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THAILAND

Because She Looks Like a Child

WHEN SIRI WAKES IT IS ABOUT NOON. In the instant of waking she knows exactly who and what she has become. As she explained to me, the soreness in her genitals reminds her of the fifteen men she had sex with the night before. Siri is fifteen years old. Sold by her parents a year ago, her resistance and her desire to escape the brothel are breaking down and acceptance and resignation are taking their place.

In the provincial city of Ubon Ratchitani in northeastern Thailand, Siri works and lives in a brothel. About ten brothels and bars, dilapidated and dusty buildings, line the side street just around the corner from a new Western-style shopping mall. Food and noodle vendors are scattered between the brothels. The woman behind the noodle stall outside the brothel where Siri works is also spy, warder, watchdog, procurer, and dinner-lady to Siri and the other twenty-four girls and women in the brothel.

The brothel is surrounded by a wall with iron gates meeting the street. Within the wall is a dusty yard, a concrete picnic table, and the ubiquitous spirit house, a small shrine that stands outside all Thai buildings. A low door leads into a windowless concrete room that is thick with the smell of cigarettes, stale beer, vomit, and sweat. This is

the "selection" room (*bong du*). On one side of the room are stained and collapsing tables and booths; on the other side is a narrow elevated platform with a bench that runs the length of the room. Spotlights pick out this bench, and at night the girls and women sit here under the glare while the men at the tables drink and choose the one they want.

Passing through a door at the far end of the bench, the man follows the girl past a window where a bookkeeper takes his money and records which girl he has taken. From there he is led to the girl's room. Behind its concrete front room the brothel degenerates even further into a haphazard shanty warren of tiny cubicles where the girls live and work. A makeshift ladder leads up to what may have once been a barn. The upper level is now lined with doors about five feet apart opening into rooms of about five by seven feet that hold a bed and little else.

Scraps of wood and cardboard separate one room from the next, and Siri has plastered her walls with pictures and posters of teenage pop stars cut from magazines. Over her bed, as in most rooms, there also hangs a framed portrait of the king of Thailand; a single bare light bulb hangs above. Next to the bed a large tin can holds water; there is a hook nearby for rags and towels. At the foot of the bed next to the door some clothes are folded on a ledge. The walls are very thin and everything can be heard from the surrounding rooms: a shout from the bookkeeper echoes through them all whether their doors are open or not.

After rising at midday, Siri washes herself in cold water from the single concrete trough that serves the twenty-five women of the brothel. Then, dressed in a T-shirt and skirt, she goes to the noodle stand for the hot soup that is a Thai breakfast. Through the afternoon, if she does not have any clients, she chats with the other girls and women as they drink beer and play cards or make decorative handicrafts together. If the pimp is away the girls will joke around, but if not they must be constantly deferential and aware of his presence, for he can harm them or use them as he pleases. Men coming in the afternoon are the exception, but those that do tend to have more money and can buy

a girl for several hours if they like. A few will even make appointments a few days ahead.

At about five, Siri and the other girls are told to dress, put on their makeup, and prepare for the night's work. By seven the men are coming in, purchasing drinks and choosing girls, and Siri will have been chosen by one or two of the ten to eighteen men who will buy her that night. Many men choose Siri because she looks much younger than her fifteen years. Slight and round faced, dressed to accentuate her youth, she might be eleven or twelve. Because she looks like a child she can be sold as a "new" girl at a higher price, about \$15, which is more than twice that charged for the other girls.

Siri is very frightened that she will get AIDS. Long before she understood prostitution she knew about HIV, as many girls from her village returned home to die from AIDS after being sold into the brothels. Every day she prays to Buddha, trying to earn the merit that will protect her from the disease. She also tries to insist that her clients use condoms, and in most cases she is successful as the pimp backs her up. But when policemen use her, or the pimp himself, they will do as they please; if she tries to insist, she will be beaten and raped. She also fears pregnancy, and like the other girls she receives injections of the contraceptive drug Depo-Provera. Once a month she has an HIV test, and so far it has been negative. She knows that if she tests positive she will be thrown out of the brothel to starve.

Though she is only fifteen Siri is now resigned to being a prostitute. After she was sold and taken to the brothel, she discovered that the work was not what she thought it would be. Like many rural Thais, Siri had a sheltered childhood and she was ignorant of what it meant to work in a brothel. Her first client hurt her and at the first opportunity she ran away. On the street with no money she was quickly caught, dragged back, beaten, and raped. That night she was forced to take on a chain of clients until the early morning. The beatings and the work continued night after night until her will was broken. Now she is sure that she is a bad person, very bad to have deserved what has happened

to her. When I commented on how pretty she looked in a photograph, how like a pop star, she replied, "I'm no star; I'm just a whore, that's all." She copes as best she can. She takes a dark pride in her higher price and in the large number of men who choose her. It is the adjustment of the concentration camp, an effort to make sense of horror.

In Thailand prostitution is illegal, yet girls like Siri are sold into sex slavery by the thousands. The brothels that hold these girls are but a small part of a much wider sex industry. How can this wholesale trade in girls continue? What keeps it working? The answer is more complicated than we might think; Thailand's economic boom, its macho culture, and its social acceptance of prostitution all contribute to it. Money, culture, and society blend in new and powerful ways to enslave girls like Siri!

Rice in the Field, Fish in the River, Daughters in the Brothel

Thailand is a country blessed with natural resources and sufficient food. The climate is mild to hot, there is dependable rain, and most of the country is a great plain, well-watered and fertile. The reliable production of rice has for centuries made Thailand a large exporter of grains, as it is today. Starvation is exceedingly rare in its history and social stability very much the norm. An old and often-repeated saying in Thai is "There is always rice in the fields and fish in the river." And anyone who has tried the imaginative Thai cuisine knows the remarkable things that can be done with those two ingredients and the local chili peppers.

If there is one part of Thailand not so rich in the necessities of life, it is the mountainous north. In fact, that area is not Thailand proper; originally the kingdom of Lanna, it was integrated into Thailand only in the late nineteenth century. The influence of Burma here is very strong—as are the cultures of the seven main hill tribes, which are distinctly foreign to the dominant Thai society. Only about a tenth of the land of the north can be used for agriculture, though what can be used

is the most fertile in the country. The result is that those who control good land are well-off; those who live in the higher elevations, in the forests, are not. In another part of the world this last group might be called hillbillies, and they share the hardscrabble life of mountain dwellers everywhere.

The harshness of this life stands in sharp contrast to that on the great plain of rice and fish. Customs and culture differ markedly as well, and one of those differences is a key to the sexual slavery practiced throughout Thailand today. For hundreds of years many people in the north, struggling for life, have been forced to view their own children as commodities. A failed harvest, the death of a key breadwinner, or any serious debt incurred by a family might lead to the sale of a daughter (never a son) as a slave or servant. In the culture of the north it was a life choice not preferred but acceptable, and one that was used regularly. In the past these sales fed a small, steady flow of servants, workers, and prostitutes south into Thai society.

Religion helped provide two important justifications for such sales of daughters. Within the type of Buddhism followed in Thailand, women are regarded as distinctly inferior to men. A woman cannot, for example, attain enlightenment, which is the ultimate goal of the devout. On the ladder of existence women are well below men, and only if she is especially careful might a woman hope to be reborn as a man in her next life. Indeed, to enter this incarnation as a woman might indicate a particularly disastrous and sinful previous life. In the advice recorded as his own words, Buddha warns his disciples about the danger of women: they are impure, carnal, and corrupting. Within these Buddhist writings prostitution is sanctioned; the *vibhaya*, or rules for monks, lists ten kinds of wives, the first three of which are "those bought for money, those living together voluntarily, those to be enjoyed or used occasionally."² Within these beliefs is no notion of sex as a sin; instead, sex is seen as an attachment to the physical and natural world, the world of suffering and ignorance. The implication is that if you must have sex, have it as impersonally as possible.

Thai Buddhism also carries a central message of acceptance and resignation in the face of life's pain and suffering. The terrible things that happen to a person are, after all, of an individual's own making, recompense for the sins of this life or previous lives. Whatever happens is a person's fixed destiny, his or her karma. To achieve the tranquility necessary for enlightenment, a person must learn to accept quietly and completely the pain of this life. For some Thai children the pain of this life includes forced prostitution. They may struggle against the abuse they suffer, but most come to resign themselves, living out a psychology of slavery that we will explore in this chapter.

A religious belief in the inferiority of girls is not the only cultural rule pressing them into slavery. Thai children, especially girls, owe their parents a profound debt, an obligation both cosmic and physical. Simply to be born is a great gift, then to be fed and raised another; and both require a lifetime of repayment. Girls in Thailand have always been expected to contribute fully to their family's income and to service their debt of obligation. In extreme cases this means being sold into slavery, being sacrificed for the good of their family. At the same time some parents have been quick to recognize the money to be realized from the sale of their children.

The small number of children sold into slavery in the past has become a flood today. This increase reflects the enormous changes in Thailand in the past fifty years as the country goes through the great transformation of industrialization—the same process that tore Europe apart over a century ago. If we are to understand slavery in Thailand we must understand these changes as well, for like so many other parts of the world, Thailand has always had slavery, but never before on this scale and never before as the new slavery.

