

Trade in Sex With Virgins an Asian Affair: Report

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While the scourge of Western pedophiles may grab local and international news headlines, it is predominantly Asian men who fuel Cambodia's trade in virgins, according to a new report by the International Organization for Migration.

About 85 percent of the clients who pay to have sex with virgins in Cambodia are Asian men, whereas Westerners comprise only 9 percent of the clientele and 6 percent were unknown, Eleanor Brown, an

IOM researcher who authored the report, said at its launch Tuesday.

Roughly half of the Asian clients are Khmer, and the other half are Asian foreigners, including Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Taiwanese and Thai men, the report said.

The report, titled "The Ties That Bind," is based on 203 interviews and 312 surveys from sex workers in Koh Kong, Siem Reap and Sihanoukville provinces in 2005-2006, and was funded by the US State Department.

According to the report, the

trade in virgins has in recent years largely shifted out of brothels and into higher-end karaoke bars, massage parlors and other entertainment establishments in Cambodia's urban centers, in part due to increased counter-trafficking efforts.

The average payment for a virgin is \$482, with a payment range that typically falls between \$200 and \$1,000, said Brown, who noted that the loss of virginity was "the largest factor contributing to

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Virgins...

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entry into commercial sex.”

According to Brown, within the virginity trade, 27 percent of the women and girls involved said they experienced overt force, while 74 percent of those who sold their virginity were under 18 at the time and 14 percent were under the age of 15.

Brown added that women and girls were often deceived into providing sexual services after being recruited into non sex-trade jobs, such as putting ice into customers' glasses at a karaoke bar.

The practice of virginity selling has become much more covert in recent years, and is arranged by small, mobile groups of brokers, Brown added.

“Before, everyone knew that it was going on,” she said.

“People don't talk about it anymore...whoever is arranging the deals makes sure that no one knows, and if they say anything, they will violently threaten them,” she added.

Keo Thea, deputy director of Phnom Penh's anti-trafficking police, said that police made reg-

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ular arrests of Korean, Chinese, and Japanese men—as well as Cambodian nationals—for trafficking and debauchery, but their crimes were less visible because media outlets neglected to cover the issue, preferring instead to focus on Westerners.

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“We don't discriminate and arrest only Western men. Most of the cases are Khmer men, [but] some print media, foreign media don't focus on this,” he said.

A representative from the International Justice Mission said that Western perpetrators and cases of sexual exploitation tended to be more high profile because they often could be prosecuted in their countries of origin.

The representative added that

Western countries—most prominently the US, the UK, and Australia—were also the leading donors to Cambodia's anti-trafficking efforts.

“One of the motivations [for donor aid] may be...that they don't want their nationals to offend, and if they do offend, they have laws to successfully arrest them,” the IJM representative said.

Keo Thea said, however, that it was more difficult for his officers to investigate trafficking and sex crimes in more upscale entertainment establishments in Cambodia.

“The new style is more secret, not like brothel areas,” he said. “We need to dress our officers up like businessmen to reach them,” he added.

Keo Thea also said that trafficking networks were primarily run by ethnic Vietnamese and Cambodian nationals. He added, however, that virginity brokers within karaoke bars and other establish-

ments were often foreign Asian nationals, including Chinese and Japanese, but denied that foreign Mafia or organized crime gangs were running the operations.

Police have made “a lot” of arrests of virginity buyers, managers, and traffickers, Keo Thea said, though he did not have the exact figures on hand.

Samleang Seila, country director for Action Pour Les Enfants, said that buying a young woman's virginity was a cultural behavior specific to Asian nationals, which was why Westerners made up only a fraction of the clientele.

According to the IOM report, sex with a virgin is believed to have a “rejuvenating and purifying effect” on the buyer.

Samleang Seila also noted that Asian sex tourists in Cambodia are a less visible group than their Western counterparts, not just because of their ethnicity but also because of the locations they frequented and their approaches to looking for sex.

Brown agreed that so-called “sex-pat”—a play on the word expatriate—communities of Western clients in Cambodia are “quite loud and in visible places, Asian [sex] tourism happens behinds closed doors.” (*Additional reporting by Saing Sonthrith*)