

Headline **Tricked by sex syndicates**
Date **26 Jul 2009**
MediaTitle **Sunday Star**
Section **Focus**
Journalist **N/A**
Frequency **Weekly**
ADValue **30,312**

Language **English**
Page No **18,20**
Article Size **810 cm²**
Color **Full Color**
PRValue **90,936**



Tricked by sex syndicates

Reports of young foreigners being lured by syndicates that traffic them into prostitution are a matter of great concern, and the authorities are set on stemming the tide with the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act.

By **SHAHANAAZ HABIB**
and **RASHVINJEET S. BEDI**
sunday@thestar.com.my

SOON, when you board a flight to Malaysia from China, Nepal, India, Indonesia, Thailand or other South-East Asian countries, don't be surprised if you are handed a multi-lingual pamphlet asking "Are you being trafficked?"

The pamphlet in 10 languages has a brief checklist meant for those coming into Malaysia for work. It asks if they have an official letter offering the job, if they know the address where they are going to work and stay, the nature of the job offered and whether the agent wanted them to be secretive about their new job.

It also asks if they have detailed information on the recruiting agency that hired them, if they have advice from their respective embassies before coming, and if they know where to get assistance in the country they are going to (i.e Malaysia).

An emergency hotline number is included in the pamphlet, which is part of the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry's efforts to get those heading here for work to think and to be better prepared in case of a worst-case scenario.

"We hope it will also be distributed at the immigration and other entry points to the country," says the Department of Women's Development director-general Datuk Dr Noorul Ainur Mohd Nur.

She says a number of people from these countries come over because they have been promised jobs only to find themselves in the hands of syndicates that traffick them into prostitution and other gains.

Unesco estimates that there are 250,000 prostitutes or (to use the politically correct term) sex workers in Malaysia.

Headline **Tricked by sex syndicates**
 Date **26 Jul 2009**
 MediaTitle **Sunday Star**
 Section **Focus**
 Journalist **N/A**
 Frequency **Weekly**
 ADValue **30,312**

Language **English**
 Page No **18,20**
 Article Size **810 cm²**
 Color **Full Color**
 PRValue **90,936**

It is hard to say how many of them are local or foreign and how many are voluntary or forced as the industry is secretive and fluid.

Tenaganita's director Irene Fernandez who works extensively with trafficked victims and in rescuing them believes most of the sex workers here are forced.

(Fernandez insists on the term sex workers, not prostitutes, because the former gives them dignity and recognition as they are providing a service while the latter is discriminatory and degrading.)

She is concerned there seems to be an increase in the number of young foreign people being brought into the country for prostitution.

"Some of the kids are as young as 14 and they are very traumatised by the whole experience. The demand is for younger people because of the concept that you become young when you have sex with a virgin and cus-

tomers concerned about HIV think there is less risk of this with a younger person."

She hopes there is "very strong monitoring" by the immigration on foreign children being brought into the country, citing the case of a Sri Lankan recruiter who managed to bring in four Sri Lankan young boys to be sex workers.

There are no statistics as yet to indicate how serious the problem of young prostitutes is becoming but Fernandez believes it is a growing trend and "if even five boys have been sold and their lives are lost, that's serious."

The government-run shelter for rescued trafficked victims has received children as young as 16 over the past year but there are only very few cases thus far.

Fernandez is concerned that some minors have been passed off as voluntary sex workers just to keep the numbers down.

The recently passed Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act makes

a clear distinction between voluntary sex workers and those who are trafficked.

"In some of our rescues, we have seen the police send off minors as voluntary sex workers but when we get hold of their documents, they show they are underaged or are children. So for me there is some problem in the screening process.

"This is also the case with trafficked women whom we have rescued. I feel Malaysia wants to show that it has a low level of trafficking in persons and so we have more and more people classified as voluntary than actually trafficked persons. This is not a good trend as our interviews with the victims show they are trafficked," she says.

Under the new Act, traffickers face up to 20 years in prison, fines and whipping for "recruiting, transporting, transferring, harbouring, providing or receiving of a person for purposes of exploitation" while victims are

not liable for prosecution for illegal entry into the country, unlawful residence or possession of fraudulent travel or identity documents obtained to enter the country.

(Before the Anti-Trafficking Act, the police were using a host of other laws such as the Child Act, the Immigration Act and Restricted Residence Act to nail the traffickers.)

