Children on the Edge

Protecting Children
from Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking
in East Asia and the Pacific

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PART ONE

Sexual Exploitation - The Problem

From the go-go bars and massage parlours of Bangkok's infamous Patpong district to the shadowy brothels of Phnom Penh's red light district of Tuol Kork to the darkened alleys of the Philippines' capital, children and those barely adult offer their bodies to meet the insatiable appetite of the sex industry.

While other children are sleeping, playing, going to school and enjoying the innocence of childhood, child sex workers in East Asia and the Pacific are struggling to cope with the grown-up consequences of their exploitation – AIDS, malnutrition, psychological trauma and sexually transmitted disease.

And all the while, their abuse is denied for shame or fear of retribution, covered up and disguised, so even now the world has no true way of knowing how widespread is their exploitation.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) believes that one million children – mainly girls but also a significant number of boys – enter the multi-billion dollar commercial sex trade globally every year. In East Asia, the sex trade is such a huge money spinner that the International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates the sex industry and related services to be worth up to 14 per cent of Thailand's gross domestic product.

The numbers of child prostitutes now constitute one third of sex workers plying their trade in the Mekong subregion. The younger they are, the more likely it is they have entered the trade against their will. Surveys indicate that 30 to 35 per cent of all sex workers in the Mekong subregion are between 12 and 17 years of age. The Thai Government estimates that there are 12,000 to 18,000 child prostitutes in Thailand. There has been a 20 per cent increase in the number of child prostitutes in Thailand over the past three years.

About 60 per cent of 71,281 registered prostitutes in Indonesia, where the sex industry is found in two thirds of the country, are between 15 to 20 years of age. In Taiwan, between 40,000 and 60,000 children are sex workers. In China, the estimates of child sex workers range from 200,000 to 500,000.

In the Lao People's Democratic Republic, where the magnitude of the trade in children is largely unmapped, sex is traded in nightclubs, pubs, hotels, guesthouses and homes. In

those places, children receive a commission on alcohol sold to clients and are encouraged to offer sexual services.

In Cambodia, one of the poorest nations in the world, the sexual exploitation of children is a thriving business, especially in the capital Phnom Penh and increasingly so in urbanising border areas such as Battambang and Banteay Meanchey provinces. Poipet, Sihanoukville, Koh Kong and the fast-growing provincial capital of Siem Reap are also following the same trend.

Studies show as many as one third of sex workers in Cambodia are children under 18 years of age. More than half of those forced into the sex industry are lured or sold into it by people they know. In Viet Nam, an estimated 41 per cent of child sex workers are introduced into the business by a friend or acquaintance.

Among those forced to sell their bodies in Cambodia are ethnic Khmer girls from the impoverished rural precincts of Kompong Cham, Battambang, Svey Rieng, Prey Veng, Kandal or Takeo, as well as young Vietnamese girls, trafficked across the border for their prized fairer skins and alleged sexual daring. Both boys and girls are trafficked to Bangkok and Pattaya by begging syndicates and some, especially girls, to these and other locations in Thailand for sexual exploitation.

The tentacles of the sex trade spread near and far, and no country can claim to be untouched by the industry's corrupt and powerful reach. Foreign clients also add to the local demand for underage prostitutes. Thailand and the Philippines have long been destinations for foreign sex tourists. The Filipino areas of Ermita, Olongapo, Angeles, Puerto Galera, Pagsanjan and Boracay and the Thai cities of Bangkok and Pattaya emerged as sex tourism havens in the 1980s.

But it is not just tourists from Western countries that drive the sex industry. On the Indonesian island of Batam, Singaporean tourists underpin the demand for underage sex. Likewise, Chinese and Thai tourists are going to the Shan State in Myanmar to take advantage of child sex workers.

And sexual tourism is only the most highly visible part of the problem of child sexual exploitation. In fact, the sex trade mainly caters to local clients, not foreigners. Moral double standards prevail in many countries in the region. While female prostitution is condemned as shameful, the practice of both married and single men using prostitutes is culturally accepted.

Socio-economic trends fuel the market

The rapid economic progress of the past 20 years has brought many improvements to the lives of women and children in East Asia and the Pacific. The average size of families has shrunk – fertility rates have fallen from 5.8 children to 2 children per woman, according to

UNICEF figures – so parents are now better able to care for their young. Children are living longer, with infant mortality rates one fifth of their levels 30 years ago, and children in many countries now have access to good-quality basic education.

But increased trade across national borders, greater mobility of workers, the incorporation of subsistence communities into the market economy, while bringing great advantages, also make conditions ripe for the exploitation of children.

Mobile populations of men, far from their families and seeking employment, create a demand for prostitution. The growth of the sex trade in remote locations, away from urban centres, makes it more difficult for authorities and non-government organisations to regulate the trade and to assist women and children who are victimised by it. The dislocation of families makes children more vulnerable to exploitation.

And in the long term, a sudden deterioration in the economic performance of any of the countries of East Asia could exacerbate the divide between rich and poor – as the Asian financial crisis did in 1997 – and throw more children into the path of traffickers and pimps.

The Path to Exploitation

Child prostitution is an extreme form of child exploitation and trafficking is a route to modern sex slavery.

Thousands of children and women are lured, sold and kidnapped into the sex industry each year. They are often betrayed by their neighbours, friends, relatives, guardians and even boyfriends or parents, and they are tricked with false promises of a better life or well-paid work. They are then forced to pay off 'debts' for transportation, health and living expenses, subdued with rape, violence and torture and sold from brothel to brothel.

Yet others move into prostitution 'voluntarily', fleeing poverty or physical, sexual and mental abuse at home. Many have been raped or abandoned by a boyfriend or husband, while others may simply hunger for the bright lights of prosperous cities. But given the cultural, economic and individual complexities of their situation, it is hard to suggest that these women and children have any real freedom of choice. The sex trade feeds on the despair, ignorance and poverty of those it seeks to exploit.

East Asian and Pacific countries account for one quarter of the world's poor. Although countries such as Japan, Singapore, Brunei and the Republic of Korea boast high per capita incomes, Cambodia, Myanmar, Mongolia, Viet Nam and Lao PDR are all near the bottom of the human development index in terms of per capita income. Within countries, statistical averages hide vast income discrepancies between women and men, rich and poor, urban dwellers and their country cousins.

Typically, those women and children most vulnerable to exploitation are from broken and impoverished homes, usually from peasant or ethnic minority villages, where a parent has died, abandoned the family, re-married, is crippled or under pressure due to addiction or debt.

Bolstering the sex trade is a low regard for women and girls throughout much of the region. For a complex variety of social, cultural and religious reasons, daughters too often do not enjoy the same standing as sons. While stereotypical gender roles are being challenged, girls are still being brought up to assume the subordinate roles of their mothers. In some societies, parents believe that it is better to invest in a son rather than a daughter who may one day marry and leave the family. The girl may also feel an extra sense of duty to repay her parents, and this, in turn, may influence her willingness to submit to sex work or other forms of abuse.

Girls are also less likely than boys to complete school and obtain the educational qualifications they need to find jobs. Six out of every 10 school-age children in the region not attending school are girls, according to UNICEF, and in most countries boys outnumber girls in the classroom. This lack of education increases their chances of ending up in the sex trade.

But it is not only girls who are sexually exploited. Although in smaller numbers, boys, too, are being drawn into the business, regularly prostituted in resort areas, major cities and border towns.

