

Exposing the Links: The Exploitation of Women in Asia

by Kathleen Carlin, Founding Executive Director

It was billed as an "exposure tour." My friend Marie Fortune, Director of the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence in Seattle and Thelma Burgonio-Watson, from the Center's Asia-Pacific desk, announced they were taking a group of North American women to the Philippines and Thailand to learn more about exploitation of women in Asia.

I therefore joined 15 other women from various points in the US and Canada for the long flight to Manila, a city of ten million people living together in the most dramatic contrasts of luxury and deprivation.

In the days we were there, we met those who were themselves, or who work in behalf of, formerly prostituted women serving U.S. military forces and their Amerasian children, internal refugees and children of war, child prostitutes, street children, battered and raped women, Filipino "comfort" women enslaved by the Japanese Imperial Forces during World War II, mail order brides, victims of forced prostitution and sexual slavery, migrant workers, refugee women, and the urban poor.

Later in Bangkok, we learned more about the sex tourism industry. Prostitution has always existed in Thailand, as anywhere. However, Thailand, with its beautiful beaches, hospitable people and extreme poverty in its rural provinces, formally became the preferred site for "rest and recreation" centers during the Vietnam war. Then sex tourism became the number one industry in the country, an industry the Thai government can now scarcely discourage without economic trauma.

In both countries we met with skilled and courageous women from non-governmental organizations doing inspired work with few resources. In Manila the center for this work is GABRIELA, a consortium of 150 women's organizations. The National Council of Churches of the Philippines supports critical programs, such as the Buklod Center in Olongapo for formerly prostituted women and the Children's Rehabilitation Center for children for political prisoners.

I assumed that on an "exposure tour," I would be exposed to many new and perhaps difficult learnings. In an ironic twist, the first thing **exposed to me** was my own ignorance of global economics. As I reflected on this new self-awareness, I realized my ignorance was hardly surprising, considering how much it is in my interest not to know the ways, as our program coordinator Emma Cantor taught me, "the first world exists because of the third world".

Here are some notes from one day of the trip.

We ride along through the countryside in our air conditioned bus. An intensely blue sky competes for vividness with the green of the relentlessly flat rice paddies. Off in the middle of the field stands a thatched roof house on stilts, a banana tree leaning protectively toward it, the water buffalo tethered there. It's almost a dream, so like the images imprinted in my mind from childhood: "people of other lands."

By the year 2000, Asia will no longer be an agrarian society. Rather, countries will target the selling of goods and services not provided by other parts of the world. Tourism, one of the growth industries in Asia, seems an obvious choice in this country of such delicate beauty. Now, 70% of the tourists to the Philippines are single men.

Reflecting five hundred years of colonization, the semi-feudal, monopolistic character of land ownership in the Philippines works in favor of the land owner. For example, in the production of rice, 70% of the profit goes to the land owner. An obvious consequence is that most farmers can't survive by farming, forcing many of them to become migrant workers.

Forty-four per cent of the Philippines' annual budget goes to pay the interest on the their foreign debt. Migrant workers, required to return 50% of their earnings to the Philippine economy or lose their passports, supply the hard currency necessary to keep the country afloat.

Most migrant workers are women. The two primary categories of contract workers are "domestics" and "entertainers," both of whom are regularly exploited and forced into prostitution. A sign in a Manila factory: "Get laid or get laid off."

"This country has been able to survive because of the vaginas and sweat of migrant women." the Executive Director of the National Council of Churches of the Philippines told us. Women's bodies are the axis on which the third world and the first world are balanced.

A sudden loud noise, hissing, and the bus jolts to a stop. A broken radiator hose changes our plans abruptly. Why has no one brought duct tape?

We settle in for a few hours on the side of the road, beside a farm house. Soon, our guides have made acquaintance with the family living there. With breathtaking ease, they accommodate our presence, graciously letting us use the "comfort room," talking with us. Those of us who don't speak Tagalog sit in the shade and read, walk around, looking at their pig and the rice paddies stretched out behind.

Gradually, the family's story unfolds: the 17 year old daughter tells Emma how their father has gone to Korea to work, because he can't support his family as a farmer. He writes of his grief at being separated from them. She writes him back cheerful letters to raise his spirits. At the same time she tries to cheer her mother and brother.

The afternoon passes, shadows lengthen, some shifting among the group reveals the possibility of impatience. The daughter and her mother approach Emma shyly with a request: since Emma speaks English perhaps she can help the daughter with something she is working on. They lay out a piece of paper she has painstakingly filled out. It is an application to a mail-order bride catalog. Can Emma tell her if she has done it correctly? Nothing is said about the 250 pisos (about \$10) that must accompany the application, along with two photographs, to its New York address.

When we met with the National Council of Churches, a question was raised. What does it mean for the Philippines and the United States to relate creatively with each other in the post-colonial era? To remain friends? As the forms of dependency dissolve, what forms of real human relationships are possible?

With that question as backdrop I struggle with how to bring my experience back and share what I have learned.

I do know some things I intend to do. I will urge my government to concern itself for the welfare of Amerasian children, many thousands of whom are street children, the most vulnerable to prostitution and sexual slavery.

I will encourage our executing an extradition treaty with the Philippines to make it more difficult for criminals, such as child abusers, to avoid criminal sanction there.

I will urge my government to use its influence with the World Bank to renegotiate the Philippines' ruinous foreign debt so that they can instead invest their capital in their own country's development.

I will work to make it less profitable for sex-tourism and mail-order bride companies to do business here.