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## Population Mobility And Prostitution In Southeast Asia

*Mouvements de populations et prostitution en Asie du Sud-Est*

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# Population Mobility and Prostitution in Southeast Asia

Graeme John Hugo\*

## INTRODUCTION

Prostitution has undergone a massive increase in scale in Southeast Asia in recent decades such that it has been argued that there is a significant commercial sex sector which has been integrated into the economic, social and potential life of the countries of the region (Lim 1998a). There is a strong relationship between this development and population movement. On the one hand various types of population shift have created significant markets for prostitutes. These include concentrations of contract workers (usually males) in plantations, mineral and oil extraction areas, sawmills etc. As well as the rapid development of urban areas to which single workers are attracted. Similarly the rapid expansion of international tourism has created a demand for sex workers. On the other hand as Lim points out:

Prostitution is closely related to both internal and international migration. Prostitutes generally do not engage in the trade in their hometowns or villages. They tend to be procured from rural areas and small towns for the cities or, as young, first time job seekers new to urban areas are drawn into the sex sector. (Lim 1998b: 18.)

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There has been a massive increase in levels of migration in the Southeast Asia region in recent decades and one of the most striking of the features of this migration is the increasing involvement of women. The present paper begins by outlining the increasing scale of migration in Southeast Asia in the 1990s and the increasing feminisation of that movement. The second part of the paper examines some of the features of the migration of prostitutes in the region and the final section addresses some policy implications.

## FEMINISATION OF INTERNAL MIGRATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Sex workers have been part of the increasing representation of females in the internal migration patterns of Southeast Asian countries in recent years. Table 1 draws together data from four of the largest Southeast Asian countries to illustrate the increasing significance of female migration in that region over recent decades. Unfortunately the data vary greatly in the definitions of migration adopted. For example, in the Indonesian census one has to move permanently across the boundaries of the 27 provinces to be counted as a migrant, whereas in Malaysia all permanent changes in place of residence are recorded in the census. Even within countries at different points in time different definitions of migration are employed. Nevertheless an increase in the extent of migration of women is strikingly apparent and in some instances (e.g. in short distance migration in Malaysia) females outnumber males among migrants. In the Philippines the proportion of Filipinos who moved between 1985 and 1990 was slightly less than it was in 1970-1975. This is probably due to the fact that many of the people who in the 1970s would have moved within the Philippines in the late 1980s moved internationally and were not counted in the census. Nevertheless it is interesting to note that female mobility is higher than that of males.

However, census detected mobility is only the tip of the iceberg of total mobility in the Asian region. For example, in Thailand Guest et al. (1994) compared the 1990 Census and National Migration Surveys (NMS) which showed that 8 percent and 22 percent of the population aged 5 or more respectively had moved in the previous five years. The difference was due to the fact that the latter detected temporary migration but the former did not. Figure 1 shows the age-sex distribution of the NMS migrants and males outnumber females in most age categories. However, it is apparent that among census migrants there is not as much male dominance. This is due to the fact that females tend not to be as involved in non-permanent migration. Guest et al. point out that: "movements [...] on a permanent basis [...] are likely to contain more or less equal numbers of women and men, or in the case of most urban migration, contain more women than men. The second major flow (non permanent) is male dominated" (1994: 543). However, it is clear that females are becoming increasingly significant in non-permanent as well as permanent migration and it is apparent that prostitutes are an important part of the female non permanent migration (e.g. see Lerman 1983).

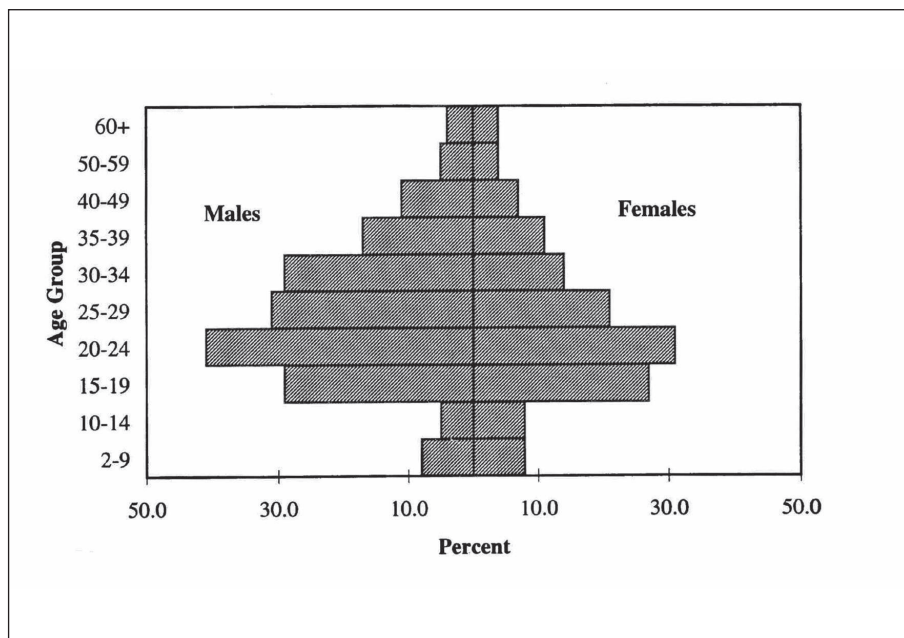


Fig. 1. Thailand: Age-Sex Distribution of Migrants, 1990

Source: Drawn from Guest et al. (1994: 541).