One Girl Equals One Television

The economic boom of the past twenty years (which crashed in 1997) had a dramatic impact on northern villages. While the center of the

country around Bangkok, rapidly industrialized, the north was left behind. Prices of food, land, and tools all increased as the economy grew, but the returns for rice growing and other agricultural work were stagnant, held down by government policies guaranteeing cheap food for factory workers in Bangkok. Yet visible everywhere in the north is a flood of consumer goods—refrigerators, televisions, cars and trucks, rice cookers, air conditioners—all of which are extremely tempting. Demand for these goods is high as families try to join the ranks of the prosperous. As it happens, the cost of participating in this consumer boom can be met from an old source, one that has also become much more profitable: the sale of children.

In the past, daughters were sold in response to a serious family financial crisis. Under the threat of losing their mortgaged rice fields and faced with destitution, a family might sell a daughter to redeem its debt, but for the most part daughters were worth about as much at home as workers as they would realize when sold. Modernization and economic growth have changed all that. Now parents feel a great pressure to buy consumer goods that were unknown even twenty years ago; the sale of a daughter might easily finance a new television set. A recent survey in the northern provinces found that of the families who sold their daughters, two-thirds could afford not to do so but “instead preferred to buy color televisions and video equipment.”³ And from the perspective of parents who are willing to sell their children, there has never been a better market.

The brothels' demand for prostitutes is rapidly increasing. The same economic boom that feeds consumer demand in northern villages lines the pockets of laborers and workers of the central plain. Poor economic migrants from the rice fields now work on building sites or in new factories earning many times what they did on the land. Possibly for the first time in their lives, these laborers can do what more well-off Thai men have always done: go to a brothel. The purchasing power of this increasing number of brothel users strengthens the call for northern girls and supports a growing business in procurement and trafficking in girls.

Siri's story was typical. A broker, a woman herself from a northern village, approached the families in Siri's village with assurances of well-paid work for their daughters. Siri's parents probably understood that the work would be as a prostitute—since they knew that other girls from their village had gone south to brothels. After some negotiation they were paid 50,000 baht (\$2,000) for Siri, a very significant sum for this family of rice farmers.⁴ This exchange began the process of debt bondage that is used to enslave the girls. The contractual arrangement between the broker and parents requires that this money be repaid by the daughter's labor before she is free to leave or is allowed to send money home. Sometimes the money is treated as a loan to the parents, the girl being both the collateral and the means of repayment. In such cases the exorbitant interest charged on the loan means there is little chance that a girl's sexual slavery will ever repay the debt.

Siri's debt of 50,000 baht rapidly escalated. Taken south by the broker, Siri was sold for 100,000 baht to the brothel where she now works. After her rape and beating Siri was informed that the debt she must repay, now to the brothel, equaled 200,000 baht. In addition, Siri learned of the other payments she would be required to make, including rent for her room at 30,000 baht per month as well as charges for food and drink, fees for medicine, and fines if she did not work hard enough or displeased a customer.

The total debt is virtually impossible to repay, even at Siri's higher rate of 400 baht. About 100 baht from each client is supposed to be credited to Siri to reduce her debt and pay her rent and other expenses; 200 goes to the pimp and the remaining 100 to the brothel. By this reckoning, Siri must have sex with 300 men a month just to pay her rent, and what is left over after other expenses barely reduces her original debt. For girls who can charge only 100 to 200 baht per client, the debt grows even faster. This debt bondage keeps the girls under complete control as long as they seem to the brothel owner and pimp worth having. Violence reinforces the control and any resistance earns a beating as well as an increase in the debt. Over time, if the girl becomes a good and cooperative prostitute, the pimp may tell her she has

paid off the debt and allow her to send small sums home. This "paying off" of the debt usually has nothing to do with an actual accounting of earnings but is declared at the discretion of the pimp, as a means to extend the profits to be made by making the girl more pliable. Together with rare visits home, money sent back to the family operates to keep her at her job.

Most girls are purchased from parents as Siri was, but for others the enslavement is much more direct. Throughout Thailand agents travel to villages offering work in factories or as domestics. Sometimes they bribe local officials to vouch for them or they befriend the monks at the local temple to gain introductions. Lured by the promise of good jobs and the money that the daughters will send back to the village, the deceived families send their girls with the agent, often paying for the privilege. Once they arrive in a city, the girls are sold to brothels where they are raped, beaten, and locked in. Still other girls are simply kidnapped. This is especially true of women and children who have come to visit relatives in Thailand from Burma or Laos. At bus and train stations gangs watch for women and children that can be snatched or drugged for shipment to brothels.

Direct enslavement by trickery or kidnapping is not really in the economic interest of the brothel owners. The steadily growing market for prostitutes, the loss of girls due to HIV infection, and the especially strong demand for younger and younger girls make it necessary for brokers and brothel owners to cultivate village families so that they might buy more daughters as they come of age. In Siri's case this meant letting her maintain ties with her family and ensuring that after a year or so she sent a monthly postal order for 10,000 baht to her parents. The monthly payment is a good investment, since it encourages Siri's parents to place their other daughters in the brothel as well. Moreover, the young girls themselves become willing to go, when older sisters and relatives returning for holidays bring stories of the rich life to be lived in the cities of the central plain. Village girls lead a sheltered life, and the appearance of women only a little older than themselves with

money and nice clothes is tremendously appealing. They admire the results of this thing called prostitution with only the vaguest notion of what it is. Recent research found that young girls know that their sisters and neighbors have become prostitutes, but when asked what it means to be a prostitute their most common answer was "wearing Western clothes in a restaurant."⁵ Drawn by this glamorous life, they put up little opposition to being sent away with the brokers to swell an already booming sex industry.

By my own conservative estimate there are perhaps 35,000 girls like Siri enslaved in Thailand. Remarkably, this is only a small proportion of all prostitutes. The actual number of prostitutes, while unknown, is certainly much higher. The government states that there are 81,384 prostitutes in Thailand—but that official number is calculated from the number of registered (though still illegal) brothels, massage parlors, and sex establishments. Every brothel, bar, or massage parlor we visited in Thailand was unregistered, and no one working with prostitutes believes the government figures. At the other end of the spectrum are the estimates put forward by activist organizations such as the Center for the Protection of Children's Rights. These groups assert that there are over 2 million prostitutes. I suspect that this number is too high in a national population of 60 million. My own reckoning, based on information gathered by AIDS workers in different cities, is that there are between half a million and one million prostitutes.

Of this number only about one in twenty is enslaved. Most become prostitutes voluntarily, though some start out in debt bondage. Sex is sold everywhere in Thailand—barber shops, massage parlors, coffee shops and cafés, bars and restaurants, nightclubs and karaoke bars, brothels, hotels, and even temples traffic in sex. Prostitutes range from the high-earning "professional" women who work with some autonomy, through the women working by choice as call girls or in massage parlors, to the enslaved rural girls like Siri. Many women work semi-independently in bars, restaurants, and nightclubs—paying a fee to the owner, working when they choose, and having the power to decide

whom to take as a customer. Most bars or clubs could not use an enslaved prostitute like Siri, as the women are often sent out on call and their clients expect a certain amount of cooperation and friendliness. Enslaved girls service the lowest end of the market: the laborers, students, and workers who can afford only the 100 baht per half hour rate. It is low-cost sex in volume, and the demand is always there. For Thai men, buying a woman is much like buying a round of drinks. But the reasons that such large numbers of Thai men use prostitutes are much more complicated and grow out of their culture, their history, and a rapidly changing economy.

"I Don't Want to Waste It. So I Take Her"

Thais worship and imitate their royal family even more than the English do theirs. The current King Bhumibol is also known as Rama the Ninth, demonstrating the stability of a royal house that has governed the country since the eighteenth century. For much of Thailand's history this was an absolute monarchy, having life-and-death power over all of society. In the fifteenth century a Law of Civil Hierarchy codified the existing rigid and all-pervasive social structure. The law assigned every male of any rank a number of imaginary rice fields, from 25 for an ordinary freeman to 10,000 for ministers of state. This established a notional and measurable worth for every person in society; even the peasants, serfs, and slaves who made up the bulk of society were allotted 15 fields each (not that they ever got to own them). And while the law's official measurement of worth was in rice fields, an equally good measure of a man's status was in wives, mistresses, and concubines. Until it was officially disbanded in 1910 the king maintained a harem of hundreds of concubines, a few of whom might be elevated to the rank of Royal Mother or Minor Wife. This form of polygamy was closely imitated by status-hungry nobles and the emerging rich merchants of the nineteenth century. Virtually all men of any substance kept at least a mistress or a "minor wife." For those with less resources, prostitution

was a perfectly acceptable option, as renting took the place of out-and-out ownership.

Even today everyone in Thailand knows their place within a very elaborate and precise status system. Mistresses and minor wives continue to enhance any man's social standing,⁶ but the consumption of commercial sex has increased dramatically. If an economic boom is a tide that raises all boats, then vast numbers of Thai men have now been raised to a financial position from which they can regularly buy sex. Nothing like the economic growth in Thailand was ever experienced in the West, but a few facts show its scale: in a country the size of Britain, one-tenth of the workforce moved from the land to industry in just the three years from 1993 to 1995; the number of factory workers doubled from less than 2 million to more than 4 million in the eight years from 1988 to 1995; and urban wages doubled from 1986 to 1996. Thailand is now the world's largest importer of motorcycles and the second-largest importer of pickup trucks after the United States (these two types of vehicles being best suited to Thailand's warm climate and dubious roads). Between 1985 and 1995 the gross national product doubled and the gross domestic product tripled. Until the economic downturn of late 1997, money flooded Thailand, transforming poor rice farmers into wage laborers and fueling consumer demand.

