

Girls are Not for Sale

In Thailand, Christian organizations are reaching out to protect young girls from sex traffickers.

During the time it takes to read the next few paragraphs—about 30 seconds—another child will be trafficked for sex somewhere in the world.

This little girl—or boy—will be sold to a brothel where she will be raped five, 10 or 15 times a night by different men, night after night after night. Without rescue, she will have to endure this horror until she dies, probably from AIDS.

Each year 1 million children join the ranks of those living this nightmare—being bought and sold like farm animals. Child sexual trafficking is a multibillion-dollar industry, and it's growing.

Can anything be done about this, or are we powerless against it? Journalist and child advocate Diana Scimone recently traveled to Thailand to find out.

Day 1: Northern Thailand

It's everywhere I look—prostitution and the trafficking of human beings. Middle-aged Western men walk arm-in-arm with beautiful, young Thai women; tottering old Japanese men escort girls young enough to be their granddaughters. They're in restaurants, hotels, on the streets, in the malls—everywhere. I can't escape it.

What I don't see is even more unsettling—the trafficking of

children. Most are teenagers. Some are as young as 5. In many cases, they're kidnapped and forced into the trade. Others are sold by their own parents to support their drug habits. There are laws against it, but they often are not enforced or are underenforced. Most people are not even aware there is a problem.

Thailand has between 60,000 and 200,000 child prostitutes—and that's just one country. I've seen the cages in Bombay, India, where newly kidnapped children are locked until they no longer have a will to resist. In Bombay, I interviewed young women—good, moral kids—who were drugged, sold and raped for profit.

I refuse to believe there's nothing we can do to help them.

Day 2: Northern Thailand

My first stop in Thailand is a small town in the north. Here, I visit a "safe home" for girls who were about to be sold—either by their families or by enterprising men and women who show up in rural villages offering to educate the girls in the big city. The parents, thrilled at the prospect of providing a future for their daughters, willingly allow them to go. They have no idea they're enlisting them in the international sex cartel—and may never see them again.

The home I visit is filled with 14 precious girls, ranging in age from 10 to about 19. "We could build 100 homes like this," the director tells me, "each with 100 girls, and we'd barely scratch the surface."

Day 3: Along Thailand's border with Myanmar

Today I drive to the “hill tribe villages” with the house parent of a safe home. Most of the rescued girls I’ve met are not ethnically Thai but members of people groups who live in the hills of northern Thailand along the borders of Myanmar (formerly known as Burma), Cambodia and Laos. The “hill tribe people,” as they’re called, are Akha, Karen, Hmong, Lisu and others.

Thailand, I learn, is a sending, receiving and transit country for the international trafficking of children. Many child prostitutes come from these villages in Thailand. Others are taken or sold from countries across the border, then smuggled into Thailand. Some are trafficked to Malaysia in the south, where they’re resold to buyers around the world.

The hill tribe villages I see are far from the quaint, picturesque spots that the travel brochures promise. Poverty is everywhere—and no wonder. The hill tribe people cannot hold Thai citizenship, even though they’ve lived in Thailand for generations, and they are not allowed to get jobs, go to school or leave the province. In fact, the only thing they can do is work in the area’s flourishing underground trade—opium production. This area of the world is known as the “Golden Triangle” because of its illicit opium production, and the trafficking of drugs, like the trafficking of humans, is a very profitable industry.

I’m learning it’s all connected—child trafficking, drugs, drug addiction, organized crime, AIDS, Internet pornography, pedophilia, incest and more. The bottom line of it all is greed.

Day 4: A small town

Another day, another safe home. If the first one housed children who were about to be sold, this one is home to girls who already passed that stage. Their stories are heartbreaking, and just when I think I've heard the worst tale of degradation and abuse, I hear another even worse.

Some girls have been sold by parents or grandparents who are so poor that some girls consider it an honor to help their families. Others are sold by family members who are drug addicts. Others have been lured into prostitution by the promise of education or work in the cities.

"How do you fight feeling overwhelmed?" I ask the safe home's director.

"By knowing that if you do your part," she says, "and everyone else does the same, the job will get done."

