

The context of trafficking in Thailand

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People may wonder how in this day and age women continue to be trafficked from a country as developed as Thailand.

Surely Thai women read newspapers or watch TV? Chances are they even know someone who's been trafficked. They must understand the dangers by now. Don't they know when they are being duped?

I put this question to Antonia Symonds, an Australian who has spent the past eight years working with the Good Shepherd Sisters in Nong Khai in Thailand's poor northeast.

'Poverty and inequality still account for most work-related migration,' Antonia says. 'There is only one rice harvest a year in many parts of the northeast, and unemployment is high outside the rice season. This makes people vulnerable to being trafficked.'

The Sisters run a range of 'trafficking prevention' projects in Nong Khai and surrounding areas, designed to provide employment and training opportunities to enable villagers to earn a living without having to migrate to the cities.

Many people in the northeast provinces, known collectively as Isarn, Thailand's poorest area, don't have enough land to grow the rice they need *and* make enough profit to get them through the dry season, which lasts from November to June or July. Coupled with this, some areas have been in drought for several years.

In March, *The Bangkok Post* featured a story about Kamphan Nonsopha and her family in the drought-stricken province of Roi-Et. The 39-year-old mother of three has borrowed heavily to supplement the meagre income her husband earns doing labouring jobs in other provinces, accruing a debt of 70,000 baht (AUD\$2,500).

'When the end of the year arrives I have to borrow money from loan sharks to pay off interest to the government's village fund and the bank,' Kamphan was quoted as saying. 'I never used the loan for investment and farming. Instead I used it for my daily expenses and education for my children.'

Women like Kamphan and her children are highly vulnerable to traffickers, who prey on those who are poor, unemployed and in debt, not to mention bored. Antonia says there is anecdotal evidence of traffickers taking vans through the villages during the school holidays, picking off children with nothing to do.

'There is no social security,' says Antonia. 'If people don't work, they don't eat. Their kids can't go to school. Life just falls apart.'

In such circumstances, it's easy to understand how even those Thai villagers who know the dangers of trafficking might be prepared to take a risk if it might result in a change of fortune.

Malee¹, also from Isarn, said as much when I interviewed her at the Good Shepherd Sisters' Centre in Pattaya on Thailand's central coast.

'I'd heard stories of women being trafficked, but I knew others who'd worked overseas and come back rich. I thought maybe I'd be one of the lucky ones,' she said.

It doesn't help that taking a chance is ingrained in the culture. Thai people have a legendary propensity for gambling, be it on the lottery, football, card games, casinos, or even with their own lives.

Some women from Isarn improve their financial situation by marrying foreigners. Udon Thani Airport in mid-April was full of Thai women and their foreign husbands en route to visit relatives for Thai New Year. But these women's newfound wealth can create jealousy and competition amongst villagers already susceptible to an increasing consumerism.

'It upsets the social balance', as one observer put it.

In addition, most women are trafficked by people they trust. Warunee¹, a young deaf woman at one of the Women's Self-Help Centre's run by the Good Shepherd Sisters, was trafficked by an aunt. Sent to Bangkok, she was hired out to men for sexual services, returning to the village pregnant and traumatised.

Trafficked women like Warunee and those who migrate for work are particularly vulnerable to HIV infection. In response to a growing number of people living with HIV returning to the community, since 2001, the Good Shepherd Sisters have run the Friendship Centre in Nong Khai.

The brainchild of Sr Pranee Sitti, Director of the Village Vocational Training Centre and Outreach Program, the Friendship Centre provides a place for people infected with and affected by HIV/AIDS to gather for mutual support, the sharing of information, and to participate in income-generating activities.

'The Centre staff see the value of all people and respect them as human beings,' says Sr Pranee. 'Our aim is to help people to accept themselves and others and to stand with dignity in society.'

¹ Names have been changed to protect privacy.