With this newfound wealth Thai men go to brothels in increasing numbers. Several recent studies show that between 80 and 87 percent of Thai men have had sex with a prostitute. Up to 90 percent report that their first sexual experience was with a prostitute. Somewhere between 10 and 40 percent of married men paid for commercial sex within the past twelve months, as have up to 50 percent of single men. Though it is difficult to measure, these reports suggest something like 3 to 5 million regular customers for commercial sex. But it would be wrong to imagine millions of Thai men sneaking furtively on their own along dark streets lined with brothels: commercial sex is a social event, part of a good night out with friends. Ninety-five percent of men going to a brothel do so with their friends, usually at the end of a night

spent drinking. Groups go out for recreation and entertainment, and especially to get drunk together. That is a strictly male pursuit, as Thai women usually abstain from alcohol. All-male groups out for a night on the town are considered normal in any Thai city, and whole neighborhoods are devoted to serving them. Most Thais, men and women, feel that commercial sex is an acceptable part of an ordinary outing for single men, and about two-thirds of men and one-third of women feel the same about married men.⁷

For most married women, having their husbands go to prostitutes is preferable to other forms of extramarital sex. Most wives accept that men naturally want multiple partners, and prostitutes are seen as less threatening to the stability of the family.⁸ Prostitutes require no long-term commitment or emotional involvement. When a husband uses a prostitute he is thought to be fulfilling a male role, but when he takes a minor wife or mistress, his wife is thought to have failed. Minor wives are usually bigamous second wives, often married by law in a district different than that of the first marriage (easily done, since no national records are kept). As wives, they require upkeep, housing, and regular support, and their offspring have a claim on inheritance; so they present a significant danger to the well-being of the major wife and her children. The relationship may not be formalized (polygamy is illegal) but it nevertheless will be regarded as binding, and the children still have legal claims for support. For the minor wife from a poor background, attachment to a well-heeled older man is a proven avenue to upward social mobility. The potential disaster for the first wife is a minor wife who convinces the man to leave his first family, and this happens often enough to keep first wives worried and watchful.

Given that sex is for sale everywhere, and that noncommercial sex threatens the family more gravely, it is little wonder that Thai wives maintain a "don't ask—don't tell" policy about prostitution. As greater spending power means their husbands can buy sex at will, most Thai women are resigned to it, simply hoping that his interest doesn't shift to a minor wife.⁹ Within this context, their husbands' occasional visits

to brothels with the boys are overlooked by wives. Because it is part of a normal outing, most men feel little or no shame in buying sex. Certainly any hesitation they might feel is quickly melted by alcohol and peer pressure. Not all nights out lead to the brothel, of course, but a promotion, pay raise, or any sort of celebration makes a visit more likely. Not all groups of friends will go to brothels on their night out. Some groups of married men never do, but others will go often, their drinking parties naturally evolving into trips to the brothel. And once Thai men are out drinking, it is normal for one reveler to pay for the group, thereby hosting the party; picking up the tab is also a form of conspicuous consumption, deployed to impress one's colleagues. This carries over to the brothel as well and often makes the difference in whether a man will use a prostitute. Interviewed in a recent study one man explained, "When we arrive at the brothel, my friends take one and pay for me to take another. It costs them money; I don't want to waste it, so I take her."¹⁰ Having one's prostitute paid for also brings an informal obligation to repay in kind at a later date. It is something many men would avoid because of the expense, if sober, but in the inebriated moment of celebration most men go along for the ride.

Buying prostitutes for someone else happens for other reasons as well. Businessmen in negotiations will provide or expect sex as part of the bargaining process. For most Thais this is a perfectly unremarkable part of business practice and necessary if one's firm or job is to continue and prosper. Men who travel on business are also more likely to use prostitutes, taking advantage of being away from their hometown or village. Government officials touring rural areas are offered local "flowers" as hospitality, and there is a saying that a man has not really been to a place until he has had a "taste" of it. Even first-year university students will be taken en masse to brothels in their first week as part of an initiation by upperclassmen. All of this behavior is made easier by the assumption that men are not responsible when they are drunk, and groups of friends egg each other on in heavy drinking—an opened whiskey bottle can never be resealed. In the macho

Thai culture, drunken accusations that a reluctant man is afraid of his wife almost always push him to accept an offered prostitute. Thai culture also emphasizes group solidarity and conflict avoidance, so acquiescence in commercial sex is often seen as better than disagreement or embarrassment. And whatever happens, men keep their secrets. Friends never admit to their wives or others what happens when the group is out drinking.

For most Thai men, commercial sex is a legitimate form of entertainment and sexual release. It is not just acceptable: it is a clear statement of status and economic power. Women in Thailand are *things*, markers in a male game of status and prestige. It is thus no surprise that some women are treated as livestock—kidnapped, abused, held like animals, bought and sold, and dumped when their usefulness is gone. When this customary treatment is combined with the relentless profit-making of the new economy, the result for women is horrific. Thousands more must be found to feed men's status needs, thousands more must be locked into sexual slavery to feed the profits of investors. And what are the police, government, and local authorities doing about slavery? Every case of sex slavery involves many crimes—fraud, kidnap, assault, rape, sometimes murder. These crimes are not rare or random; they are systematic and repeated in brothels thousands of times each month. Yet those with the power to stop this terror instead help it grow and grow in the very lucrative world of the modern slaveholder.

Millionaire Tigers and Billionaire Geese

Who are these modern slaveholders? The answer is anyone and everyone: anyone, that is, with a little capital to invest. The people that *appear* to own the enslaved prostitutes—the pimps, madams, and brothel keepers—are in fact usually just employees. As hired muscle, pimps and their helpers provide the brutality that controls women and makes possible their commercial exploitation. Although they are just employees, the pimps do rather well for themselves. Often living in the brothel,

they receive a salary and add to that income from a number of scams; for example, food and drink are sold to customers at inflated prices and the pimps pocket the difference. Much more lucrative is their control of the price of sex. While each woman has a basic price, the pimps size up each customer and pitch the fee accordingly. In this way a client may pay two or three times more than the normal rate and all of the surplus goes to the pimp. In league with the bookkeeper, the pimp systematically cheats the prostitutes of the little that is supposed to be credited against their debt. If they manage the sex slaves well and play all of the angles, pimps will easily make ten times their basic wage—a great income for an ex-peasant whose main skills are violence and intimidation, but nothing compared to the riches to be made by the brokers and the real slaveholders.

The brokers and agents that buy girls in the villages and sell them to brothels are only short-term slaveholders. Their business is part recruiting agency, part shipping company, part public relations, and part kidnapping gang. They aim to buy low and sell high, while maintaining a good flow of girls from the villages. Brokers are equally likely to be men or women and usually come from the regions in which they recruit. Some will be local people dealing in girls in addition to their jobs as police officers, government bureaucrats, or even schoolteachers. Positions of public trust are excellent starting points for buying young girls. In spite of the character of their work they are well respected. Seen as job providers and sources of large cash payments to parents, they are well known in their communities. Many of the women brokers were once sold themselves, spent some years as prostitutes, and now, in their middle age, make a living by supplying girls to the brothels. These women are walking advertisements for sexual slavery. Their lifestyle and income, their Western clothes and glamorous sophisticated ways, point to a rosy economic future for the girls they buy. That they have physically survived their years in the brothel may be the exception—many more young women come back to the villages to die of AIDS—but the parents tend to be optimistic. Whether these dealers

are local people or traveling agents, they combine the business of procuring with other economic pursuits. A returned prostitute may live with her family, look after her parents, own a rice field or two, and buy and sell girls on the side. Like the pimps, they are in a good business, doubling their money on each girl within two or three weeks, but like the pimps, their profits are small compared to those of the long-term slaveholders.

The real slaveowners tend to be middle-aged businessmen. They fit seamlessly into the community, and they suffer no social discrimination for what they do. If anything, they are admired as successful, diversified capitalists. Brothel ownership is normally only one of many business interests for the slaveholder. To be sure, a brothel owner may have some ties to organized crime, but in Thailand organized crime includes the police and much of the government. Indeed, the work of the modern slaveholder is best seen not as aberrant criminality but as a perfect example of disinterested capitalism. Owning the brothel that holds young girls in bondage is simply a business matter. The investors would say that they are creating jobs and wealth. There is no hypocrisy in their actions, for they obey an important social norm: earning a lot of money is a good enough reason for anything. Of course, the slaveholder living in a middle-class neighborhood would display no outward sign of his work. His neighbors would know that he was a businessman, a successful one, and respect him for that. To look too closely into someone else's affairs is a serious affront in Thai culture: "mind your own business" (*yaa suek*) is one of the strongest retorts in the Thai language. So the slaveholder gains all of the benefits of exploiting and abusing young girls with no social repercussions.

The slaveholder may in fact be a partnership, company, or corporation. From the 1980s, Japanese investment poured into Thailand, in an enormous migration of capital that was called "Flying Geese."¹¹ The strong yen led to buying and building across the country, and while electronics firms built television factories, other investors found there was much, much more money to be made in the sex industry. In the

footsteps of the Japanese came investment by the so-called Four Tigers (South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore) who also found marvelous opportunities in commercial sex. (All five of these countries also proved to be strong import markets for enslaved Thai girls, as discussed below.) The Geese and the Tigers had the resources to buy the local criminals, police, administrators, and property needed to set up commercial sex businesses. Indigenous Thais also invested in brothels as the sex industry boomed; with less capital, they were more likely to open poorer, working-class outlets.