She asks me to conceal the name and location of the home because the girls' former "owners" often try to kidnap them again. To their warped way of thinking, they've paid a high price for their merchandise and suddenly have no return on their investment. The thought of a child being considered merchandise sickens me, but that is the reality of trafficking. In the world of greed, children are a commodity.

Day 5: Chiang Mai

I visit Home of Joy in this Thai city. Director Kathleen DeMaso tells me the eight toddlers who live here would have been at risk if left in their own homes. Some have parents in prison; others have lost a parent to AIDS. None is technically an orphan, so they'll never be adopted.

I decide that playing with eight active toddlers is more grueling than the 26-hour flight to Thailand. Thankfully I've brought a friend with me—PawPaw, a plush animal dog who is the main character in my children's books, *Adventures With PawPaw*.

There are numerous fights over who gets to hold PawPaw, and after a few hours of playing, reading and coloring, I'm able to extricate PawPaw from their grasp, hug all the kids and be on my way—with more precious faces forever in my heart.

Day 6: Chiang Mai

A number of international organizations have launched efforts to stop child trafficking. One of them—Justice for Children International (JFCI)—recently organized a training conference here for social workers, counselors and others who work with exploited children.

“Rescue organizations often say they can rescue more kids if they had more safe homes,” JFCI President Rob Morris tells me, “and you can't build them if you don't have trained caregivers. That's the need we're responding to.”

JFCI () brought together 15 caregivers from Thailand, Cambodia and the Philippines, who spent two weeks learning from JFCI's director of aftercare, Gundelina Velazco, a Filipina with a Ph.D. and plenty of experience in counseling traumatized kids. Last summer, JFCI began a nine-month, graduate-level program in the Philippines for caregivers who will specialize in treating these traumatized kids.

Velazco describes these children as “frail victim[s] of one of

the worst human atrocities one could ever imagine. And they number in the millions. Many of them have lost their minds. Quite a number have lost their lives—in agony. Those who have survived are scarred, physically and psychologically. Many are still bonded to a life of pain, shame, torment and fear.”

JFCI’s trained caregivers will love these children, build therapeutic relationships with them, and provide a safe base where the children can grow out of their traumas and realize their worth and potential as God’s children.

Day 7: Chiang Mai

This morning I travel to a secure compound and meet with some of the staff of International Justice Mission (IJM), which works through the legal system in countries around the world to end injustice, including child trafficking. IJM () works in partnership with police and prosecutors to rescue victims of trafficking, and arrest and convict traffickers.

I meet with IJM Thailand Director Andrey Sawchenko and two social workers, one of whom is also an attorney. I learn that there are laws against child trafficking in most countries, and though they’re not as strong as they could be, if even these laws were enforced, far fewer children would be bought and sold.

Most people, however, are not aware of the penalties—or even the problem. In Thailand, for example, the majority of children and adults know nothing about the trafficking crisis or the penalties against it. This is particularly true in areas with rural populations that are uneducated—such as hill tribe villages.

Educating children, parents and communities, I learn, would go a long way to stopping trafficking.

Day 8: Bangkok

As my plane leaves for my flight home, the faces of many children fill my heart—not just in Thailand, but also in other countries where children are bought and sold as a commodity. “I paid a high price for these children,” the Lord tells me, “and the price I paid for them is higher than any price that anyone could ever pay. Therefore, I own them. They belong to Me.”

I think of the words of IJM founder Gary Haugen: “The question is not, ‘Where is God?’ but, ‘Where are God’s people?’”

Some people tell me the situation here will never change—but I don’t believe that. I’ve read the book of Acts; I know the promise that we will do “greater works”—and I’m ready to partner with Him now to end this horror.

Why wouldn’t we? Why not in Thailand? And why not right now?

Diana Scimone is a journalist and author of the Adventures With PawPaw children’s book series. Her nonprofit organization, PawPaw’s Pals Inc., is launching an awareness campaign in Thailand called Not for Sale (), which is aimed at helping educate children, parents and communities about the horrors of child trafficking. To contribute to this effort, please send tax-deductible gifts to Christian Life Missions, Attn: Not for Sale, P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 32795-2248.