The extent to which these female internal migrants are involved in the sex industry cannot be determined since official statistics do not detect this type of work. However, some indication of the scale of the industry is gained in Table 2 which provides estimates of the number of prostitutes in each of four countries. It can be assured that almost all of these are migrants.

As indicated earlier the bulk of female sex workers in the region are recruited directly in villages and small towns or among recent migrants to cities. The internal migrants are directed to the main types of areas:

- the large cities of the region;
- tourist destinations;
- rural locations where there are concentrations of large numbers of male workers e.g. truck routes, plantations, mining areas, large scale construction sites.

It is clear that much of the movement is rural-urban in nature. Table 3 for example shows how the proportion of lifetime migrants in Jakarta, Indonesia has gone from 47.6 in 1961 to 50.8 percent in 1995. However, when more recent migrants are considered 56.5 percent are female. This reflects the fact both of increased female participation in migration and increased turnover of females in megacities, with many spending several years in the city then returning to the village.

Table 1. Selected Southeast Asian Countries: Changes in Migration Rates for Males and Females since Independence

	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>
<b>INDONESIA</b>		
Percent of population ever lived in another province		
1971	6.29	5.06
1985	8.37	7.29
1990	10.62	9.03
1995	11.19	10.00
Percent ever lived in another Kabupaten within same province		
1985	7.04	6.75
1995		
Percent moved within last five years		
1985	2.07	1.85
1990	3.54	3.12
1995	2.46	2.37
<b>PHILIPPINES</b>		
Percent of population moving between municipalities		
1960-70	7.4	8.1
1965-73 (population aged 15 years and over only)	11.8	14.3
1970-75	6.1	6.5
1975-80	6.6	7.2
1985-90	6.46	7.18
<b>THAILAND</b>		
Percent of population moving between Changwats		
1955-60	4.1	3.1
1965-70	6.6	5.7
1975-80	8.0	7.1
<b>PENINSULAR MALAYSIA</b>		
Percent of population ever lived in another state (inter-state lifetime migrants)		
1957	8.2	8.1
1970	11.1	10.6

1980	14.0	13.4
Percent of population lifetime migrants		
1970	29.9	29.8
1980	30.6	31.8
Percent of population who moved in last year		
1981	6.3	5.7
1982	6.0	5.5
1983	6.9	6.3
1986	8.2	7.5

Source: Indonesia—Censuses of 1971, 1980, 1990, and Intercensal Survey of 1985, 1995. Philippines—Raymundo et al. (1988: 36, 87); ESCAP (1978: 69). Thailand—ESCAP (1976: 19); ESCAP (1988: 27). Malaysia—Hugo et al. (1989: 243).

Table 2. Estimates of the Numbers of Prostitutes in Four Southeast Asian Countries 1998

Country	Range of Estimates	Source
Indonesia	140,000 - 230,000	Jones, Sulistyaningsih & Hull (1998)
Malaysia	43,000 - 142,000	Nagaraj & Yahya (1998)
Philippines	400,000 - 500,000	Ofreneo & Ofreneo (1998)
Thailand	200,000 - 300,000	Boonchalaksi & Guest (1998)

Table 3. Jakarta, Migrant Population by Gender, 1961-1995

Census/Intercensal Survey	Males	Females	Percentage Female
1961 Born in another province	727,834	661,793	47.6
1971 Born in another province	932,841	888,994	48.7
1971 Ever lived in another province	956,649	909,986	48.8
1990 Born in another province	1,577,412	1,592,803	50.2
1990 Ever lived in another province	1,609,207	1,620,865	50.2
1990 Five years ago lived in another province	374,560	458,469	55.0
1995 Born in another province	1,659,192	1,712,192	50.8
1995 Ever lived in another province	1,694,363	1,748,115	50.8
1995 Five years ago lived in another province	258,815	335,727	56.5

Source: Indonesia Population Censuses (1961, 1971, 1990) and Intercensal Survey (1995).

## FEMINISATION OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Population movement between nations has increased greatly in scale in Southeast Asia over the 1980-1990s (Hugo 1998a) and one of its most distinctive characteristics has been the feminisation of this migration. Female migration in the Southeast Asian context has taken some distinctive forms and there is a great deal of segmentation into specific types of migration (Hugo 1998b). Movement of workers, mostly on a temporary basis has been the largest flow. It is difficult to establish the extent of labour migration of women among Asian countries because much of the movement is undocumented and many of the sources do not break down the official data that are available by gender. In Table 4 we make some estimates of the size of the labour migration from the Southeast Asian region among the main outmigration countries. Overall females would appear to make up between a third and a half of all migrants. An important segment of female migration in the region is the movement of sex workers between countries in the region but also and importantly to destinations outside of the region. The main patterns of movement are shown in Figure 2. Two of the major areas of origin of female sex workers are Thailand and the Philippines but there are also flows from Indonesia to Malaysia and Singapore and from Burma, Cambodia and Laos into Thailand.