A history of incest or rape is a common factor that links women and children to the sex trade. Survivors of rape or incest often run away, only to swap the sexual abuse at home for that meted out by brothel owners and pimps. In Viet Nam, China, Cambodia and Thailand, the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific's (ESCAP) small-scale surveys found that up to half of sexually exploited children have suffered prior sexual abuse.

The failure to register the births of many thousands of children throughout East Asia makes it difficult to assess the ages of children who enter into prostitution and to mount cases against traffickers and their agents. Children whose births are not recorded and do not officially exist can easily 'disappear' into the sex industry without a trace. In Indonesia, where rates of birth registration are officially estimated at 50 to 69 per cent, children

enrolling in schools must now have a birth certificate. Those who are unregistered, including street children, migrants and the homeless, are not only largely excluded from the education system but from health and other services. And in most countries, young people without official documents find that they cannot be employed legally.

CASE STUDY 1:

A stolen childhood: Svey's story

Svey* lost her innocence when she lost her virginity at age 16. It was callously snatched from her by her only guardian, a half-sister who had raised the orphan since she was five years old. It was purchased for the princely sum of $500 by a Cambodian civil servant, old enough to be her grandfather and whose name she was never to learn.

Until that moment, when Svey became another of Asia's victims of child sexual exploitation, her life had been lonely and poor but never heart-achingly painful. Coming from the eastern Cambodian province of Kompong Cham, Svey had grown up on the banks of the Mekong River. Her mother had died giving birth and her father died also shortly after. Her aunt raised her until the age of five, after which a half-sister claimed her and took her to the city of Kompong Cham.

As she grew up, Svey earned her keep serving beers at her sister's karaoke bar. But then came a meeting with a stranger. Her sister's brother-in-law had asked her to go for a stroll in the park. There she met up with an elderly man with grey hair, who then took her to a dancing bar where she was given a drink. She blacked out after taking several sips and awoke several hours later in a hotel room, groggy and disoriented. Her clothes were in disarray. She had been raped. Weeping inconsolably, she begged to be taken home. The man told her he had bought her, and she had no choice but to submit.

For one week, Svey was kept locked in a hotel room. When the time came to release her, the man purchased for her bracelets, necklaces, a ring and earrings from a market and sent her home.

But on her return to her sister, there was no sympathy, no surprise at her absence. The jewellery was ripped from her body, Svey was beaten and then forced to join seven girls required to provide sexual services for up to eight clients a night at the karaoke bar. Her customers were mostly

Cambodian men and some foreign construction workers from Thailand, Japan and Taiwan who would pay anywhere between $10 and $20 for sexual services.

Did she ever ask her sister why she had betrayed her the way she did? Svey confesses she did not dare. The beatings had already grown more intense as Svey refused to receive customers. She was whipped with bamboo and attacked with a knife or anything else that proved to be handy at the time.

Eventually, she summoned enough courage to escape. Stumbling onto the streets, she came across a policeman from whom she begged help. He took her to a refuge where she stayed for nine months. She changed her name and fled to another shelter in Phnom Penh. There she learned that police had withdrawn charges against the half-sister. Word got back to Svey that her half-sister had threatened to kill her.

Now 18, with a new identity, Svey's time as a sex worker has come to define her. She has a sadness that seems deep within. But she also shows an emotional toughness and strength of purpose, and no doubt this enabled her to escape the clutches of her exploiters.

More alone in the world than ever, she does not trust men, and prefers not to dream beyond tomorrow. Through Agir Pour Les Femmes En Situation Precaire (Action for Women in Distressing Circumstances – AFESIP), she is learning the skills of a hairdresser and make-up artist and is receiving marketing and business instruction so she can plan a new life for herself. AFESIP, which is supported by UNICEF, estimates five per cent of the girls they rescue return to the brothels, unable to cope with independent living, but for the others there is the hope of a new life.

Svey smiles shyly. She is determined she will be one of the successes. Yes, she would like to marry but she knows only too well that, while Cambodian men are frequent visitors of brothels, their wives-to-be must be virgins. The pictures on the wall of AFESIP's sewing room show wedding ceremonies of girls who have found marriage partners. But they are taped next to one of a sallow-faced former prostitute dying of AIDS, a reminder that for every happy ending there are many tragic ones.

Svey has never received justice and never will. Despite never using a condom during sex with clients and her ignorance of the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS, Svey has tested clear for both, one consolation for a brutally stolen childhood.

** To protect their identities, the real names of the girls in this publication have not been used.*

HIV/AIDS

In Thailand, the Global Orphan Project and the Ministry of Health have estimated that half a million children may be left without a mother, and probably a father by the time they reach adolescence, because of AIDS. By the end of 1999, UN AIDS and the World Health Organisation (WHO) had estimated that some 140,000 of the region's children had already been orphaned by AIDS. In Cambodia, a national health survey in 1998 found that 380,000 children younger than 15 had lost one or both parents.

HIV/AIDS slashes family income, forces children to drop out of school to help cut costs or earn additional income and leaves children vulnerable to tuberculosis and other diseases carried by their infected parents. Once alone in the world, these children have no one to safeguard their interests and no one to provide for them, leaving them vulnerable to the worst forms of exploitation.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic has also served to fuel the market for child prostitutes, as many men mistakenly believe that sex with a virgin or a child with few sex partners will protect them from infection and even enhance their virility. The girls themselves are often ignorant of HIV/AIDS and are powerless to insist on condom use.

Life as a Sex Worker

If it is a better life that women and children seek when they enter the sex trade, they soon discover they were wretchedly mistaken. Any economic gain is overwhelmed by months, if not years, of inhumane treatment, rape, beatings, ill health, possibly death, as well as psychological trauma and nightmares. The Cambodian Women's Crisis Centre (CWCC) reports that many of its clients attempted to commit suicide during their stay in brothels, often more than once.

With surveys showing girls forced to serve an average of five to 10 customers a day, women and children in prostitution are extremely vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases, including syphilis, herpes, urinary tract infections and polyps. And of course HIV/AIDS threatens their very lives. The unregulated nature of the industry – especially in remote border areas – makes it difficult to educate sex workers on the need to practise safe sex. Access to doctors and medical specialists to treat the symptoms of STDs early on is not always assured because brothels tend to use pharmacists and herbal remedies for fear their girls may be reported.

In Thailand, street children who sell their bodies are generally malnourished and live in poor, unhygienic conditions. They are generally small for their age, suffer from lice, skin infections, eczema and impetigo.

A survey of prostitutes by the Cambodian Women's Development Association (CWDA) in 1994 found that 29 per cent suffered physical abuse at the hands of their clients. Another 6 per cent said they had been abused by brothel owners.

Women and children are sold to brothel owners for as little as $50, according to the CWCC, and are locked up in dark, cramped rooms without sufficient air or proper sanitation. Those who resist are at times tortured and severely beaten.

In the Philippines, a 1998 study (supported by UNICEF) of child sex workers showed that the working day ranged from 30 minutes to 24 hours, from one to seven days a week, and from one to nine customers a day. Slightly more than 40 per cent described their work environment as "congested, over-crowded, dirty and did not allow freedom of movement".

Prostitutes suffer from a wide-range of health problems but it is HIV/AIDS that poses the greatest threat to sex workers. The CWDA says that up to 53 per cent of Cambodian prostitutes it has surveyed are HIV positive. Despite messages reinforcing the need for sex workers to exercise care, the power imbalance between the sex worker and customer means that condoms are worn for protection only if the client is willing.