While young prostitutes have regular contact with the police, they may never meet the person who effectively owns them. The relationship between slaveholder and slave in modern Thailand is a model of arm's-length capitalism. Brothel owners, whether individuals or companies, need have little contact with prostitutes. It is possible that some co-owners do not even know they are slaveholders, only that they employ commercial sex workers. The promise of high returns is a powerful incentive to invest in a friend's new enterprise, and most Thais invest in businesses run by friends or relatives rather than in stocks and shares. Diversified capital investment is a new thing in Thailand, but it has caught on quickly. The ways of Western markets and economics are avidly imitated by the new businesspeople throughout Thailand. Looking to the developed countries they see investors putting their money into stock-market mutual funds on the basis of returns above all else—and that the portfolio might include firms making land mines or instruments of torture need not concern anyone. But the amount of distance needed to plead ignorance doesn't have to be so great; a single step is enough to separate an investor from his or her conscience.

Whether they be individual Thais, partnerships, or foreign investors, the slaveholders share many characteristics and well exemplify today's new slavers. There is little or no racial or ethnic difference between them and the slaves they own (with the exception of Japanese investors). They feel no need to rationalize their slaveholding on racial grounds. Nor are they linked in any sort of hereditary ownership of slaves or

of the children of their slaves. They are not really interested in their slaves at all, just in the bottom line on their investment. If they weren't slaveholders they would put their money into other businesses, but there is little incentive to do so since brothels are such solid investments, much more stable than the stock market. Contributing to the economy is a strong *moral* argument in Thailand, and these slaveholders might be proud of their contribution—they see themselves as providing jobs, and even as lifting the debt-bonded girls out of rural poverty. Not that these moral questions matter, since the slaveholders never need think about the women in their brothels, where they come from, or what will happen to them.

To understand the business of slavery today we have to know something about the economy in which it operates. In spite of the economic boom, the average Thai's income is very low by Western standards. Within an industrializing country, millions still live in rural poverty. If a rural family owns its house and has a rice field, it might survive on as little as 500 baht (\$20) per month. Such absolute poverty means a diet of rice supplemented with insects (crickets, grubs, and maggots are widely eaten), wild plants, and what fish they can catch themselves. Below this level, which can be sustained only in the countryside, is hunger and the loss of any house or land. For most Thais an income of 2,500 to 4,500 baht per month (\$100 to \$180) is normal. Government figures from December 1996 put two-thirds of the population at this level, which is still poverty: in the cities rent will take more than half of the average income, and prices climb constantly. At this income there is deprivation but no hunger since government policies artificially depress the price of rice (to the impoverishment of farmers). Rice sells for 20 baht (75 cents) a kilo, with a family of four eating about a kilo of rice each day. They might eat, but Thais on these poverty wages can do little else. Whether in city, town, or village, to earn it they will work six or seven twelve- to fourteen-hour days each week. Illness or injury can quickly send even this standard of living plummeting downward. There is no system of welfare or health care, and pinched budgets allow no

space for saving. In these families the 20,000 to 50,000 baht (\$800 to \$1,000) brought by selling a daughter represents a year's income. Such a vast sum is a powerful inducement and blinds parents to the realities of sex slavery.

The Always Prospering "Restaurant"

Brothels are just one of the many outlets for commercial sex, but because of their rapid turnover they serve a large proportion of men buying sex. The average brothel keeps between ten and thirty prostitutes, and most average around twenty. In the countryside the brothel may just be someone's house with three or four women working, but it is the brothels in cities and towns that hold girls in debt bondage. Many brothels benefit from economies of agglomeration, bunching together in a red-light district. If they have any sign outside (and most don't), it will be cryptically neutral. One working-class brothel I visited had a small lighted sign hanging by its gate that read "Always Prospering"; below it in smaller type and different paint had been added "restaurant." This addition, I was told, had been made at the suggestion of the police, though no food was for sale inside. The buildings themselves are as a rule dilapidated, dirty, leaky, and cobbled together from scrap. Rats and roaches infest them and sanitation is minimal. The women who must work in them are young, rarely over thirty and often younger than eighteen. There is little difference between them and their customers. Both are from poor backgrounds, though the girls are more likely to be from the northern region. In the far south of Thailand the men may be Malay or Singaporean Muslims, but the girls will still be northern Thai Buddhists. The exception to the regular use of northern Thai girls is the recent increase in women trafficked from Burma and Laos, and enslaved in brothels. Importing women helps meet the rising demand for fresh prostitutes.

Forced prostitution is a great business. The overheads are low, the turnover high, and the profits immense. In this research I have tried for

the first time to detail the business side of this form of slavery and to expose the scale of exploitation and its rewards. It is far, far different from the capital-intensive slavery of the past, which required long-term investments and made solid but small profits. The disposability of the women, the special profits to be made from children, all ensure a low-risk, high-return enterprise. For all its dilapidation and filth the brothel is a highly efficient machine that in destroying young girls turns them into gold.

To set up a brothel requires a relatively small outlay. About 80,000 baht (\$3,200) will buy all the furniture, equipment, and fixtures that are needed. The building itself will be rented for anywhere from 4,000 to 15,000 baht per month (\$160 to \$600). In addition to the prostitutes the brothel needs a pimp (who often has a helper) and a cashier/bookkeeper; it sometimes employs a cook as well. Pimps will receive from 5,000 to 10,000 baht per month in salary (\$200 to \$400), cashiers about 7,000 baht (\$280), and the cook about 5,000 baht (\$200) or less. For electricity and other utilities about 2,000 baht (\$80) is needed each month. Beer and whiskey must be bought for resale to clients. This leaves only two other expenses—food and bribes.

Feeding a prostitute costs 50 to 80 baht per day (\$2.00 to \$3.20). Slaveholders do not skimp on food, since men want healthy-looking girls with full figures. Healthy looks are important in a country suffering an HIV epidemic, and *young* healthy girls are thought to be the safest. Bribes are not exorbitant or unpredictable; in most brothels a policeman stops by once a day to pick up 200 to 400 baht (\$8 to \$16), a monthly expenditure of about 6,000 baht (\$240) that is topped off by giving the policeman a girl for an hour if he seems interested. The police pay close attention to the stability of the brothels: a short side street generates \$32,000 to \$64,000 each year in relatively effortless income. The higher-priced massage parlors and nightclubs pay much larger bribes and usually a significant start-up payment as well. Bribe income is the key reason that senior police officials are happy to buy their positions and compete for the most lucrative ones.

TABLE I MONTHLY EXPENDITURE AND INCOME FOR THE ALWAYS PROSPERING BROTHEL

Expenses		Income	
Item	Amount (in baht)	Item	Amount (in baht)
Rent	5,000	Commercial sex*	1,050,000
Utilities and bills	2,000	Rent paid by prostitutes	600,000
Food and drink	45,000	Sale of condoms	70,000
Pimp's salary	7,000	Sale of drinks	672,000
Cashier	7,000	Virgin premium	50,000
Cook	5,000	"Interest" on debt bond	15,000
Bribes	6,000		
Payments to taxis, etc.	12,000		
Beer and whiskey	168,000		
<i>Total</i>	<u>257,000</u>	<i>Total</i>	<u>2,457,000</u>
	(U.S.\$10,280)	<i>Monthly Profit</i>	2,200,000
			(U.S.\$88,000)

* Calculated for 20 prostitutes averaging 14 clients per day, at 125 baht per client, for 30 days.

Income far exceeds expenses. Each of the twenty girls makes about 125 baht (\$5) for the brothel with each client she has, and each day she has between ten and eighteen clients for 1,250 to 2,250 baht (\$50 to \$90). A single day's return is 25,000 to 45,000 baht (\$1,000 to \$1,800) just on sex. And as can be seen from table 1, there are a number of other ways for the brothel to turn a penny.

The profit on drinks, mostly the sale of beer and whiskey, is difficult to measure. The table's almost 700,000 baht is a conservative estimate based on each client buying a single beer, which has been bought by the brothel for 20 baht and sold for 80 baht. The prostitute's rent averages 30,000 baht per month for her room, and if half the girls are repaying a debt bond the brothel would make at least 15,000 baht each month on the "interest." The sale of condoms is pure profit, as they are provided free of charge to brothels by the Ministry of Health in an attempt to slow the spread of HIV. Clients are charged 10 baht for a condom

and most clients are required to use one. Siri explained that she went through three to four boxes of condoms each month; there are 100 condoms in each box.

The income shown as the *virgin premium* requires some explanation. Some customers, especially Chinese and Sino-Thais, are willing to pay very large amounts to have sex with a virgin. This strong preference has two bases. The first is the ancient Chinese belief that sex with a virgin will reawaken sexual virility and prolong life. A girl's virginity is thought to be a strong source of *yang* (or coolness), which quenches and slows the *yin* (or heat) of the aging process. Wealthy Chinese and Sino-Thais (as well as Chinese sex tourists from Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong) will try to have sex with virgins as regularly as possible and will pay well for the opportunity. When a new girl is brought to the brothel she will not be placed out in the selection room with the other prostitutes but kept back in another room, the *hong bud boree sut* (the "room to unveil virgins"). Here she will be displayed, possibly with other children, and her price will be negotiated with the pimp. To deflower a virgin these men pay between 5,000 and 50,000 baht (\$200 to \$2,000). Deflowering often takes place away from the brothel in a hotel room rented for the occasion. The pimp or his assistant will often attend as well, since it is usually necessary to beat the girl into submission.