Table 4. Estimated Stocks of Migrant Workers Overseas in the Mid-1990s

Origin	Year	Stock	Estimated Percent Female	Source
Philippines	1997	6,100,000	55	Saywell (1997: 80)
Indonesia	1997	2,404,000	40	Depnaker, Indonesia
Thailand	1995	445,000	60	Stahl and PECC-HRD
Malaysia	1995	200,000	40	Azizah (1997)
Burma	1995	415,000	35	Stahl and PECC-HRD
Vietnam	1995	195,000	-	Hugo (1998a: 165)

Table 5. The Philippines—Deployment of Newly Hired Female OCWs by Occupation 1994 (Percent)

Occupation	Percent
Production and Transport Workers	8.4
Maids	44.8
Other Services	7.3
Entertainers	32.6
Nurses	4.7
Other	2.1
Total	100.0

Source: Battistella (1995: 598-599).

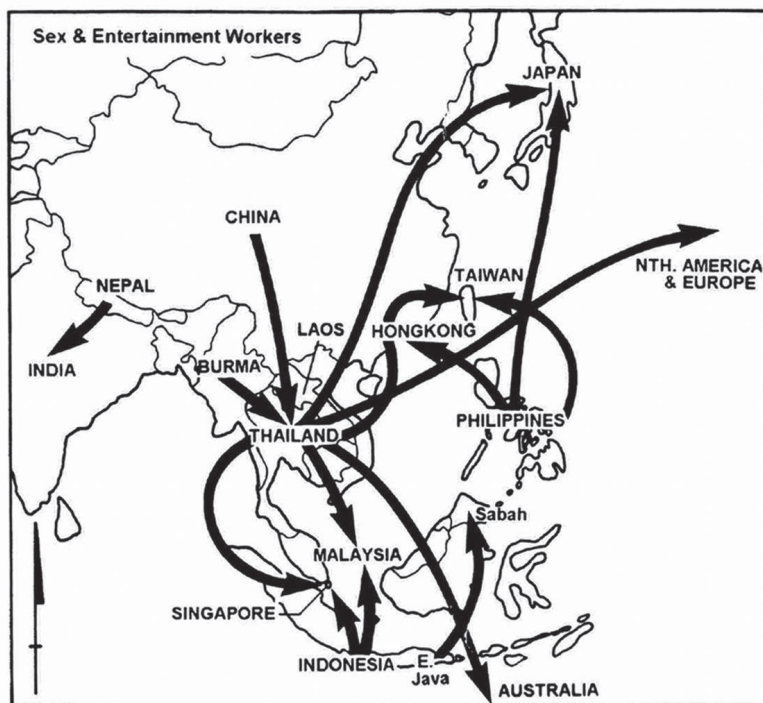


Fig. 2. Asia—Main Flows of Sex and Entertainment Workers

The Philippines is a major origin of female migrants in the region and Table 5 shows that there is a substantial involvement of Filipino migrant women in the so-called entertainment industry in the region but also in Japan, North America, Europe, Australia and elsewhere in Asia. Filipinos are estimated to make up about half of the 150,000 foreign sex workers in Japan (Sherry, Lee & Vatikiotis 1995: 23). It is clear that it is not only legal migrants from the Philippines who are involved in Japan's sex industry and illegals make up a significant proportion of entertainment workers in Japan (Miki 1995). One of the effects of this is the increasing incidence of the birth of "Japihoy" (Japanese-Filipino) children—605 between 1991 and 1993 (*Manila Chronicle*, July 13, 1994).

Little is known of international migration out of Vietnam and there are no figures available regarding it. Nevertheless, it is apparent that it has become involved in the international sex trade of the region. For example it was reported that 5,000 Vietnamese women were taken across the border into China in the early 1990s to work as prostitutes or to be sold as slaves (Sherry, Lee & Vatikiotis 1995: 23). More recently there were reports of more than 17,000 Taiwanese men taking young Vietnamese women as mail order brides with cases of sexual exploitation being reported (*South China Morning Post*, 18 January 1999).



Indonesia has one of the largest flows of female international migration in the Southeast Asian region with the majority being undocumented (Hugo 1998b). Domestic workers dominate among the female migrant workers to Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong. However, there is a significant movement of sex workers from Indonesia to Sabah (predominantly from East Java) and from Sumatra to Peninsula Malaysia and Singapore (Jones 1996). There is significant movement of prostitutes from the Riau area in Sumatra to nearby Singapore—in fact there is substantial nightly commuting of sex workers from Riau into Singapore. In addition there is commuting of Singaporeans in the opposite direction to the Riau islands of Batan and Babi where the prices of prostitutes are only a quarter of those in Singapore (Jones, Sulistyarningsih & Hull 1998: 49). It is clear that women have moved to Batan from other parts of Indonesia particularly to be involved in the sex industry.