The Economics of the Sex Trade

Once in the sex trade, it is difficult – if not impossible – to get out. Mentally scarred, the child prostitutes become street-wise, cynical, hardened and embittered. Sex becomes a commodity to be traded. It also becomes their only means of financial support.

The 1998 survey of child prostitutes in the Philippines found that up to three quarters wanted to leave their work and more than half wanted to return to school. But six out of 10 thought this would depend on "having enough savings".

The parents and guardians of these children are often seduced by the relative wealth that prostitution can bring. Most of those parents questioned in the same survey believed they would stop their children working the streets if they had a 'choice'. But they are dependent on the children's income to alleviate their poverty.

The Women's Education, Development, Productivity and Research Organisation found that consumerism had infected some Filipino families to the extent that, dazzled by household appliances and electronic gadgetry, they actively encouraged their daughters to "take their chances abroad even if they risked having to sell their bodies". The child that kept the family financially afloat was often accorded special status within the family. In 1994, the organisation End Child Prostitution, Pornography and Trafficking (ECPAT) International considered the apathy of parents who were the beneficiaries of 'paedophile generosity' to be one of the barriers to tackling paedophilia. Families are able to survive and even rise to higher standards of living on the money made by children.

The sex trade is indeed a profitable business. The money offered by one client for one night can represent three to four times the minimum weekly wage. For a virgin the amount can be as high as 10 to 20 times the normal weekly wage. In Bangkok in 2001, sex could be traded for 500 baht per service ($11), three times the highest minimum wage level (in Bangkok) of 165 baht per day. In Cambodia, virgins are sold for up to $800. This represents three times the country's annual GDP per capita rate.

But most of the money from this trade, especially in the case of trafficking and debt bondage, is not seen by the women and children who provide the services. Most of the profits go to brothel owners and their agents, in commissions to middlemen and women, and as payment to those who sell the girls into the sex industry. In the case of debt bondage, the girls often do not receive any money for providing sexual services. Forced to work to pay off the so-called 'debts' of their transportation, accommodation, food and health care, these debts are rarely erased by their pimps, agents and traffickers who add interest and use this appalling system as a means of subduing the girls and guaranteeing their cooperation.

Trafficking – A Profitable Business

High in the hillsides of Thailand's infamous Golden Triangle lies the epicentre of a modern day slave trade.

From Thailand's northern provinces and from neighbouring Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, Viet Nam and Myanmar, women and children are trafficked and sold like commodities.

Poor and illiterate, tricked or simply trapped, women and children are lured from impoverished rural villages, urban slums and border refugee camps with false promises of work, money and a better life.

For the girls caught in this sordid trade their greatest asset is their highly-prized virginity and the enduring legacy of their ordeal is a health wrecked by sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies, AIDS and psychological trauma.

In the foothills of Chiang Rai girls are sold for between 2,000 and 20,000 baht ($45 to $450), according to the child protection group, the Development and Education Programme for Daughters and Communities (DEPDC).

Orphans, the daughters and sons of broken families, abandoned young wives and the children of families that have accumulated large debts are prime targets of the unscrupulous middlemen and women.

Most vulnerable are women and children from ethnic minority groups, such as the Akha, Lahu, Lisu, Thai Yai, Thai Leu and Luwa. Says DEPDC's director Sompop Jantraka, the lack of birth certificates, the statelessness and the alarming levels of drug addiction among adults makes the women and children easy prey. In one Akha village of 150 families, says Jantraka, up to 10 agents could be operating.

For every girl they recruit, the criminal agents receive a commission of between 3,000 and 5,000 baht (approximately $80 to $110).

Jantraka describes the situation as a "blood sucker cycle" of degradation and despair. Bribes are paid to border police and immigration officials, drivers receive danger money, the brothel owners skim from the takings of the girls, the tour guides receive commissions for the clients they bring and the country reaps the economic benefits of the sex trade.

And the girl?

She is indentured to sell her body to pay off the 'debts' she owes to those who feed and clothe her in her enslavement.

The seedy underworld and clandestine operations of international trafficking rings as well as cultural taboos make it difficult, if not impossible, to accurately assess the extent of trafficking in women and children. What experienced child protection workers sense is that the problem is growing, fuelled by conditions of poverty, illiteracy, AIDS and drug addiction.

The trafficking and sale of children, both domestic and across international borders, is closely linked to child prostitution in the region. In Thailand, it was reported that almost 200,000 foreign children were trafficked into the country in 1996 for the purpose of exploitative child labour, which includes commercial sexual exploitation. Recent Thai government policy to eradicate child prostitution has meant that there are fewer girls being lured into prostitution from its northern provinces. But they are being replaced by women and children brought from Myanmar, southern China, Lao PDR and Cambodia.

In China, children, mostly boys under seven years, are trafficked for adoption, while young women are abducted to become brides for Chinese bachelors in towns and villages where partners are in short supply and dowries are prohibitively expensive. Most of the trade is within the country, with women and children stolen from the provinces of Sichuan, Guizhou and Hubei. The UN Rapporteur on Violence Against Women said in her 1997 report that in some rural villages between 30 and 90 per cent of marriages result from trafficking, a demand created by the shortage of women available for marriage.

Overwhelmingly, however, women and children are lured, kidnapped and coerced for the purpose of providing sexual services – mainly for locals, but also for tourists and paedophiles.

The best figures suggest that around the world more than one million people, of which 35 per cent are children, have been illegally trafficked across borders to service the international sex industry.

The International Organisation for Migration estimates that up to 300,000 women and children are trapped in slavery-like conditions in the Mekong subregion, which includes Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, Viet Nam and the two southern Chinese provinces of Yunnan and Guangxi. More than 250,000 women and children are thought to have been the victims of trafficking within China alone. Many of the estimated 15,000 to 20,000 prostitutes in Phnom Penh are believed to be Vietnamese girls and women.

Trafficking operates across borders in the Mekong area; it trades women and children from developing countries to industrialised countries within the region; and it also sells its victims to countries in other parts of the world. From Thailand, young girls are sent to work as prostitutes in countries as far afield as Europe, Japan, Taiwan, Australia, Hong Kong and the United States.

Chinese girls are trafficked to Malaysia, Myanmar and Viet Nam via Thailand's massage parlours, which serve as a smokescreen for the commercial sex trade. There are also unconfirmed reports of women being trafficked from Lao PDR, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Myanmar, Russia and Viet Nam into China. ECPAT International reports cases of young women from Thailand becoming mail-order brides in Taiwan. There, child trafficking is taking place disguised as arranged marriage. Many women and children are also shipped from the Philippines to Japan, Singapore, Malaysia and Australia to supply the demand for "brides".

The Coalition Against Trafficking of Women also reports the existence of criminal syndicates that abduct or lure away tens of thousands of young, mostly rural Chinese women. In Chiang Mai, the same drug syndicates moving methamphetamines from the drug laboratories of Myanmar are also suspected of trafficking young Myanmar girls into Thailand.

CASE STUDY 2:

Poipet: A border town fights back

It is squalid and diseased. No fit place for children, let alone 3,900 families and 8,000 children all under 15 years of age. Here in Poipet, along the route of the former railway line to Thailand, lies the notorious slum of Kbal Spean. Where the steel track and sleepers once lay is now a dusty and rutted path where raw sewage runs in filthy streams, babies suckle on withered breasts, and homes, no wider than the length of a man, teeter on precarious bamboo legs.