The second reason the brothel can demand a virgin premium is the general fear of HIV/AIDS. While Thai men or other non-Chinese customers do not believe in yin and yang, they do fear HIV infection. It is assumed that virgins cannot carry the virus, and even after a girl has lost her virginity, she can be sold at a higher price as "pure" or "fresh." One Burmese girl reported being sold as a virgin to four different clients. The younger the girl, or the younger-looking she is, the higher her price can be, as in Siri's case. The premium might also be paid to a brothel by another, higher-class, commercial sex business. Special "members clubs" or massage parlors might take an order from a customer for a virgin, a pure girl, or a child. If the brothel doesn't have a suitable

young girl on hand, it might arrange with a broker for one to be recruited or, if time is pressing, kidnapped. The more expensive establishments don't normally want to get involved in procuring and are willing to pay the brothels to find the young girls. Once used in this way, the girl is put to work with the other prostitutes in the brothel to feed the normal profit stream.

This profit stream makes sex slavery very lucrative. The Always Prospering brothel nets something like 26,400,000 baht a year (\$1,056,000), a return of 856 percent on expenses. Key to this level of profit is the low cost of each girl. A new girl, at 100,000 baht, requires a capital outlay of less than 5 percent of one month's profit. Simply from the sale of her body and the rent she must pay, a brothel recovers the cost of buying a girl within two or three months. Within the sex industry it is the slaveholder that makes the highest profits. Voluntary prostitutes in nightclubs and massage parlors charge higher prices, but have only three to five clients a day. Escort girls may have only one client a night. Voluntary sex workers, who keep a much larger proportion of the money they make, also exercise some discretion over which clients they will take. By contrast, the slaveholder's total control of the prostitute, over the volume of clients she must take and over the money she makes, means vast profits. There is no good estimate of the importance of the sex industry to the Thai economy, and the total number of sex workers is hotly debated. But if we look just at girls like Siri, the estimated 35,000 girls held in debt bondage, the annual profits they generate are enormous. If their brothels follow the same scheme as the Always Prospering, the annual profit made on these girls is over 46 billion baht (\$1.85 billion). There is, however, one other cost to be laid against this profit—the price the girls pay with their bodies, minds, and health.

Disposable Bodies

Girls are so cheap that there is little reason to take care of them over the long term. Expenditure on medical care or prevention is rare in

the brothels, since the working life of girls in debt bondage is fairly short—two to five years. After that, most of the profit has been drained from the girl and it is more cost-effective to discard her and replace her with someone fresh. No brothel wants to take on the responsibility of a sick or dying girl.

Enslaved prostitutes in brothels face two major threats to their physical health and to their lives: violence and disease. Violence—their enslavement enforced through rape, beatings, or threats—is always present. It is the typical introduction to their new status as sex slaves. Virtually every girl interviewed repeated the same story: after being taken to the brothel or to her first client as a virgin, any resistance or refusal was met with beatings and rape. A few girls report being drugged and then attacked; others report being forced to submit at gunpoint. The immediate and forceful application of terror is the first step in successful enslavement. Within hours of being brought to the brothel, the girls are in pain and shock. Like other victims of torture they often go numb, paralyzed in their minds if not in their bodies. For the youngest girls, with little understanding of what is happening to them, the trauma is overwhelming. Shattered and betrayed, they often have little clear memory of what has occurred.

After the first attack the girl has little resistance left, but the violence never ends. In the brothel, violence and terror are the final arbiters of all questions. There is no argument, there is no appeal. An unhappy customer brings a beating, a sadistic client brings more pain; in order to intimidate and cheat them more easily, the pimp rains down terror randomly on the prostitutes. The girls must do anything the pimp wants if they are to avoid being beaten. Escape is impossible. One girl reported that when she was caught trying to escape, the pimp beat her and then took her into the viewing room; with two helpers he then beat her again in front of all the girls in the brothel. Afterward she was locked into a room for three days and nights with no food or water. When she was released she was immediately put to work. Two other girls who attempted escape told of being stripped naked and whipped

with steel coat hangers by pimps. The police serve as slave-catchers whenever a girl escapes; once captured, girls are often beaten or abused in the police station before being sent back to the brothel. For most girls it soon becomes clear that they can never escape, that their only hope for release is to please the pimp and to somehow pay off their debt.

In time, confusion and disbelief fade, leaving dread, resignation, and a separation of the conscious link between mind and body. Now the girl does whatever it takes to reduce the pain, to adjust mentally to a life that means being used by fifteen men a day. The reaction to this abuse takes many forms: lethargy, aggression, self-loathing and suicide attempts, confusion, self-abuse, depression, full-blown psychoses, and hallucinations. Girls who have been freed and taken into shelters are found to have all these. Rehabilitation workers report that the girls suffer emotional instability; they are unable to trust or form relationships, to readjust to the world outside the brothel, or to learn and develop normally. Unfortunately, psychological counseling is virtually unknown in Thailand, as there is a strong cultural pressure to keep any mental problems hidden, and little therapeutic work is done with girls freed from brothels. The long-term impact of this experience is unknown.

A clearer picture can be drawn of the physical diseases that the girls accumulate. There are many sexually transmitted diseases, and prostitutes contract most of them. Multiple infections reduce the immune system and make it easier for infections to take hold. If the illness affects their ability to have sex it may be dealt with, but serious chronic illnesses are often left untreated. Contraception often harms the girls as well. Some slaveholders administer contraceptive pills themselves, continuing them without any break and withholding the monthly placebo pills. Thus the girls stop menstruating altogether and work more nights in the month. Some girls are given three or four contraceptive pills a day; others are given Depo-Provera injections by the pimp or the bookkeeper. The same needle might be used for injecting all of them, passing HIV from girl to girl. Most girls who become pregnant

will be sent for an abortion. Abortion is illegal in Thailand so this will be a backstreet operation, with all the obvious risks. A few women are kept working while they are pregnant, as some Thai men want to have sex with pregnant women. When the child is born it can be taken and sold by the brothel owner and the woman put back to work.

Not surprisingly, HIV/AIDS is epidemic in enslaved prostitutes. Thailand now has the highest rate of HIV infection in the world. Officially, the government admits to 800,000 cases, but health workers insist there are at least twice that many. Mechai Veravaidya, a birth control campaigner and expert who has been so successful that *mechai* is now the Thai word for condom, predicts there will be 4.3 million people infected with HIV by 2001.¹² The epidemic has passed beyond the high-risk groups of sex workers and drug users, who now have infection rates as high as 90 percent in some areas. The group with the greatest increase in HIV infection today are wives exposed through their husbands' visits to prostitutes. In some rural villages where the trafficking of girls has been a regular feature, the infection rate is over 60 percent. Recent research suggests that the younger the girl, the more susceptible she is to HIV due to the lack of development of the protective vaginal mucous membrane. In spite of the distribution of condoms by the government, some brothels do not require their use. Many young girls understand little about HIV and how it is contracted. Some feel that using condoms is too painful when they have to service ten to fifteen men a night. In fact, the abrasion of the vagina brought on by repeated sex with condoms can increase the chances of HIV infection when unprotected sex next occurs. Even in brothels where condoms are sold or required, girls cannot always force men to use them. Most northern villages house young girls and women who have come home from the brothels to die of AIDS. There they are sometimes shunned and sometimes hounded out of the village. There are a few rehabilitation centers run by charities and the government that work with ex-prostitutes and women who are HIV-positive, but they can take only a tiny fraction of those in need. Outside the brothel there is no life left

for most of these women, and some will stay in the brothel even when they have the chance to leave.

We're Unfit for Anything Else Now

Occasionally the government will order a raid on a brothel and take all the girls into custody. This is done for show, when newspaper reports of foreign interest makes it necessary. During such raids the prostitutes hide or run away from the police. Since the police normally work for the slaveholders, the girls assume the worst, not that they will be freed. Videos taken during these actions show girls paralyzed by fear and shock sitting numbly in the display room or later in police cells. Sometimes they are taken to emergency shelters, but the rehabilitation workers have learned it is impossible to keep some of them from running back to the brothel. One shelter worker explained, "When the girls are first brought in we say to them—'Don't break any windows in order to leave. Look, we are all going to the doctor now for a checkup, the door is open, just leave if you want'—it is no use to hold them against their will."¹³

The complex relationship between slave and slaveholder helps explain why a young prostitute runs back to the brothel after so much cruel treatment. From the outside it seems simple—one person controls others through violence, taking away their freedom. But slaves have to live on as slaves; they must find ways to adapt to their enslavement. Of course, any adaptation to horror may itself be horrible. Their reactions mirror the words of the psychologist R. D. Laing, who declared that some kinds of mental illness were strategies "invented in order to live in an unlivable situation."¹⁴ Within the brothels perhaps half of the sex slaves escape into a state of trauma and withdrawal; the other half find a more active adaptation, which may include close identification with the pimp or slaveholder. This resignation, this giving in, has the important benefit of reducing the violence the prostitutes suffer. Once escape is seen as impossible, any action or obedience that takes

away pain, that makes life a little more bearable, becomes viable no matter how degrading or illogical. Whether a girl adapts or withdraws may depend on how much she knew about life in the brothel before her arrival. Some parents admit that they understand exactly what happens to their daughters after they sell them. Some girls realize that they will probably be prostitutes and know something about what that means. For these girls adaptation may be easier. Other girls, especially very young girls, expect to be working in factories or restaurants. They will have heard of prostitution, but have little or no idea what it actually entails. For these girls physical assault and rape can be shattering, and they may react by escaping into shock and numbness.