Thailand is a major centre of migration of women involved in the sex industry. Figure 2 shows that Thailand is not only a major sender of sex workers to Japan, Taiwan, other parts of Asia and Australia but it also receives substantial numbers of sex workers from neighbouring countries. One insidious element in this has been the trafficking of women from Thailand. This involves both Thai women and women from other countries for whom Bangkok is staging point in being sent to third countries. In some cases young women are “sold” to recruiters in virtual slavery to pay off the debts of their parents. Trafficking of women from Asian countries in virtual slavery has been noted in the region and is often associated with the entertainment and sex industries. Figure 3 shows the main routes for trafficking women and children in Southeast Asia and the centrality of Thailand in this pattern is evident. This trade is largely in the hands of organised crime, some of it involving diversification from the drug trade.

There are an estimated 150,000 foreign sex workers in Japan alone, 40% of them Thais (Sherry, Lee & Vatikiotis 1995: 24). It is clear that Southeast Asian women, especially Thais, are living in virtual slavery in Japan. Miki (1995: 21) found in a study of one of many shelters for foreign wives of Japanese men that of the 160 women helped by the shelter, 142 of them were Thais and 132 of them had been the victims of slavery. Skrobanek, Boonpakdee and Jantateero (1997) have made a study of the trafficking of women in Thailand, and have graphically shown the misery experienced by women involved in this movement which dates back to the nineteenth century. However, this modern form of movement developed out of the expansion of the sex industry in the 1980s due to the basing of many US military men in Thailand. It grew in the 1980s and many thousands of Thai women were trafficked to Europe and Asia. The main routes of these women are identified as follows:

- Europe, especially Germany;
- Malaysia and Singapore;
- Hong Kong and Taiwan;

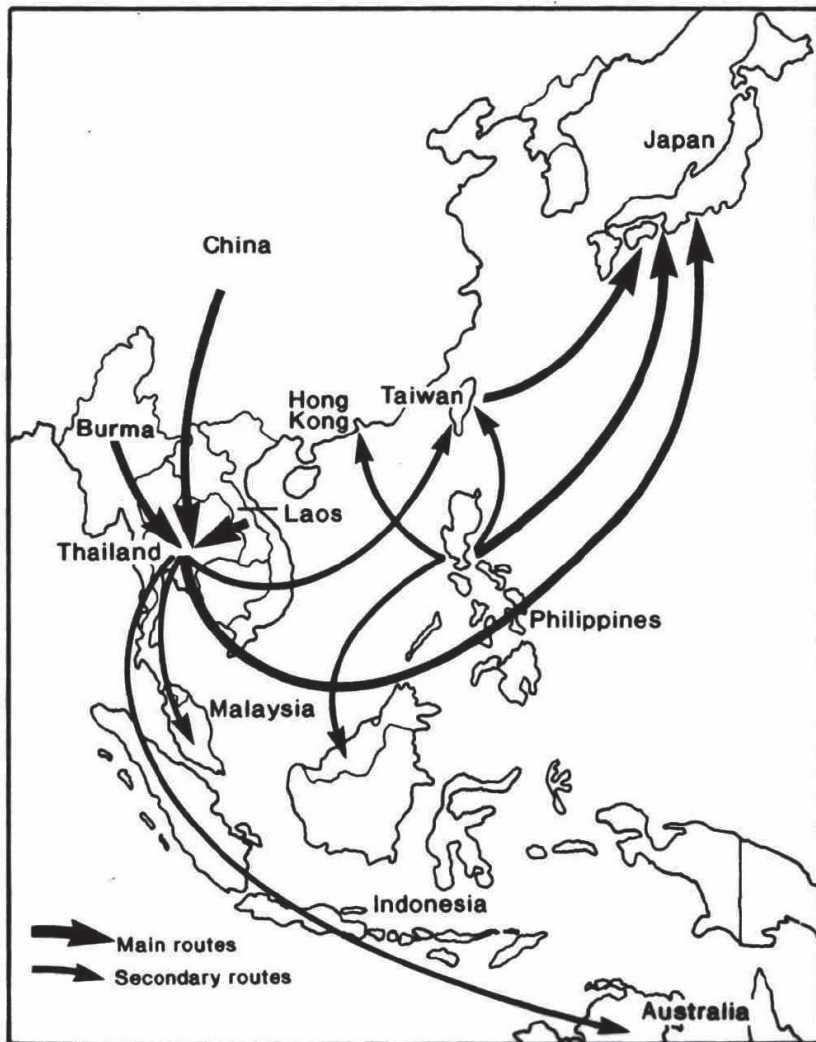


Fig. 3. Southeast Asia: Trafficking of Women and Children

Source: *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 14 December 1995, p. 26.

- Japan (in 1993 the Thai embassy in Japan estimated there were 80,000 to 100,000 Thai women working in the Japanese industry);
- smaller flows are to the USA, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and China.

A significant part of the movement of Thai sex workers is directed to more developed countries. Brockett (1996) has shown that there is a circuit for Thai sex workers moving into Australia and other Asian destinations, especially Japan. She estimates that at any one time there are 250-300 Thai women working in Sydney's sex industry at any one time. O'Connor's (1995) survey of 214 sex workers in Sydney found that 60 had been born in Thailand.