Everything seems temporary, and it is. And the families who call this shantytown "home" would rather be elsewhere. But they are trapped by the poverty that brought them here in the first place. Since the opening of the border in 1991, and at an accelerated pace following the onset of peace in December 1998, poor, unskilled, illiterate and landless Cambodians from all over the country have been streaming into Poipet hoping to secure a living across the border in more prosperous Thailand. Among them are many former refugees who had fled to the Thai border or were displaced inside the country during two decades of armed conflict and whose reintegration into peacetime society has failed.

In Kbal Spean there are too many mouths to feed and too few jobs to go around. What work there is can be found over the border and is both menial and poorly paid. In their thousands each day, Poipet's slum and resettlement dwellers queue from 7:30 a.m. to cart freshwater fish and second-hand clothing to Thai markets or buy up vegetables and supplies to sell in Cambodia. Among them are children who receive 30 to 40 baht (less than $1) a day to take laden carts across the border. Even the casinos, neon meccas for the Thai middle classes, largely bypass local Cambodians to recruit their professional staff from Phnom Penh and even the Philippines.

It is not surprising then that Poipet and other Cambodian border towns are at the epicentre of trafficking. Debt-strapped parents or relatives sell or lease their children, reputedly for between 1,000 and 1,500 baht ($22 to $23) a month, for use as professional street hawkers or members of begging groups in Bangkok, Pattaya, Phuket and Hua Hin. Some are sold to brothels. Some either drift into prostitution or are lured into it while out on the streets. In Poipet itself, brothels, karaoke bars and massage parlours cater to Cambodian and Thai men.

UNICEF has been working in Poipet since 2000, seeking to strengthen the capacity of local authorities to respond to the growing numbers of women and children who are trafficked across the border and those who are then repatriated to Cambodia.

Last year, UNICEF stepped in to provide temporary funding for nine months of an International Organisation for Migration (IOM) scheme to repatriate Cambodian children from Thailand. IOM collects children from welfare homes in Thailand, returns them to social workers at a Cambodian government transit centre where children are assessed and their families traced. UNICEF placed a technical advisor with the District Social Affairs Department in Poipet to train local social workers and police, provide pre-vocational training to women and children and assist with the tracing of families.

This scheme was designed by an inter-agency Steering Committee coordinated by the Ministry of Social Affairs, Labour, Vocational Training and Youth Rehabilitation (MOSALVY), which includes IOM, UNICEF and non-government organisations.

Funding is now being finalised to establish a permanent reception team at the border consisting of two social workers and a local policewoman who would work seven days a week to receive deported children as they cross the border and to provide initial counselling and referral to longer-term shelters. One of the major difficulties has been to predict the arrival times of these illegal migrants, hence the need for a round-the-clock presence.

In addition, UNICEF has identified a need to establish a centre at Poipet capable of housing 25 girls and young women who are either victims of sexual abuse or who have returned from Thailand as illegal migrants.

But it is at the grassroots level – working to improve the lot of slum dwellers – that UNICEF believes it stands to make its greatest strides against commercial sex exploitation and trafficking.

About 25,000 people now live in Poipet's three major slum areas. Another 50,000 have shifted or been voluntarily resettled in 11 remote and isolated villages on Poipet's periphery where the Government offers slum dwellers a small plot of land on which they can build their houses. Among the children living in the resettlements, 12,000 aged between 6 and 15 do not go to school. Around 400 children work as day labourers or beg, and 130 older boys are known to live on the streets. Others are left behind to fend for themselves as their parents seek to earn a living. Most of the children lack food, some are losing the black pigment in their hair from vitamin deficiency.

There are no basic services in these resettlements. Some are so remote that families have returned to the slums, unable to afford the 20-baht fare into town for work each day. In the district where Poipet is located, there is only one health centre to serve 100,000 people. The resettlement of Ou Neang is surrounded by mined areas, cut off during the rainy season and has problems with water supply. Almost one third of those who came to claim their small plot of land have returned to the slums less than one year later.

Only three concrete schools have been built in the resettlements; the rest are makeshift thatch and dirt floor constructions. UNICEF field workers estimate that 12 new schools are needed to cater to the large numbers of school-aged children.

UNICEF is now extending to the Poipet resettlements a program it began in 1999 in Battambang province where village members, health workers, teachers, monks and 'acharn', police and government officials, unite to educate the community about HIV/AIDS infection, sexual abuse, domestic violence and child trafficking. Through the community network, the project identifies children at risk, provides the support and financial assistance to help families in need and coordinates efforts through efficient networking to address cases of child abuse or exploitation.

During the first year of implementation, Community Social Helpers interviewed 6,692 children – or about 18 per cent of village children – identifying about half who were at risk. These children or their families received counselling, children were re-enrolled in school and a small number received material support in the form of rice, school supplies or clothes.

Toul Tasok village, about 20 minutes from Battambang city, is one of 52 villages where the community-based Child Protection Network has been established. Support workers have identified 15 children at risk and re-enrolled them in school, negotiating a waiver of school fees and providing assistance for uniforms and materials where necessary. Of these 15 children, seven – two of whom are orphans – are deemed to be special cases.

Villagers have fully informed their communities about trafficking and sexual exploitation, about the tricks that are used to lure their children away and the steps to take if a child disappears. Through their diligence, Toul Tasok villagers believe they may have chased away traffickers lurking in the district.

A total of 49 villages also contribute to Child Village Social Funds. UNICEF matches 40 per cent of the village contribution. The pooled money is used to repair dilapidated homes, provide for schooling and pay for medical treatment. Some of these funds helped four-year-old Chork, who was in severe pain with a growth in his groin. The fund paid to transport Chork to a hospital and negotiated free medical services during his two weeks in Battambang hospital.

Such has been the scheme's success in catching children before they fall through the safety net that the program is currently being extended to Phnom Penh and Svay Rieng. There are plans to establish similar networks in Siem Reap, Koh Kong and Sihanoukville.

PART TWO

Combating Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking

The international front

At the turn of the 21st century has come new hope for the fight against trafficking with the breakthrough signing of the Convention Against Transnational Organised Crime by 124 countries. The Convention includes supplementary protocols to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking of Persons and the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air.

Though the treaty and protocols have yet to be universally ratified, China, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam have signed the Convention. Indonesia and the Philippines have signed the Protocol on Trafficking. These are major steps forward in galvanising international concern and in closing loopholes that have enabled traffickers to challenge and bypass international laws.

For the first time, the protocol identifies trafficking as an international crime and it addresses the problems of definition that have frustrated those who seek to hunt down and prosecute criminal traffickers. It also ensures some protection and recourse for victims.

The Convention recognises that trafficking and exploitation can take place with the victim's consent, in the case of children, and that trafficking can result from inducement, "an abuse of power" or from a "position of vulnerability", removing the defence of traffickers that children had chosen their own exploitation.

It refers to "the victims of trafficking" rather than "trafficked persons" and explicitly links the supply of women and children to "demand", calling on countries to enact legislation that addresses trading in women and children.

But the key turning point in the global campaign to recognise the rights of children and prevent abuses came a decade before with the region-wide ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

All countries of the East Asia and Pacific Region have ratified the CRC and most have national committees set up to ensure laws satisfactorily address the rights of the child. The CRC guides UNICEF's work and provides an international framework for the protection of children against sexual abuse and sexual exploitation.

Article 19 of the CRC commits governments to protect children from all forms of physical or mental violence, including sexual abuse. Article 34 of the CRC commits governments to protect children from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, and Article 35 calls for the prevention of the sale and trafficking of children. In particular, governments are empowered to prevent the inducement or coercion of a child to engage in any unlawful sexual activity, as well as the exploitative use of children in prostitution, unlawful sexual practices or in pornographic performances and materials.