In the world in which they live, like the world of the concentration camp, there are only those with total power and those with no power. Reward and punishment come from a single source, the pimp. The girls often find building a relationship with the pimp to be a good strategy. While pimps are thugs, they do rely also on means of control other than violence. They are adept at manipulation, at fostering insecurity and dependence. They can be kind, at times, and they can treat a girl with affection in order to increase her pliability and her reliance on them. Cultural norms have also prepared the sex slaves for control and submission. A girl will be told how her parents will suffer if she does not cooperate and work hard, how the debt is on her shoulders and must be repaid. The need to submit and to accept family responsibility will be hammered home again and again. Thai sex roles are clearly defined and women are expected to be retiring, nonassertive, and obedient, as the girls hear repeatedly. Their religion, too, supports this manipulation. Thai Buddhism asserts that everyone must repay the karmic debt accumulated in past lives with suffering in this life. Such beliefs encourage the girls to turn inward, as they realize that they must have committed terrible sins in a past life to deserve their enslavement and abuse. Their religion urges them to accept this suffering, to come to terms with it, and to reconcile themselves to their fate.

As a result the girls become willing slaves, trusted and obedient.

When I met Siri, she had just crossed the invisible line between resistance and submission. Though only fifteen she was reconciled to life as a prostitute. She explained it was her fate, her karma, and each day she prayed to Buddha for acceptance. In the past she had tried to escape; now she dreams of earning enough money to build a house in her village. Her anger and resentment had dissolved, and she willingly accedes to the pimp's wishes, priding herself on her looks and higher price. Her resistance ended, she is now allowed out of the brothel to visit the temple. In his domination of Siri, her pimp has a powerful ally: her mother. Siri's mother had been staying at the Always Prospering brothel for several days when we arrived. She had come down from her village at the pimp's request while Siri had an operation. (Although Siri wouldn't tell us the nature of the operation, she did say that it had cost her 10,000 baht.) The pimp was concerned that while Siri was convalescing she might begin to think of escape. Her mother provided a forceful check on such thoughts, providing basic care but at the same time reminding Siri of her duty and the importance of repaying her debt both to the brothel and to her parents. In time the pimp may allow Siri to go home on holidays as he does some of the other girls. There is little threat that they will run away, for they know the pimp can always find them in their village; they are convinced that wherever they fled they would be found.

This belief in an omniscient pimp is supported by the other, more distant, relationships each girl has with slaveholders and the government. From the policeman who comes each day to the brothel, to the police chief in the city or district, to the political boss that the police chief must answer to, and so on up the ladder of government, the machine of the state is the machine of enslavement. That is not to say that the police or government directly enslaves girls in brothels; instead they provide a system of protection and enforcement for the slaveholders that makes slavery possible. At all levels of government, officials turn a blind eye to the crime of slavery. A complete set of laws on the statute books lies unenforced: they forbid trafficking in women,

prostitution, rape, sexual abuse of minors, establishment of brothels, kidnapping, forced labor, debt bondage, and slavery. Some officials profit from bribes; others regularly use the brothels. The result is an unofficial but highly effective system of state enforcement of sex slavery. The power of the pimp is enormously enhanced by the power of the national police. Thailand's Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai admitted in 1992 that "the problem [of sex slavery] would be less if those who have the weapons and enforce the law were not involved," but he added that "if the problem cannot be solved, I won't order the authorities to tackle it."¹⁵ Since 1992 police involvement has, if anything, increased.¹⁶

On the day that Chuan made these comments, a tragic murder was discovered in Songkhla that exposed the links between police and brothel owners.¹⁷ A young Thai prostitute, Passawara Samrit, from the northern city of Chiangmai was found dead with her throat slashed. After receiving death threats from her pimp and police when she tried to run away from her brothel, Passawara escaped to the local hospital and asked for help. Hospital staff turned her over to the welfare department at the Songkhla provincial hall, and the welfare officials called in the police. At the end of the day, while still at the welfare office, Passawara went to the toilet and disappeared. Her body was found the next morning. Extensive press reports made it impossible for the police to cover up the murder, and in a month's time investigators charged six men: two provincial officers, two police officers, the son-in-law of the brothel owner, and the pimp. A parliamentary investigation found that the local police station received regular payoffs from the brothel owner. Following the investigation, twenty policemen were transferred for idleness and "allowing bad incidents to occur."¹⁸

Escape and Be Arrested

The same economic boom that has increased the demand for prostitutes may, in time, bring about an end to Thai sex slavery. Industrial

growth has also meant an increase in jobs for women. Education and training are expanding rapidly across Thailand, and women and girls are very much taking part. The ignorance and deprivation on which the enslavement of girls depends are on the wane, and better-educated girls are much less likely to fall for the promises made by brokers. The traditional duties to family, including the debt of obligation to parents, are also becoming less compelling. As the front line of industrialization sweeps over northern Thailand, it is bringing fundamental change. Programs on the television bought with the money from selling one daughter may carry the warning messages to her younger sisters. As they learn more about new jobs, about HIV/AIDS, and about the fate of those sent to the brothels, northern Thai girls refuse to follow their sisters south. Slavery functions best when alternatives are few, and education and the media are opening the eyes of Thai girls to a world of choice.

For the slaveholders this presents a serious problem. They are faced with an increase in demand for prostitutes and a diminishing supply—already the price of young Thai girls is spiraling upward. Their only recourse is to look elsewhere, to areas where poverty and ignorance still hold sway. Nothing, in fact, could be easier, for there remain large oppressed and isolated populations desperate enough to believe the promises of the brokers. From Burma to the west and Laos to the east come thousands of economic and political refugees searching for work; they are defenseless in a country where they are illegal aliens. The techniques that have worked so well in bringing Thai girls to the brothels are again deployed, but now across the borders. Investigators from Human Rights Watch, who made a special study of this trafficking in 1993, explain:

The trafficking of Burmese women and girls into Thailand is appalling in its efficiency and ruthlessness. Driven by the desire to maximize profit and the fear of HIV/AIDS, agents acting on behalf of brothel owners infiltrate ever more remote areas of Burma seeking unsuspecting recruits. Virgin girls are particularly sought after

because they bring a higher price and pose less threat of exposure to sexually transmitted disease. The agents promise the women and girls jobs as waitresses or dishwashers, with good pay and new clothes. Family members or friends typically accompany the women and girls to the Thai border, where they receive a payment ranging from 10,000 to 20,000 baht from someone associated with the brothel. This payment becomes the debt, usually doubled with interest, that the women and girls must work to pay off, not by waiting or dishwashing, but through sexual servitude.¹⁹

Once in the brothels they are in the same situation as enslaved Thai girls, except worse: because they do not speak Thai their isolation is increased, and as illegal aliens they are open to even more abuse. The pimps tell them repeatedly that if they set foot outside the brothel they will be arrested. And if they are arrested Burmese and Lao girls and women are afforded no legal rights. They are often held for long periods at the mercy of police, without charge or trial. A strong traditional antipathy between Thais and Burmese increases their chances of discrimination and arbitrary treatment. Burmese women fall below even the demigrated position of Thai women. Explaining why so many Burmese women were kept in brothels in Ranong in southern Thailand, the regional police commander stated: "In my opinion it is disgraceful to let Burmese men [working in the local fishing industry] frequent Thai prostitutes. Therefore I have been flexible in allowing Burmese prostitutes to work here."²⁰

The special horror suffered by Burmese and Lao women is the strong possibility of reenslavement once they reach the revolving door at the border. If they escape or are dumped by the brothel owners, they come quickly to the attention of the police, since they have no money for transport and cannot speak the language. Once they are picked up they are placed in detention, where they meet women who have been arrested in the periodic raids on brothels and taken into custody with only the clothes they are wearing. In local jails the foreign women might

be held without charge for as long as eight months while they suffer sexual and other abuse by the police. In time, they might be sent to the Immigrant Detention Center in Bangkok or the penal reform institution at Pakkret. In both places abuse and extortion by staff continue, and some girls are sold back to the brothels from there. No trial is necessary for deportation, but many women are tried and convicted of prostitution or illegal entry. The trials take place in Thai without interpreters, and fines are charged against those convicted. If they have no money to pay the fines, and most do not, they are sent to a factory-prison to earn it. There they make light bulbs or plastic flowers for up to twelve hours a day; the prison officials decide when they have earned enough to pay their fine. After the factory-prison the women are sent back to police cells or the Immigrant Detention Center. Most are held until they can cover the cost of transportation (illegal aliens are required by law to pay for their own deportation); others are summarily deported.

The border between Thailand and Burma is especially chaotic and dangerous. Only part of it is controlled by the Burmese military dictatorship, while other areas are in the hands of tribal militias or warlords. After arrival at the border the deportees are held by immigration police in cells for another three to seven days. Over this time the police extort money and physically and sexually abuse the inmates. The police also use this time to make arrangements with brothel owners and brokers and to notify them of the dates and places of deportation. On the day of deportation the prisoners are driven for several hours along the border into the countryside, far from any village, and then pushed out of the cattle trucks in which they are transported. Abandoned in the jungle, miles from any main road, they are given no food or water and have no idea where they are or how to proceed into Burma. As the immigration police drive away, the deportees are approached by agents and brokers who follow the trucks from town under arrangements with the police. The brokers offer work and transportation back into

Thailand. Abandoned in the jungle many women see the offer as their only choice. Some who don't are just attacked and abducted. In either case, the cycle of debt bondage and prostitution begins again.