Thailand has also become a significant destination for women from neighbouring countries many of whom enter the sex industry. It is apparent that Thailand is drawing women from China, Burma and Indo China who are then subsequently trafficked along with Thai women to Japan, Germany and the United States (Vatikiotis, Sakamaki & Silverman 1995: 26). It is also estimated that 30,000 Burmese women work in the Thai sex industry in Bangkok and in border towns (Fairclough 1995: 27).

Cambodia has recently become a significant centre of the sex industry and for the trafficking of women. This involves both trafficking of Cambodian women to Bangkok and to the rapidly expanding sex industry in Pnom Penh (*Manila Chronicle*, July 31, 1994). It is apparent too that there is movement of Vietnamese prostitutes into Cambodia. Chanda (1992: 15) reports that "Hundreds of Vietnamese bar girls and prostitutes have flocked to brothels and dance halls" in Pnom Penh.

Malaysia has been a significant destination for sex workers from Indonesia. Jones for example documents a range of abuses of Indonesian migrant women in Malaysia. He reports that Indonesian officials in Malaysia provided minimal help to migrant women in difficulty indicating that they

[...] portrayed single women who worked in Malaysia as social misfits who could not get a husband or who had personal problems at home that prompted them to leave. (Male migrants, on the other hand, were seen as adventurous and entrepreneurial). From their statements in the press, many Malaysian officials appear to view maids, particularly Filipino but other nationalities as well, as potential prostitutes. (Jones 1996: 17.)

There is also, however, migration of sex workers out of Malaysia. Japan is an important destination. Sazaki (1994: 565-77) indicates that there is a similar pattern of trafficking to that observed in Thailand. Fernandez reports that Malaysia is involved in global trafficking in women as a

[...] sending country, a receiving country and a transit country. Women from the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Burma, South China, Russia, India, Columbia and other East European countries are trafficked into Malaysia, while Malaysian women are trafficked into Taiwan, Hong Kong, Europe and Australia. Besides, girls from Thailand are sent to countries like Japan after transit stops at Kuala Lumpur, where syndicated organise Malaysian passports for them. Within Malaysia itself indigenous

girls from Sabah and Sarawak are trafficked to peninsular Malaysia. Besides, Indian girls from estates and Malay women from interior Kelantan and Terengganu are reportedly trafficked to urban areas and the west coast. (Fernandez 1996: 112.)

International population movements have not only had an influence on the supply of prostitutes but have also to some extent shaped the demand. Movements of men from more developed countries has increased the demand for prostitution in different parts of the region. The stationing of substantial numbers of US troops in Viet Nam, the Philippines and Thailand obviously was significant. The Gabriela network, a Philippine US women's solidarity organisation has maintained that in the fifty postwar years that the US military was in the Philippines:

- almost a million people were enticed into the sex trade;
- some 60,000 children were abandoned by their American soldier fathers;
- HIV/AIDS entered the Philippines through the bases.

However, the 1980-1990s have seen the proliferation of insidious and widespread sex tourism involving large numbers of European, North American, Japanese and Australian men into the region which has influenced the development of prostitution in the large cities like Bangkok and resort areas. Increasingly, sex tourism in the region has increased from other Asian countries, especially Taiwan, Hong Kong and China. The linkages set up by sex tourism between other countries and Southeast Asian nations such as the Philippines and Thailand also became conduits for the flows of Southeast Asian prostitutes to developed countries like Japan, Germany and Australia.

## THE PROCESS OF MIGRATION OF PROSTITUTES

The process of both internal and international migration in Southeast Asia has a number of distinctive characteristics. Migrant female sex workers tend to come from particular rural areas. For example, Jones, Sulistyarningsih and Hull (1998: 40) point out that "certain areas of Java have a long standing reputation for supplying numbers of women as prostitutes." These include Indramaya in the province of West Java and Wonogiri in Central Java. In addition, there are particular parts of the outer islands in Indonesia which are known to supply prostitutes. For example, North Sumatra is an important supply point for Batam and North Sulawesi for oil and forestry settlements in East Kalimantan. Such patterns are common in other Southeast Asian countries. The reasons for this spatial concentration of origin areas of prostitutes are clearly associated with the development of networks between migrant prostitutes and women in their home villages and the development of subsequent chain migration. Many women migrate to join friends and relatives already working at the destination and, hence, move in an atmosphere of certainty. Jones, Sulistyarningsih and Hull (*ibid.*: 41) attribute this to:

- the preference given by employers to those who have been employed in the past or to their relatives and friends,

- the information provided by earlier migrants,
- the greater ease of allocating work to people with common backgrounds,
- the demonstration effect of sex workers returning for visits to their home area flaunting symbols of affluence to show their success in the occupation.

In fact, a relationship often develops between the employers of prostitutes and particular villages which are the source areas of the women. Fieldwork in Java found situations where organisations of prostitutes in Sumatra sent money to particular villages in Java to send girls to Sumatra to work as prostitutes.