Of the estimated 250,000 sex workers in the country, it is interesting to note that since the Act was enforced last year, only 141 have passed through the Government shelter for trafficked victims in the past year.

Does this mean that the rest are voluntary?

Dr Noorul too wonders about the low numbers and why no local victims are sent to their shelter in KL.

Still, the ministry is concerned enough about the situation on

> **TURN TO PAGE 20**



Are you being trafficked?: Pamphlets cautioning foreigners entering to work here to pay heed to the possibility of being trafficked are going to be distributed on planes and entry points.

Sex industry goes clandestine

Headline **Tricked by sex syndicates**
 Date **26 Jul 2009**
 MediaTitle **Sunday Star**
 Section **Focus**
 Journalist **N/A**
 Frequency **Weekly**
 ADValue **30,312**

Language **English**
 Page No **18,20**
 Article Size **810 cm²**
 Color **Full Color**
 PRValue **90,936**

> FROM PAGE 18

the ground and only days ago set up another shelter in Kota Kinabalu and is planning for another spot in Johor.

For Fernandez, most sex workers especially foreign ones are forced or tricked into it.

She says while some do come into the country using social visit passes and stay on to work voluntarily as sex workers, those numbers are minimal as the syndicates that control the sex industry will try to force them out.

So most are forced into prostitution and work for almost nothing because the syndicates take in all the money. The girls are given pills to prevent pregnancy and also drugged so that they sleep till it is time to work. When they get up, they are given their meals and then it is time to go back to their work.

She says from interviewing those rescued it is obvious that the industry is very organised and that the syndicates give the girls GPS mobile phones to keep track of their movement. They are followed by a pimp wherever they go and they are watched all the time so they have

little chance of getting away.

"When it is organised in such a manner, to me it is forced," she says.

The sex industry too has gone clandestine. Other than the usual spas and clubs, according to Fernandez, the syndicates have taken the sex business to some select bungalow houses and golf clubs.

And she claims that blacksheep immigration and police officers are helping the syndicates.

"The girls tell us some of their first clients are police and immigration officers so this is another revealing factor of involvement by the enforcement agencies within the sex industry.

"In our rescue work too, we have found that when we deal directly with the police stations, the syndicates get a tip-off and the girls are removed very fast.

"So now we work through Bukit Aman which has set up a special trafficking in persons unit. And we are quite happy with that and are able to rescue the girls faster this way.

"The immigration has an anti-trafficking council and we would really like to co-ordinate with them but it operates at a snail's pace," she says.

As for local sex workers, Fernandez says while some do go in voluntarily, most enter the business due to poverty, violence or they are simply cheated into it and remain in it because they feel they have lost all dignity.

"In that situation, you can't draw a line at which is forced and which is voluntary. For me, to some extent, this is forced because it doesn't stem from free choice," she says.

The economic crisis too, she says, has impacted on some families so badly that there have been cases of husbands convincing their wives to become sex workers.

"The understanding is that you are earning so the morality issue is thrown out because the financial issue becomes the priority," she says.

Which is why the ministry's Dr Noorul has decided in the present economic situation to step up efforts and road shows to empower local women with information of how much help is really out there for those in dire need.

"We are aware that the crisis has a big impact on women especially single mothers who don't have anybody to depend on," she says, adding that it is really quite amazing how much help they can get.

For example, she says, single mothers can get funds to pay for their kids' school uniforms, tuition, school bus fare, housing and loans

to start up small businesses from bodies like Tekun, Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia, Mara, and SME bank, while those with five kids to support can even get RM450 from the Welfare Department.

There are also various free training programmes which teach them skills like how to sew as a way of earning money or they can even baby-sit in their homes and earn RM1,000 each month looking after five kids at RM200 each.

"One of the reasons our women go into prostitution is they need the money but they don't know the avenues of making money and what is out there for them," she adds.

Whatever the case, there appears to be a bit of a shift in thinking with the new Anti-Trafficking Act and all the teething problems need to be ironed out quickly if Malaysia wants to be serious in combating the problem.

And if the world's oldest profession is here to stay, as many expect it would, Fernandez says it has to be made more transparent and the whole support system established, and the problem of syndicates that push trafficking addressed aggressively.

»We are aware that the crisis has a big impact on women especially single mothers«



DATUK DR NOORUL AINUR MOHD NUR