If they do make it into Burma, the women face imprisonment or worse. If apprehended by Burmese border patrols they are charged with "illegal departure" from Burma. If they cannot pay the fine, and most cannot, they serve six months' hard labor. Imprisonment applies to all those convicted—men, women, and children. If a girl or woman is suspected of having been a prostitute she can face additional charges and long sentences. Women found to be HIV-positive have been imprisoned and executed by the Burmese military dictatorship. According to Human Rights Watch there are consistent reports of "deportees being routinely arrested, detained, subjected to abuse and forced to porter for the military. Torture, rape and execution have been well documented by the United Nations bodies, international human rights organizations, and governments."²¹

The situation on Thailand's eastern border with Laos is much more difficult to assess. The border is more open, and there is a great deal of movement back and forth. Lao police, government officials, and community leaders are involved in the trafficking, acting as agents and making payments to local parents. They act with impunity, as it is very difficult for Lao girls to escape back to their villages; those that do find it dangerous to speak against police or officials. One informant told me that if a returning girl did talk, no one would believe her *and* she would be branded as a prostitute and shunned. There would be no way to expose the broker and no retribution; she would just have to resign herself to her fate. It is difficult to know how many Lao women and girls are brought into Thailand. In the northeast many Thais normally speak Lao, making it difficult to tell whether a prostitute is a local Thai or has actually come from Laos. Since they are illegal aliens, Lao girls will always claim to be local Thais and will often have false identity cards to prove it. In the brothels their lives are indistinguishable from those of Thai women.

"They Didn't Think Those People Were Human Beings"

Women and girls flow in both directions over Thailand's borders.²² Export of enslaved prostitutes is a robust business, supplying brothels in Japan, Europe, and America. Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs estimated in 1994 that as many as 50,000 Thai women were living illegally in Japan and working in prostitution. Their situation in these countries parallels that of Burmese women held in Thailand. The enslavement of Thai women follows a familiar pattern. Promised work as cleaners, domestics, dishwashers, or cooks, Thai girls and women pay large fees to employment agents to secure jobs in the rich developed countries. When they arrive they are brutalized and enslaved. Their debt bonds are significantly larger than those of enslaved prostitutes in Thailand, since they include airfares, bribes to immigration officials, the costs of false passports, and sometimes the fees paid to foreign men to marry them and ease their entry.

Variations on sex slavery occur in different countries. In Switzerland girls are brought in on "artist" visas as exotic dancers. There, in addition to being prostitutes they must work as striptease dancers in order to meet the carefully checked terms of their employment. In Germany they are usually bar girls, and they are sold to men by the bartender or bouncer. Some are simply placed in brothels or apartments controlled by pimps. After Japanese sex tours to Thailand began in the 1980s, Japan rapidly became the largest importer of Thai women. The fear of HIV/AIDS in Japan has also increased the demand for virgins. Because of their large disposable incomes, Japanese men are able to pay considerable sums for young rural girls from Thailand. Japanese organized crime, the Yakuza, is involved throughout the importation process, sometimes transshipping women through Malaysia or the Philippines. In the cities it maintains bars and brothels and trade in Thai women. The women are bought and sold between brothels and controlled with extreme violence. Resistance can bring murder. Because they are illegal aliens and often enter the country under false passports,

Japanese gangs rarely hesitate to kill girls who have angered them or ceased to be profitable. Thai women deported from Japan also report that the gangs will addict girls to drugs in order to manage them more easily.

Criminal gangs, usually Chinese or Vietnamese, also control brothels in the United States that enslave Thai women. Police raids in New York, Seattle, San Diego, and Los Angeles have freed over a hundred girls and women.²³ In New York City thirty Thai women were locked into the upper floors of a building used as a brothel. Iron bars sealed the windows and a series of buzzer-operated armored gates blocked exit to the street. During police raids the women were herded into a secret basement room. At her trial the brothel owner testified that she bought the women outright, paying between \$6,000 and \$15,000 each. The women were charged \$300 per week for room and board; they worked from 11 A.M. till 4 A.M. and were sold by the hour to clients. Chinese and Vietnamese gangsters were also involved in the brothel, collecting protection money and hunting down escaped prostitutes. The gangs owned chains of brothels and massage parlors around which they rotated the Thai women in order to defeat law enforcement efforts. After being freed from the New York brothel, some of the women disappeared—only to turn up weeks later in similar circumstances 3,000 miles away in Seattle. One of the rescued Thai women, who had been promised restaurant work and then enslaved, testified that the brothel owners “bought something and wanted to use it to the full extent, and they didn’t think those people were human beings.”²⁴

Thai women have been imported into North America for factory work as well as commercial sex work. In late 1995 sixty-eight Thais, most of them women, were rescued from a sweatshop garment factory in Los Angeles. Most of these women were in fact garment workers in Thailand and had paid agents for the possibility of good jobs in the United States. When they arrived their passports were taken away and they were placed in debt bondage. Forced to live within a locked factory compound, they worked sixteen-hour days under armed guard.

told they must repay debts of around \$5,000, they were paid just over \$10 per day from which the cost of their food was deducted.

Like many developing countries, Thailand exports its people as cheap labor. Thai men regularly find construction and factory work in Middle Eastern and other Asian countries. The vast commercial sex industry in Thailand has led it to be a major exporter of women. The low status of women in Thailand, together with the regular abandonment of mothers with children as men move on to other or minor wives, creates a ready supply of women desperate to find ways to support their families. Hearing about women who have secured legitimate jobs abroad they incur large debts to pay agents’ and brokers’ fees. For those who are enslaved the result is exploitation followed by destitution on their return to Thailand. Their poverty is compounded by the money, borrowed to pay airfare, that they still owe friends or relatives.

Official Indifference and a Growth Economy

In many ways, Thailand closely resembles another country, one that was going through rapid industrialization and economic boom one hundred years ago. Rapidly shifting its labor force off the farm, experiencing unprecedented economic growth, flooded with economic migrants, and run by corrupt politicians and a greedy and criminal police force, the United States then faced many of the problems confronting Thailand today. In the 1890s political machines that brought together organized crime with politicians and police ran the prostitution and protection rackets, drug sales, and extortion in American cities. Opposing them were a weak and disorganized reform movement and a muckraking press. I make this comparison because it is important to explore why Thailand’s government is so ineffective when faced with the enslavement of its own citizens, and also to remember that conditions *can* change over time. Discussions with Thais about the horrific nature of sex slavery often end with their assertion that “nothing will ever change this . . . the problem is just too big . . . those with power will

never allow change." Yet the social and economic underpinnings of slavery in Thailand are always changing, sometimes for the worse and sometimes for the better. No society can remain static, particularly one undergoing such upheavals as Thailand.

Even a cursory look at the record shows that most Thai politicians do not take sex slavery seriously. While it is true that full and complete laws exist forbidding enslavement, trafficking, and exploitation, they are not enforced. Actually, that is not quite true: they are *very occasionally* enforced whenever public scandal requires that politicians need to be seen doing something. When the enforcement crackdowns do occur, they take on a quality of comic opera. After shocking accounts of child prostitution and sex slavery in the press in 1992, the government moved quickly to set up a special anti-prostitution task force.²⁵ The unit was ordered to raid every brothel in the country that had underage or forced prostitutes. This major law enforcement campaign was undertaken by six men, with one car. And when the tiny task force took its job seriously and pressed ahead with raids in spite of the resistance of local police, its authority to override local police was withdrawn. After further successes working with the support of charitable organizations to free enslaved prostitutes and children, it was disbanded in favor of a group that would work more closely with local police. In 1994 this government special force arrested 64 brothel owners, 472 Thai prostitutes, and 9 foreign prostitutes, and rescued 35 children and sex slaves—in a country with an estimated one million commercial sex workers.²⁶

When Burmese or Lao girls are arrested, the Thai police routinely violate their own laws. The Antitrafficking Law of 1928 forbids the imprisonment or fine of women or girls trafficked into Thailand. Nevertheless, the police commonly charge them and imprison them, as we have seen, so that brothel owners can reclaim these women by paying their "fines"—which include a bribe for the police. The conspiracy of gangs, police, and immigration officials allows trafficking to occur on a large and increasing scale. When police or officials are charged in connection with these offenses, they receive the lightest slap on the wrist.

Punishment for the police ordinarily consists of a posting to another job. The same reluctance to apprehend or punish extends to brothel owners as well. Reading through newspaper reports of police raids one is struck by the incredible slipperiness of the brothel keepers. In raid after raid they escape, while the prostitutes are all captured. When they are arrested only a few are brought into court (most skip bail), and even fewer receive sentences. Colonel Surasak Suttharom, the man in charge of the task force, explained that when he did get a case to court, brothel keepers were allowed to plead to lesser violations, after which they paid a fine or settled the case out of court.²⁷ Obstruction of the investigations and very long delays in the court proceedings, sometimes up to three years, made the conviction rate extremely low. Yet even Colonel Surasak regards the brothel keepers with ambiguity. "These wicked people," he said, "are sometimes good men because they help bring these poor girls away from home for a better living."