A key question becomes; how does such a link get established? Jones, Sulistyarningsih and Hull (*ibid.*) indicate that some areas have a long history of making women available for sexual services—going back to pre-colonial courts. It may also be adventitious factors which see a particular individual recruited into the industry and then subsequently paving the way for fellow villagers to join her.

The fact that the sex industry is in many cases illegal or involvement in it is regarded as shameful raises the question of how these women are regarded in their home village. Field experience indicates that these women are often not open about their destination occupation in their home areas but there is general knowledge in the village about what work they do. There is no doubt that over time there is an acceptance of the work in the origin area and that it becomes an accepted or normal part of behaviour for young women to leave the village to work as prostitutes. The remittances from the prostitutes are an important source of funds for village development. It is clear that in some areas there are substantial numbers of cases of parents “selling” their young daughter to traffickers (Sherry, Lee & Vatikiotis 1995: 22). A key element in the migration of women to work as prostitutes in Southeast Asia is the involvement of recruiters. While middlemen (and women) are involved in several activities within the prostitution industry in the region, those involved in the recruiting of new women for the industry play a crucial role. Some recruiters are clear about the work women will be asked to do, especially those who recruit women from particular areas which have a reputation for supplying large numbers of women as prostitutes. Nevertheless, it is common for women to be misled that they will be working at activities other than prostitution. It is clear that organised crime has entered the area of recruiting in a substantial way. The *yakuza* control Japan’s sex industry and their influence is spreading in Southeast Asia as are Chinese snakeheads, Taiwanese gangsters, Hong Kong triads and the Russian mafia (Vatikiotis, Sekamaki & Silverman 1995: 26). Since, in many cases, prostitution is illegal, recruiters often engage in exploitative activity. As Sherry, Lee and Vatikiotis point out

[...] with huge profits to be made, many procurers are willing to speed the migration process along by seeking out recruits in increasingly remote villages or kidnapping them outright. Arbitrary debts and other pressures are used to coerce them into prostitution. (Sherry, Lee & Vatikiotis 1995: 23.)

In sum, the causes of migration of women to take up prostitution are complex and range along a continuum from outright coercion to voluntary recruitment. Jones, Sulistyarningsih and Hull (1998: 39) summarise the entry to the sector in the Indonesian case as follows: “the cases of ‘voluntary deliberate’ entry tend to be few, most are semi voluntary or involuntary recruitment based on the pressure of circumstances or (more rarely) outright coercion.” There is a greater institutional element in this form of migration than in other types with recruiters being crucial to the movement. Social networks are crucial to the process in both internal and international migration.

One element shaping the migration of prostitutes relates to unequal gender relations. Some argue that social structures in some Southeast Asian contexts are responsible. In many contexts women are “brought up to feel a sense of duty or moral obligation to earn money to repay the care and protection given them by their parents in raising them” (Lim 1998b: 12). This has led them to accept going into prostitution or, in extreme cases, to be sold off to traffickers, to fulfil their obligation to their parents.

In the destination areas, the migrant women are often placed in a situation of vulnerability by the nature of their occupation, which is in many cases at the margins or outside of the law. Among the international migrants the vulnerability is exacerbated by the fact that they may be undocumented or have their passports taken away by their employers. The prostitutes are generally in a powerless situation in relation to their clients, employers, authorities and the police and are often subject to abuse. It is common to find prostitutes at the destination grouping themselves into clusters based on their home towns or villages of origin (Jones, Sulistyarningsih & Hull 1998: 39). Hence, there are social network effects at both origin and destination. These networks are important sources of social support, assistance when ill, etc. However, in many international destinations, the bulk of assistance to migrant and entertainment workers appears to come from Non Government Organisations, e.g. Indonesian Workers Welfare Situation in Kuala Lumpur and a number of organisations supporting Thai and Filipino women in Japan (Miki 1995). Even where women in the entertainment industry have legal status at the destination as with many Thai sex workers in Australia “it is rarely an easy time and in some cases the personal costs can be high: STDs, depression, loneliness, drug and alcohol problems, etc.” (Brockett 1996: 125) as well as overwork, official and unofficial harassment.

The effects of migration upon the women who migrate to take up prostitution are unclear. Other things being equal it would be expected that migration would be an empowering process for women leaving rural areas of Southeast Asia for the following reasons:

- migration often involves women moving away from the immediate control of traditional, often patriarchal, forms of authority and being separated from those controls by some distance;

- it often is associated with a move from a familial mode of production to an enterprise mode;
- it often involves a transition from a rural to an urban context;
- migrant women may for the first time receive money for their work and have control over what they do with that money;
- they may, for the first time be living with people other than their family;
- they are likely to be exposed to a range of experiences and influences different to the traditional way of life maintained in the place of origin;
- they will interact with (especially in the workplace) people from a wider range of backgrounds and experience than in their place of origin;
- they are more likely to have greater personal decision making power in relation to their day to day behaviour;
- in some societies it results in a breakdown of the seclusion and isolation of women typical of the traditional situation;
- there may be a change in the relative roles of males and females;
- they may form new types of alliances and friendships with other women—e.g. through their involvement in formal and informal groups like unions, sisterhoods, etc. Indeed such group solidarity of women migrants in the absence of family is common.