Optional protocols attached to the CRC governing child rights in armed conflict and in the sale and use of children for prostitution and pornography have also been credited with dramatically increasing the recognition of children in need of special protection. Both protocols were signed last year by Cambodia, China, Nauru and the Philippines, and Viet Nam has recently ratified.

Another milestone was the adoption in 1999 of the ILO Convention No. 182 on the worst forms of child labour. This too was a significant step toward addressing sexual exploitation and trafficking and the Convention has been ratified by seven countries in the region.

The Stockholm World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in 1996 consolidated the progress made in the early 90s through the CRC. The World Congress opened the door for a more concrete partnership between those non-government organisations and government agencies seeking to eradicate child sexual exploitation, especially child prostitution, child pornography and child trafficking for sexual purposes.

It set a deadline of the year 2000 for governments to formulate plans of action to prevent exploitation, protect children and recover and re-integrate these victims. Thailand, Cambodia and the Philippines have already done so. Australia and New Zealand, although they did not attend the Stockholm Congress, have also adopted its Declaration and Agenda for Action.

In April 2000 the government of Cambodia officially adopted its five-year National Plan Against Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking of Children. The Plan was developed under the coordination of the Cambodia National Council of Children in consultation with other government and non-government agencies and launched in 1999. In the area of protection, one of its aims is to increase the capacity of police to conduct investigations, rescue victims, refer them to shelters and appropriate services, arrest offenders and prepare cases for prosecution.

By the time of the Stockholm congress, Thailand had already shaped a national plan of action to combat child exploitation and trafficking. Then in 1996 and 1997, Thailand introduced two new laws against child prostitution and the trafficking of children that served to incriminate customers and protect those under 18 years. Additionally, child-friendly procedures were established by the Criminal Procedure Amendment Act of 1999. While the problems are still widespread, the country has taken great strides in protecting its children from trafficking and sexual exploitation.

CASE STUDY 3:

Girl power breakout

In a school hall in Thailand's northern Paan district, students, mostly girls, are being entertained by a play. Laughter erupts at the pulled punches and a girl's mock attempts at giving birth but the themes could not be more serious. The storyline begins with boy meeting girl, marrying and having a baby together.

From here, the plot turns decidedly black. Boy and girl argue, trade blows. Boy takes off with another woman, leaving the girl alone and destitute. Eventually, she sells her young son as a domestic servant to a woman in Bangkok who beats him. But an old neighbour stumbles on one such beating and reports the abuse to police, who arrest the woman and reunite the boy and his mother.

This piece of amateur theatre, which tackles the taboo subjects in Thai society of domestic violence and child labour, represents the first line of defence in the battle against the sexual exploitation of children -– a bid to harness 'girl power' to prevent abuse.

The audience is made up of about 44 child rights volunteers, a new batch of specially trained groups of school children whose job it is to raise awareness of child rights among their communities and peer groups. These volunteers are trained to recognise child abuse, whether it be physical, sexual or involves trafficking, and to know what action to take in such cases. With the fun of the theatre comes discussion on sex education, AIDS and sexual abuse and the training of even more volunteers to spread the word in communities.

The young volunteers are the third generation of a grassroots prevention programme that was begun by the Foundation of Women in 1995 with UNICEF funding. In the initial group of 66 volunteers were Nartnaree Luangmoi and Nujaret Tarinthom of Baan Mae Or in Paan district who two years later set up Soon Puea Nong Ying (literally translated as 'center for younger sisters'), a multi-purpose centre for girls in the village.

This centre sits in the middle of Chiang Rai province, part of the infamous drug-producing 'Golden Triangle' that straddles the border regions of Thailand, Lao PDR and Myanmar. The idea was to provide a place for teenage girls to get together, socialise and talk about issues that were off limits.

With UNICEF's help, the Centre for Girls, set up in the backyard of Nartnaree's father's house, is arming not only teenage girls but also younger girls and boys with knowledge that could one day protect them against abuse. And it is providing them and their mothers with job skills training – through guitar lessons, dancing instruction, cooking classes and computer and office training – that improves their future prospects for work.

"The child rights volunteer program is like a star burst," according to Kitiya Phornsadja, UNICEF's child protection officer in Thailand. "You keep expanding to get the critical mass in the communities so that they can protect themselves."

Child rights volunteers are in five provinces of Thailand. In the nearby district of Payao, Wasana Somwan's team of volunteers at Buasatan School has seen it all – teenage pregnancies, cases of incest and rape, and more recently, alarming levels of methamphetamine use among classmates. In the first six months of 2000, Wasana, a secondary school teacher, has assisted 44 children, including eight cases of sexual abuse and 13 orphans whose parents had died from AIDS.

Wasana first became active in the child rights movement six years ago when she discovered a six-year-old student had been raped by her stepfather. The 12-year-old sister had also been sexually assaulted, with the attacks taking place while the mother was working nights as a prostitute. Today, Wasana's Centre for the Protection of Children's and Women's Rights is training another 40 volunteers, producing newsletters that are circulated to students in 27 schools and continuing its surveys of vulnerable children.

The network benefits from the support of local health workers, police, government officers, social workers, monks and teachers who also act as community watchdogs to whom volunteers can report signs of abuse or stress.

In the six months from January to July 2001, the Centre for Girls in Baan Mae Or received 33 complaints from volunteers, parents, village chiefs and health workers of sexual abuse, a common precursor to prostitution. The Centre provides protection and care for these children as well as helping to pursue offenders through the courts. Nartnaree's team is still waiting for the justice system to catch up with the teacher accused of molesting seven young children two years ago.

The success of such active community programmes is undeniable. "The children don't keep silent anymore," Nartnaree says. She says the traffickers have not been seen in her parts for a long time.

But she now worries about the increasing numbers of abandoned children and orphans whose parents have died from AIDS. Left without family support and care, these children are vulnerable to exploitation. Chiang Rai is the reputed AIDS capital of Thailand. Its 1.25 million residents constitute just 1.9 per cent of the country's 62 million people but account for 10 per cent of its AIDS cases. In Paan district, Nartnaree estimates one person dies from AIDS every two days. The work of the child rights volunteers will continue to be critically needed and plans are underway to expand the network to all regions of Thailand starting October 2001.

Regional initiatives

At a regional level, UNICEF has supported legal reviews of legislation to strengthen protection for child rights and is supporting cross-border initiatives. The Mekong Regional Law Centre and the Thailand National Committee on Trafficking of Children and Women approached UNICEF and other partners to support their efforts to establish cooperation amongst the countries of the Mekong subregion in protecting children from trafficking. Thailand and Cambodia have come up with a Common Agreement, and other countries are expected to do the same. It is hoped that the bilateral agreements will lead to multilateral ones.

The draft Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) binds the two countries to jointly attacking the problem of human trafficking. Under the agreement, trafficked people are to be treated as victims, not illegal migrants, and are not to be prosecuted for illegal entry by the sender or receiver country. They are also not to be sent to a migrant detention centre. In all circumstances, they are to be treated humanely and given safe shelter, health care, legal assistance and access to an interpreter. On their return to their country of origin, the victims are to be provided counselling and support and helped to pursue and prosecute the offenders.

If signed, the MOU would be the first such agreement in East Asia. It is hoped that similar agreements can be reached between Thailand and Lao PDR, as well as Viet Nam. UNICEF is also facilitating a cross-border agreement between China and Viet Nam.