Though it represents only a tiny fraction of the problem, Thai cooperation with European law enforcement has improved. In 1992 Thailand passed an Act on International Cooperation in Criminal (Law) Matters. This law allows the attorney general to gather evidence against foreigners who commit crimes in Thailand and send it to their home countries. Under its provisions, evidence was taken from a Thai child to help prosecute a Swedish pedophile. The Swede had been arrested in Thailand, but he skipped bail and fled. Rearrested on the basis of the forwarded evidence he was tried and convicted in Sweden. To bring such a prosecution in Europe required the extraterritorial jurisdiction laws that have existed in the Scandinavian countries for some time. Recently, after campaigns by the End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism (ECPAT) network, similar laws have been enacted in Australia, Belgium, France, Germany, New Zealand, and the United States. ECPAT and other organizations have also convinced the Thai attorney general not to allow bail in future cases of foreigners accused of child sexual abuse.

At the beginning of 1997 Thailand revised the law on prostitution.

The new statute dramatically increased the fines and prison sentences for anyone who has sex with prostitutes under the age of eighteen (maximum 60,000 baht and three years, respectively) or under the age of fifteen (maximum 400,000 baht and 20 years). This marked a real improvement over the 1960 Prostitution Suppression Act, which made every person involved in prostitution subject to penalties except the customer. Prostitution is still illegal, but now an adult prostitute is liable only for a fine of 1,000 baht and one month in jail. Prostitutes under the age of eighteen are not to be charged, but if arrested they will be forced to go to a rehabilitation center for not more than six months and then sent for vocational training for two years. The law also sets out fines and sentences for parents who sell their children, as well as for the procurers, brokers, agents, and brothel owners who buy them. It is a good start in addressing the issue of sex slavery, but it may have little effect. Leaving aside the question of whether or not the law will actually be enforced, there are a number of loopholes and other problems. For example, there are not enough rehabilitation centers to take anywhere near all the young prostitutes who fall under this law. The key problem, however, is that prostitution remains criminalized in a way that allows pimps and police to continue working together, using the law as a threat to control commercial sex workers.

For girls like Siri the new law will probably have little, if any, impact. In the provincial towns, like the one where she works, the police have a firm grip on the sex industry and few concerns about national political decisions; they worry even less about international concerns. There is no shortage of clear recommendations to help the Thai government reduce sex slavery. In 1993 Human Rights Watch published seventeen distinct steps that the government might take to deal with trafficking in women.²⁸ But the law has no teeth as long as the police serve the slaveholders first and the public second. And while there are huge profits flowing through the brothels and into the pockets of police, why should they enforce a law that has so little public backing? Most Thais,

particularly Thai men, see nothing wrong in using prostitutes and little wrong in using underage girls. That the girls are there to repay a debt makes perfect sense within their cultural context. That it is a wonderful business for those who invest in brothels is another reason not to question the system that supplies girls and women.

In spite of the new law, it is still not clear which side the government is on. Throughout the 1960s, the interior minister publicly championed expansion of the sex industry to promote tourism. Not long after prostitution was made illegal in 1960, a Service Establishments law was passed that legitimated "entertainment" as an industry. The law explained that women in entertainment were expected to provide "special services"—in other words, sex. This law gave power to brothel owners as "entertainment providers" (legal) over the women who had been prostitutes (illegal). It drove independent women sex workers into brothels and set up a legal category for these "service establishments." In the 1960s and early 1970s these service establishments did very well from the 40,000 American soldiers who were stationed in Thailand and the large numbers that were sent there on R&R leave during the Vietnam War. As the U.S. bases closed down in the late 1970s, the Thai government looked to tourism and to sex as important sources of income that might replace those lost earnings. In 1980 the vice premier encouraged the provincial governors to create more sex establishments to bring tourism to the provinces: "Within the next two years we need money. Therefore, I ask all governors to consider the natural scenery in your provinces, together with some forms of entertainment that some of you might think of as disgusting and shameful, because we have to consider the jobs that will be created."²⁹ Thailand's economic boom included a sharp increase in sex tourism tacitly backed by government. International tourist arrivals jumped from 2 million in 1981 to 4 million in 1988 to over 7 million in 1996.³⁰ Two-thirds of tourists are unaccompanied men: in other words, nearly 5 million unaccompanied men visited Thailand in 1996. A significant proportion of these were sex

tourists. Because they feared it would diminish the large foreign exchange earnings gained from sex tourists, government officials consistently denied the "rumor" of a worsening AIDS crisis throughout the 1980s. As late as 1989 the prime minister declared that AIDS was "no problem" in Thailand.³¹ Helped along by sex tourism, HIV/AIDS is now epidemic in Thailand, but sex tourism continues to be a major source of foreign exchange and not one that the government would want to restrict.

But it is important to understand that the direct link between sex tourism and slavery is small. With the exception of children sold to pedophiles, most commercial sex workers serving the tourist boom are not slaves. There is no question that the women and girls working with sex tourists suffer extreme exploitation and degradation, but most are not enslaved through the debt bondage that captures girls into brothels used almost exclusively by poor and working-class Thai men. However, the indirect connection is crucial: sex tourism has created a new business climate conducive to sexual slavery. Thai culture, as we have seen, has always treated women and sex as commodities to be bought, sold, traded, and used. Yet concubines and polygamy are historical patterns; these old cultural forms of sexual exploitation have been transformed into new business opportunities, as Thailand embraces the world of twenty-first-century business and economics. With government support, traditional sexual abuse of women has been modernized and expanded with a vengeance. The brochures of the European companies that have leaped into the sex tour business leave the reader in no doubt of what they are selling:

Slim, sunburnt, and sweet, they love the white man in an erotic and devoted way. They are masters of the art of making love by nature, an art that we Europeans do not know. (Life Travel, Switzerland)

[M]any girls from the sex world come from the poor north-eastern region of the country and from the slums of Bangkok. It has become a custom that one of the nice looking daughters goes into the busi-

ness in order to earn money for the poor family . . . you can get the feeling that taking a girl here is as easy as buying a package of cigarettes . . . little slaves who give real Thai warmth. (Kanita Kamha Travel, the Netherlands)³²

As the country takes on a new Western-style materialist morality, the ubiquitous sale of sex sends a clear message—women can be enslaved and exploited for profit. Sex tourism helped set the stage for the expansion of sexual slavery.

Sex tourism also generates some of the income that Thai men use to fund their visits to brothels. No one knows how much money it pours into the Thai economy, but if we assume that just one-quarter of sex workers serve sex tourists and that their customers pay about the same as they would pay to use Siri, then 656 billion baht (\$26.2 billion) a year would be about right. This is thirteen times more than the amount Thailand earns by building and exporting computers, one of their major industries, and it is money that floods into the country without any concomitant need to build factories or improve infrastructure. It is part of the boom raising the standard of living generally and allowing the purchase of commercial sex by an ever greater number of working-class men. Thousands upon thousands of men buy sex on a regular basis, and those who are just now beginning to taste the new prosperity do not want to be left out. Buying women is a mark of success and achievement, a mark that more men expect as Thailand joins the world economy.

Joining the world economy has done wonders for Thailand's income and terrible things to its society. According to Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, economists who have analyzed Thailand's economic boom,

Government has let the businessmen ransack the nation's human and natural resources to achieve growth. It has not forced them to put much back. In many respects, the last generation of economic growth has been a disaster. The forests have been obliterated. The

urban environment has deteriorated. Little has been done to combat the growth in industrial pollution and hazardous wastes. For many people whose labour has created the boom, the conditions of work, health, and safety are grim.

Neither law nor conscience has been very effective in limiting the social costs of growth. Business has revelled in the atmosphere of free-for-all. The machinery for social protection has proved very pliable. The legal framework is defective. The judiciary is suspect. The police are unreliable. The authorities have consistently tried to block popular organisations to defend popular rights.³³

The machinery for social protection is so ineffectual that slaves are bought and sold. So where does this leave us and those who are enslaved? Many human rights organizations call on the government to enforce its laws. Indeed, if they were enforced to the letter there would be no slavery. But, as we have seen, the law can do little against the combined strength of a sexist culture, rationalizing religion, amoral exploitative economy, and corrupt government.

Thailand is a country sick with an addiction to slavery. From village to city and back, the profits of slavery flow. Once authorities and businesspeople become accustomed to this outpouring of money, once any moral objection has been drowned in it, a justification of slavery is easy to mount, and Thai culture and religion stand ready to do so. The situation is similar to that of the United States in the 1850s—with a significant part of the economy dependent on slavery, religion and culture are ready to explain why this is all for the best. But there is also an important difference: this is the new slavery, and the impermanence of modern slavery and the dedication of human rights workers offer some hope.

Throughout Thailand people and organizations are fighting against slavery. The Center for the Protection of Children's Rights rescues children from brothels, gives them medical and psychological care, and provides sheltered homes for rehabilitation. The Foundation for Women and its sister organization, the Global Alliance against Traffic in Women, ceaselessly press the government to enact and enforce laws.

PAI and the Task Force to End Child Sexploitation have had tremendous success in raising awareness in Europe and North America, particularly in getting laws passed that can punish Westerners who usually exploit Thai children. But these activists are attempting to shift the mountain of social indifference in Thailand. The surplus of potential slaves—especially in the politically disturbed neighboring countries of Burma, Laos, and Cambodia—their low cost, and the resulting high profits, obstruct the reformers' work. At best, these organizations are only able to help a fraction of the slaves in Thailand, and they can do little to attack slavery at its roots; yet, as we will see in the next chapter, such work would be viewed in the context of the old slavery of Mauritania as a great breakthrough.