Nevertheless, the fact that many migrant prostitutes enter situations at the destination in which they are heavily controlled and often exploited may mean that migration does not empower them but disempowers them. The complexity and variability of the migration experience for women needs to be stressed and the widespread tendency to stereotype their movement and its impacts needs to be avoided. Most migrations have both positive and negative consequences. For example, even women migrants in highly vulnerable and exploitative situations often indicate that their migration has given them greater autonomy in some areas of their lives. Brockett (1996: 128), for example, reports that Thai sex workers in Sydney considered that their migration had empowered them.

Disempowerment is especially prevalent when women move as undocumented international migrants so that recruiters and employers hold power over them by virtue of the fact that contact with the authorities would result in the repatriation of the women. The growing practice of trafficking in women migrants (Skrobanek 1996: 98-99) results in the violation of their human rights in a number of areas. Women:

- are denied the right of self-determination,
- are forced to work in bonded labour to pay back debts incurred or fear of arrest if they are undocumented,
- are economically exploited by their income being expropriated by others,

- some are forced into prostitution and denied the rights to choose clients and conditions of work,
- are denied the right of access to medical treatment and social assistance,
- are the target of racial discrimination and prejudice and subject to many forms of physical and psychological violence,
- are subject to charges of overstaying and deportation and not recognised as victims of trafficking,
- can become stateless and hence persecuted at origin and destination,
- encounter violence from authorities such as police,
- are denied the right to privacy;
- media focus on the women rather than the abusers;
- children born to women abroad are denied nationality of the receiving country.

The number of years that a woman can be an active prostitute is more limited than is the case for other occupations and they frequently return to their villages of origin. Prostitutes are important remitters of funds to their home villages both to their families of origin and to purchase investments to ensure their future well being. The onset of the financial crisis has seen more women enter prostitution in the region (*Jakarta Post*, August 19, 1998: 12) as women are displaced from both formal and informal sector jobs.

## POLICY ISSUES

A number of policy issues arise in the discussion of migration and prostitution. Lim and Oishi (1996: 32) have suggested that the policy aspects of female migration are best approached through a consideration of:

- issues relating to the destination;
- issues relating to the origin;
- issues relating to the migrants themselves.

An issue of paramount significance relates to the protection of the migrants. It is apparent that many females are being put into a very vulnerable situation by virtue of being both female and an outsider at the destination as well as being often in an illegal occupation. Among international migrants, being undocumented sometimes further exacerbates this. The abuse and exploitation of Southeast Asian migrant prostitutes remains substantial and policies and programmes regarding them are generally ineffective. The involvement of organised crime in the recruitment and migration of prostitutes in the region as well as in the prostitution industry more generally is also important. It is certain that there will be increasing demand for prostitutes in the region. As Lim points out

[...] the stark reality is that the sex sector is “big business” that is well entrenched in national economies and the international economy with highly organised



institutional structures, widespread linkages with many other types of “legitimate” economic activities, networks of dependencies involving significant parts of the population and powerful vested interests. Prostitution is also deeply rooted in a double standard of morality for men and women, as well as in a sense of gratitude or obligation that children feel they owe their parents. These economic and social foundations are not easy to dismantle. (Lim 1998c: 213.)

This points to the fact that there is a need to recognise that the sex sector will continue to exist and grow in Southeast Asia and that little is to be gained by draconian attempts to close down the industry. Such efforts will only result in the industry being driven further underground and the exploitation of the sex workers increased even further.

In the origin areas of prostitutes, there is a need for provision of accurate information, both good and bad, to women who are potential migrant prostitutes. This would involve providing women with full details about work possibilities, earnings and conditions in likely destination areas, indicate their rights in dealing with recruiters and an indication of what costs are involved. Greater efforts have to be made to control the activities of recruiters and procurers and those engaging in exploitative practices particularly. This would involve the outlawing of recruitment of child prostitutes. Traffickers need to be identified and prosecuted with full force. On the other hand, there should be recognition of the sex industry as a legitimate activity and recruiters who provide full information to potential prostitutes and treat them fairly need to be able to operate within the law.

In the destination areas, there is a need to ensure protection for prostitutes through recognition of the legitimacy of the industry and the development of appropriate working conditions of prostitutes is necessary. There is a particular problem when the women work in countries other than their own and in such context they are often denied even the protection given prostitutes who are nationals. In such cases, there is a need for bilateral and multilateral arrangements that protect the workers at the destination. In addition, there is scope for the encouragement and assistance of the development of Non Governmental Organisations at the destination that seek to assist and protect prostitutes. They have generally been more effective in this task than government agencies have been. Migrant workers, especially those overseas and undocumented, are often defenceless against abuses by employers, recruiting agents, customers and authorities. These include (Fernandez 1996: 108):

- non payment of wages;
- unlawful deduction of wages;
- contract substitution;
- harsh, unremunerative and exploitative conditions of work;
- physical, mental and sexual abuse;
- no compensation for or protection against hazards/accidents at work;
- limitation on freedom of movement, withholding of documents;

- prevention from resignation;
- extortionate retrieval of travel costs and expenses.