Although there are three extradition laws in the Mekong subregion (Thailand-Lao PDR, Thailand-Cambodia, Thailand-China) there is still a need for mutual assistance and extradition agreements between countries within East Asia and with other regions. This would prevent offenders escaping prosecution by using another country as a legal haven.

The UNICEF response

The focus of UNICEF's work on the frontline has been to lift the veil of ignorance, to educate, retrain, improve living conditions and eliminate the causes of poverty that make children particularly vulnerable to exploitation. The prevention of child exploitation has become the cornerstone of UNICEF's support in the region to combat sexual exploitation. It aims to help families and communities become the first line of protection for children. Prevention programmes are designed to educate families and girls about the dangers of trafficking and prostitution and to provide girls with life skills and job training.

UNICEF also continues to support rescue efforts and programmes to reunite children with their families and communities. And it works with partners at an international level and with governments to close the loopholes that allow the traffickers and exploiters to escape prosecution.

In Thailand, an innovative partnership with the hotel industry is providing training and employment opportunities to young girls who are at risk of being sold into prostitution.

In Cambodia, a Child Protection Network is being established in Poipet, a major gateway to Thailand. This aims to inform children and families about child rights, encourage communities to look for the early warning signs of children at risk and to respond quickly and appropriately to ensure that children do not end up as victims of sexual exploitation.

UNICEF is also working with the region's ministries of education to ensure that children are enrolled and continue in school. Life skills are being incorporated into school curriculums to ensure that children and parents have adequate information to protect themselves from traffickers. Efforts are also being supported to track and trace school dropouts.

To raise public awareness, UNICEF Cambodia, in October and November 2000, screened a series of public service announcements every evening on three television stations. The campaign consisted of seven one-minute spots on the sexual exploitation of children. They targeted potential victims and their families, warning of the common tricks of traffickers to lure girls into prostitution and attacked the demand for prostitution. Traffickers were reminded of the harsh penalties they faced and potential customers were shown the misery of sex workers' conditions.

The television campaign proved a runaway success and is set to be repeated once formal police training is completed. A hotline number given to provide assistance for victims received 415 calls, of which 221 were complaints of child sexual exploitation and trafficking from victims, their families or friends. Of these, 105 cases have been investigated.

Rescue, recovery and reintegration

In the Kredtrakarn Protection and Occupational Welfare Center of the Department of Public Welfare on the outskirts of Bangkok, around 350 girls nervously await a homecoming. Among their number are 104 girls from Lao PDR, 14 of whom have been trafficked.

Prevention strategies have come too late for these girls. Rescued from exploitative and abusive situations, the task of those whose job it is to care for the girls is to provide welfare, medical care, counselling and even financial support during the healing process.

The quality of this intervention will ultimately determine the success of the girls' psychological recovery and the chances of their healthy development into adulthood.

CASE STUDY 4:

Noi's story: The path from beer to bars

"Noi, Noi," the researcher calls softly outside a rickety wooden door on the ground floor of a two-storey boarding house near the airport on the outskirts of Vientiane, the capital of Lao PDR.

There is a small brick doorstep to stop the water from flowing down the hill under the door. There are no windows. Just a wooden grille tacked with tattered plastic. The curtain on the inside looks as though it was once the sheet of a child's bed.

'Noi' means 'little' or 'little one' in Lao. It is a common generic name for young girls and boys.

The researcher is from the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare. She is dressed traditionally in a sarong and dark jacket. Ducks, chicken and geese waddle in the mud around her feet as she stands outside. Green mould is growing up the wall.

The researcher is working with UNICEF on a study of the commercial sexual exploitation of children, one of the first such studies in Lao PDR. One of its aims is to find out the critical factors that lead children into prostitution. With this information, the Ministry can develop more appropriate training for social workers and outreach programmes, work that is being funded by the UNICEF National Committee in Belgium.

"Noi, Noi," the researcher calls softly again.

The landlady, who is sitting in a room next door, goes to see if Noi is using the latrine and water containers comprising the bathroom out the back. The landlady knows that Noi must be somewhere close by because her door is closed from the inside, unlike the other doors on the ground floor that are each padlocked on the outside. Above them is the number of the room, painted with a broad brush so large that you can see them from the street above.

Noi finally appears. Although it is early afternoon, she looks as though she has just woken up. She is wearing a long and slightly grubby yellow T-shirt that has seen better days. It looks as though it is her nightdress. She has a silver bracelet around one ankle, a small golden locket around her neck and impossibly high, powder-blue platform shoes.

Her unbrushed hair is growing out both a henna rinse and a perm. Her tired eyes are still wearing the make-up from the previous night, her eyebrows plucked and pencilled in.

She sits on a bed in the landlady's room to tell her story, her fingers playing constantly with the little silver chain around her ankle.

Noi comes from a poor village about one hour's drive from Vientiane where her parents raised Noi, her four sisters and three brothers. Her grandmother died when her mother was a small child, so her mother married very young to an older man. Noi finished the highest grade available in her primary school and then went to work in her family's rice fields with her father, mother and elder sister. The four eldest children had already left to form households of their own.

Noi was 15 when her father became ill.

"When my father got sick, he could not move. He could not get out of bed," she explains. "We had to sell some of our land."

To help earn more money to pay for his medical costs and for food, Noi agreed to go and work in a beer shop in a larger town that was run by a woman from her village who had left to get married.

Noi earned about 20,000 to 30,000 kip ($3 to $4) a week on the commission from selling beer to customers at the shop. She sent back as much money as she could to her family.

For one year, she refused the advances of customers to sleep with them. Then her father died, her older sister left to get married, and her mother lost the strength to work the family rice fields. Her 10-year-old sister was now running the household, and her eight-year-old brother was still at school. Noi found herself the key income earner for the family.

The customers were offering 100,000 kip ($11) for Noi to have sex with them, which represented about three times as much as Noi could normally earn in one week. Finally she said yes. She did not like the work but she was very happy to be able to provide better support to her family.

"My family now has everything they need because of my work," she says. "They have a refrigerator now and a television."

However, Noi hated having to drink beer and was unhappy that she could never have a night off. Finally, she moved to Vientiane.

"It is better here," she says. "I can earn more money, and I can have a night off if I am feeling sick or want to rest. Before, I could send back 800,000 kip ($86) to my family, but now I can send back two or three times this amount."

Does her family know where the money comes from?

"They have never asked me," she says, "So I have never told them. But I think they must know what I do to bring home that much money."

Noi's working day starts at 9 p.m. when she goes to work in a particular bar. If the 'mama-san' finds a client for her, she pays a commission to the 'mama-san', otherwise she can retain all her earnings.

"I really hate this work," she confesses. "But I have to do it because I need the money. Sometimes I really don't like the client, but I have to sleep with him even if I don't like him."

Noi explains that she was naive when she started. She would only ask for the money after the man had had sex with her, and sometimes the man would not pay. Now she asks first.

If she thinks the client looks diseased or might have AIDS, however, she gives the money back and refuses to have sex. If he looks healthy, she doesn't insist on him using a condom. She doesn't think that healthy looking people can have AIDS.

It is hard to get her to talk about the future.

"I don't think about myself," she says. "I don't really have an idea about the future. I just want to earn money to help my mother and my family."

Would she like to have a family of her own one day?

"I would like to get married and I would like to have children," she admits. "But it is impossible now. I have to support my mother. Even if someone asked me tomorrow, I could not say yes . . . "

"Perhaps in five years' time," she says, "When my younger sister grows up and gets married. Perhaps her husband could come and live with them and help. Then I could think of a family of my own. I would like to be able to run a small business from the front of the house while I raised my children."

Noi, at 18, has been a sex worker for two years. Due to this work, her father's medical bills have been paid, her family has had enough to eat, her younger brother has been able to stay at school, her younger sister has been able to stay at home, and the household now has a refrigerator and a TV.

But the cost to Noi may be her life itself.

She has not had an AIDS test.

"I am too scared," she says.

Helping children who have been sexually exploited to recover and re-enter society is a concern of UNICEF. Capacity building for government and non-government organisations is being supported through training activities in counselling and social work skills. Small grants are being provided to promote NGO-run safe shelters for recovery assistance.

Trafficked and sexually-exploited children are extremely traumatised. They usually carry a great deal of shame and guilt about them and can fear returning home.

Therefore, it is not possible for them to be picked up by authorities one day and dropped off in their home villages the next. Thailand has one of the most well-established and comprehensive shelter systems in the region. There are homes for sexually-exploited children that provide psychological services as well as education, job training, health care and family counselling. No child in these homes remains longer than two years.

The provision of health and social services in other parts of the region, however, is limited. In Cambodia, there are few havens for the victims of sexual abuse and exploitation. The Ministry of Social Affairs lacks technical means and does not have the budget to operate the many halfway houses, drop-in centres and transitional care and support services needed.

The only existing recovery centres for victims of sexual exploitation or abuse are run by non-government organisations with foreign funding. The 11 best-known are: AFESIP in Phnom Penh, Kompong Cham and Siem Reap, CWCC in Phnom Penh, Banteay Meanchey and Siem Reap, House of Hope in Kompong Cham, World Vision in Kandal and the Cambodian Centre for the Protection of Children's Rights (CCPCR) in Phnom Penh, Sihanoukville and Svay Rieng. Together they have the capacity to receive around 400 girls or women who stay at the recovery centres, on average, for six months.

Victims come to these centres after contact is made through brothels, family complaints or police referrals. The girls are provided shelter, food, medical care, counselling, basic literacy and numeracy classes, life skills and pre-vocational training. They are then either reunited with their families or helped to find a job to live independently.

Social workers from AFESIP visit families first to assess the chances of a successful reunion, to reduce the stigma associated with their return and to identify a local employment contact. A returning child will receive visits from the social workers during the first three months they are at home. In this way, AFESIP has aided 74 Cambodian and Vietnamese children. The non-government organisation is also set to become the first in Cambodia to establish its own commercially self-sufficient garment factory in Kompong Cham. When operational, it will employ up to 17 former sex workers full-time to make clothing for the European market.

Others, like Mith Samlanh in Phnom Penh, are run for street children, orphans, abandoned children and others in need of special protection. On the streets, children are provided with meals, a shower and shampoo, medical attention if needed and education about the dangers of HIV/AIDS. At the shelter, children can sign up for vocational courses in sewing, electronics, motor mechanics instruction and remedial schooling. A Western-style restaurant provides training in commercial cookery and hospitality work. The aim, says its coordinator Sébastien Marot, is to provide a life plan, not just skills, so the children have the foundation to rebuild their lives.

But efforts need to also focus on psychological healing. The concept of psychological counselling remains little known in Cambodia. Psychological programs in Yunnan province (China), Lao PDR and Viet Nam take the form of re-education for victims of trafficking. In Yunnan, a repatriation station in Kunming offers only medical care. In Thailand, a chronic shortage of counsellors and social workers is hindering efforts at rehabilitation.

Justice for children

Sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children is illegal in each country of the Mekong subregion and offenders are liable to jail terms or fines.

But the commitment shown by countries in East Asia and the Pacific to eradicate child sexual exploitation has been generally undermined by weak sanctions, legal loopholes, lack of police enforcement and court procedures that are traumatic for the child victims.

A major thrust of the UNICEF campaign against child sexual exploitation has been to attack the web of ignorance and community acceptance that protects the agents of the sex industry from prosecution and enables them to continue their work unchallenged. To this end, UNICEF has been seeking to make local police aware of the raft of new laws, procedures and international treaties that protect women and children.

UNICEF also provides support to reviews of national legislation that address specific areas of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation. It is forging new partnerships with the region's ministries of interior, justice and public security to improve law enforcement and protection of children. In Viet Nam, an amendment to the penal code has increased sanctions against adult offenders. In Cambodia and Thailand, police and justice officials are being trained on child rights and child friendly procedures to make sure that children who are rescued are not subject to further trauma by the legal process.

In Indonesia legislation does not meet international standards. Even when crimes of abuse are reported, prosecution is frustrated by ambivalent interpretations of law and weak penalties for offenders. There is a chronic shortage of safety net programmes for children and families at risk. The Government did, however, establish the National Commission for Child Protection in 1998 with UNICEF support. Child protection bodies have also been established in five provinces.

In Lao PDR, the Government has recognised that its laws on trafficking are weak and must be strengthened. There are no formal systems to repatriate children and there are few services offering social and psychological support, educational and work opportunities.

Thailand has well-crafted laws but corruption, as in most parts of Asia, poses a major obstacle to prosecution and conviction. While there are many honest and dedicated police and government officers who are fighting the trafficking and sexual exploitation of children, there are also corrupt officials who ride ruthlessly on the backs of the children and women whom they exploit in their support of this ugly trade.

Legal enforcement

Rith Channary, a young girl from Tomreap village, near Battambang, was brutally raped one night in May 2000. She had refused the sexual advances of a youth while strolling along the Mekong River, and he and others forced themselves on her.

The rape may have gone unpunished but for a policeman who heard Rith's sobs and screams and for a unique assistance program that has enabled the Cambodian justice system to better respond to complaints of sexual abuse and exploitation.

The rape was referred by the UNICEF-supported community-based Child Protection Network to Cambodia's Bar Association, which represented the victim in court using a recently established team of lawyers specialising in cases of child abuse or exploitation.

In a judgement delivered in January this year, the men were sentenced to 10 years in jail and had to pay the victim compensation equivalent to $1,000.

The heavy sentence and the provision of civil redress have been subsequently hailed as a breakthrough in attempts to translate international and national government commitment to end child sexual exploitation into concrete action against the perpetrators. Rape cases in Cambodia rarely make it to court, let alone attract the penalties imposed by the court in Rith Channary's case.

In 1996, Cambodia made child trafficking and sexual exploitation a crime, with offenders subject to jail terms of up to 20 years where the victim is under 15 years of age. Unfortunately, the laws have rarely been invoked. Some judicial

officers have been labouring under the misapprehension that they cannot apply the law until they receive specific instructions by a sub-decree that has to be adopted by a ministerial council.

Police, particularly in remote regions, have either been unaware of the new laws or without a copy of the legislation. Police and court staff have been poorly qualified and poorly paid, with limited material in which to work – a legacy of the Khmer Rouge, which left the country with four lawyers and no university faculty of law.

In the past, legal representation for child victims has been practically non-existent, as most lawyers have been trained as legal defenders, not prosecutors. Families themselves have also compromised cases, either withdrawing complaints in exchange for compensation or being ignorant of their legal rights. Some simply do not know what a lawyer is.

Last year UNICEF, together with the International Organisation for Migration, Save the Children Norway, World Vision and the UN Cambodia Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, provided financial and technical assistance to Cambodia's Ministry of the Interior to train senior police officials and investigating judges and prosecutors.