In most destination countries, women sex workers are not covered by local employment acts and owing to the sheer physical control to which they are subject, are unable to stop patterns of exploitation.

The health dimensions of the sex sector in Southeast Asia are important (Lim 1998a). Clearly they are at considerable risk of contracting HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases and of subsequently spreading them to clients and to their home community. Pollock has shown how the ability to protect themselves against HIV/AIDS has been taken away from Burmese women working in Thailand as prostitutes:

[...] Not only are they illegal immigrants but they are also doing an illegal job. They have absolutely no protection. The work the women do is looked down upon in the society where she is working and the society where she comes from. She is not only physically isolated but also psychologically and spiritually. She is not in a position to refuse customers—because she is illegal, has a debt, doesn't speak the language, is afraid, has no protection, she will therefore have to sleep with some customers who refuse to use condoms and this will put her at high risk for HIV. (Pollock 1996: 104.)

One report has estimated that nearly half of the prostitutes trafficked from Myanmar were already HIV positive (Lintner & Lintner 1996).

At present, much of the government activity against prostitution is directed to the prostitutes who, in many cases, are the victims rather than the criminals. There is not enough effort to control the activities of unscrupulous agents, brothel owners, recruiters, procurers and protection racket criminals. There is a need to decriminalise prostitution and for prostitutes to be included in the general labour laws.

## CONCLUSION

There is a clear link between prostitution and migration in the Southeast Asian region. Almost all of the regions several million prostitutes are migrants. The bulk are recruited from rural areas and subsequently move to cities, resorts, frontier areas or transport routes within their countries or to other countries. This movement has expanded rapidly over the last two decades and shows no indication of slowing down. There is no area of migration where the migrants have more potential for, or actual experience of, abuse and exploitation—economic, physical and social. Where interventions occur they tend to be policy actions directed toward the prostitutes who are often the victims rather than the criminals in the system. There is a need in the region to recognise that prostitution is a significant industry and that it needs to be legalised and its workers given the protection and working conditions afforded to other workers. This objective needs to be approached in a

multiplicity of ways reflecting the complexity of the industry and its relationships with migration and as a matter of urgency.

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## Editor's note

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The reader who wishes to see the evolution of the demographic data of the countries concerned can consult the following official websites:

- **Indonesia for 2010:** <http://sp2010.bps.go.id/index.php/site/index>.
- **Philippines for 2010:** <https://psa.gov.ph/content/domestic-and-international-migrants-philippines-results-2010-census>.
- **Thailand from 1997 to 2012:** <http://web.nso.go.th/en/survey/migrat/migrat.htm>.
- **Malaysia for 2010-2011:** [https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/images/stories/files/LatestReleases/findings/Summary\\_findings\\_Migras2011.pdf](https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/images/stories/files/LatestReleases/findings/Summary_findings_Migras2011.pdf); <https://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/2014/index.htm>.
- Jacqueline Joudo Larsen, 2010, *Migration and people trafficking in Southeast Asia*: [http://www.aic.gov.au/media\\_library/publications/tandi\\_pdf/tandi401.pdf](http://www.aic.gov.au/media_library/publications/tandi_pdf/tandi401.pdf).

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**Abstract:** While most countries of Southeast Asia resist the classification of prostitution as an industry, or sex work as an acceptable occupation in national statistics, there is no doubt that millions of women in the region earn a livelihood from selling sexual services. To do this virtually all of these women are forced to leave their birthplaces and residences and migrate to places where they will have some anonymity. Often this migration is involuntary, and sometimes it involves cruel exploitation. This paper pulls together the limited data available to gain insights into the shadowy world of Asian prostitution. It concludes that while governments frequently crack down on women selling sex, they ignore the roles of male customers, and often protect the criminal

elements who use kidnapping and violence to exploit the women. There is a need for legalization of the sex industry to protect women and expel criminals.

### ***Mouvements de populations et prostitution en Asie du Sud-Est***

**Résumé:** Bien que la plupart des pays d'Asie du Sud-Est refusent de considérer que la prostitution est une industrie à part entière et que le travail du sexe constitue une occupation acceptable dans les statistiques nationales, il ne fait aucun doute que des millions de femmes de la région gagnent leur vie en vendant des services sexuels. Pour ce faire, pratiquement toutes ces femmes sont obligées de quitter leur lieu de naissance et leur résidence et de migrer vers des endroits où elles auront un certain anonymat. Souvent, cette migration est involontaire, et parfois elle implique une exploitation cruelle. Ce document rassemble les données limitées disponibles pour obtenir des aperçus sur le sombre aspect de la prostitution asiatique. Il conclut que si les gouvernements freinent fréquemment les femmes vendant du sexe, ils ignorent les rôles des clients masculins et protègent souvent les criminels qui utilisent le kidnapping et la violence pour exploiter les femmes. Il est nécessaire de légaliser l'industrie du sexe pour protéger les femmes et expulser les criminels.

**Keywords:** sex work, mobility, involuntary migration, exploitation, Southeast Asia.

**Mots-clés:** prostitution, mobilité, migration forcée, exploitation, Asie du Sud-Est.