Already, child protection workers are beginning to see the project bear fruit with evidence that police are being more sensitive to the victims of child sexual exploitation and are more pro-active in their prosecution of cases. Planning for the next phase is already underway but Cambodia lawmakers have only to look to Thailand for their lead.

In September 1999, Thailand introduced changes to the Criminal Procedure Amendment, making court procedures more child friendly. Psychologists or social workers and lawyers are now required to be present during police interviews of minors. And children need no longer stand up in front of the abuser to give evidence in court.

In 1998, the Chiang Mai Child Protection Committee, chaired by the Governor and supported by UNICEF Thailand, formed a multi-disciplinary team to better protect children from physical, mental and sexual abuse. An emergency home was set up by the Chiang Mai Provincial Welfare Office, and a series of protocols for assisting victims of abuse were developed for the team's use.

Within the Coordination Centre of the Protection of Child Rights in Chiang Mai, a special interview room with one-way mirrors has been built for abused women and children so that interviews can be carried out in a supportive environment. Interviews need not be repeated, and identification of suspects can be made without intimidating face-to-face contact. Police protocols have been consolidated into a single handbook, and police have received training in interview techniques and forensic guidelines.

The Coordination Centre in Chiang Mai is a first for Thailand, and similar centres are eventually to be set up in all 76 provinces of Thailand. UNICEF is supporting their work.

CASE STUDY 5:

Telling her own story: Nat escapes

Nat's memory fails her. She doesn't remember when or where she was born. In Akha villages births are a moment in the passing seasons and Nat's arrival in the world in a remote highland village went unrecorded. Nor does Nat have any memories of her father, who presumably died when she was small.

Without a date of birth, she cannot be entirely sure at what age she ran away from her home in the highlands of Chiang Rai province or when it was that she was forced into prostitution.

She thinks it was at about age 10 that she grew sick of her stepfather's verbal abuse. He was a heroin and opium addict, out of work and hostile to Nat and his two stepsons. Required to work in the fields and perform household chores, Nat, like most girls, did not get much schooling, probably a year or two at most.

Certainly, she could not read or write, and she knew the Akha language better than Thai. One day, together with a friend, the young girl simply took off without saying good-bye and boarded a bus bound for Bangkok, hoping to escape to a better life.

Free from the control of her stepfather, in a world far away from the isolation of her remote community, Nat thought Bangkok would be 'paradise'.

Instead, she found work in an unglamorous noodle shop and was paid a modest 1,500 baht per month, along with her board and food.

Sometime later, Nat doesn't know when – those who care for her estimate at about age 14 – the girlfriend who had travelled to Bangkok with her resurfaced to tell Nat of a wonderful job serving drinks in a bar in the Patpong district of Bangkok, the city's notorious red light area.

They both joined the staff, the girlfriend abruptly leaving a month later, never to be heard from again. Nat went on serving drinks for another two months before she was forced by the owner, a Thai police official, to sell herself to the bar's customers. In hindsight, Nat was probably betrayed and sold into prostitution by her only friend in Bangkok. She was coerced with threats against the life of her mother if she dare tell. Her first customer was a sex tourist from the United Kingdom. Nat was then forced to take five or six customers a week.

For four years or so, Nat was confined to the bar and her quarters, never allowed to see daylight or wander freely. She was told that without identification papers she would be imprisoned. She never knew differently, and in a moment of desperation, she strung up some cord and tried to hang herself. Nat was stopped only by a co-worker.

"Every day I cried," Nat recalls. Her co-workers, who never knew of the threats used to keep Nat submissive, gave her a teddy bear to console her. It was one of her only possessions when an American girl called Annie, a volunteer with RAHAB Ministries, rescued her from the bar. At first Annie paid the owner 500 baht ($11) to take Nat on a shopping trip, her first outing in four years. When Annie tried to secure her release, the owner insisted Nat's long-lost brother had run up debts of 5,000 baht ($110) and demanded compensation. He received his payment and Nat her freedom.

Now safely in a shelter run by the New Life Centre Foundation in Chiang Mai, Nat and other girls are seeking to rebuild their lives. Her stepfather has disappeared somewhere near Hat Yai; her mother had thought her dead and cried in disbelief when she was reunited with her only daughter, but is incapable of looking after her.

Nat, 18, may not remember ages, but memories of her recent past are still raw and a matter of personal shame. At one point, she berates herself for not being a good girl. She is hugged and told to focus on the future and not on the past. Nat wants an education, maybe to proceed to secondary school and university. She is lucky that the centre and its volunteers are willing to back her career plans. Nat is hoping her past will not be the future of others.

This is the reason she is telling her story.

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Information was also drawn from UNICEF situation analyses and background papers.

Patterns of Trafficking in Children and Women in the EAP Region

China

Domestic: small boys for illegal adoption, girls for brides
Outgoing to Thailand, Cambodia and others: girls for prostitution

- 10,503 child and women victims of domestic trafficking (including 1,563 children) were rescued and 14,709 traffickers were arrested between 1996 and 1998.
- In some counties and villages, between 30% and 90% of marriages result from trafficking.
- In 1995 and 1996 up to 100 girls were repatriated back from Cambodia.

Myanmar

Outgoing to Thailand: girls/boys for all purposes
Transit from China to Thailand: girls for prostitution

- Thai officials estimate that 20,000 women and girls have been trafficked from Myanmar to Thai brothels, with more than 10,000 trafficked each year.

Thailand

Incoming from Mekong sub-region countries: women and children for prostitution and labour
Domestic: girls from northern provinces for prostitution
Transit from China and other countries to Malaysia and Singapore: mostly girls
Outgoing to Japan, Singapore and other regions:

- 80,000 women and children have been trafficked to Thailand for prostitution since 1990 and the largest numbers are from Myanmar, followed by Yunnan (China) and Lao PDR.
- Internal traffic of Thai females consists mostly of girls 12-16 years old from hill tribes of the north/northeast.

Indonesia

Outgoing to countries abroad: girls for prostitution and domestic labour

- An estimated 40 females are sent to Taiwan and Hong Kong every month.

Viet Nam

Domestic: girls for prostitution
Outgoing to Cambodia and China: girls for prostitution, domestic labour and for brides
Incoming from Cambodia: children for begging

- 3,000 Vietnamese women and children have been trafficked to China for domestic work and to Cambodia for prostitution.
- Between 1991 and June 1999, 1,739 cases of trafficked women and children were prosecuted including 253 cases of trafficked children.

Lao PDR

Transit from China and Viet Nam to Thailand: girls for prostitution
Outgoing to Thailand: girls/boys for prostitution, domestic labour, factories and construction. The majority of cases involve girls 15-19 years old. Ethnic minorities are particularly vulnerable.

Philippines

Domestic: children for prostitution
Outgoing to countries abroad: prostitution and domestic labour

- In 1996, some 492 of the 3,776 reported cases of child abuse involved trafficking and prostitution.
- 150,000 Filipina women were reportedly trafficked into Japan in 1998 for prostitution.

Cambodia

Domestic: girls for prostitution
Outgoing to Thailand and Viet Nam: girls/boys for all purposes
Incoming from Viet Nam: girls for prostitution

- More than 15% of 3,000 females trafficked from southern Viet Nam were reported to be younger than 15 years old.
- ESCAP and ILO reports indicate that thousands of Khmer girls are trafficked to Thailand for prostitution and hundreds of children are trafficked for begging.

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