

## **Child Sex Tourism in the Philippines**

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This essay aims to discuss the issues involved in child sex tourism, with a particular focus on the Philippines. It will begin by reviewing the historical context of sex tourism in the Philippines, then go on to consider the current situation: who engages in child sex tourism; poverty and negative livelihood strategies; the ‘leakage’ of tourist money; the role of social distancing; and issues regarding age. It will conclude with a discussion of what is and could be done to end child sex tourism.

In addition to a range of print and internet-based sources, this essay also makes use of the author’s experience of living and teaching for a year (2005/6) in Pasil in Cebu City, in the South of the Philippines. Pasil is a slum area built over the remains of the city’s rubbish dump.

The Philippines are made up of 7,107 islands and has a total population of over 82 million people (World Guide 2005). It has a long and colourful history and because of its strategic positioning on oceanic trade routes, has been occupied by the Spanish, Americans and Japanese. Largely due to the presence of US military bases, prostitution became big business throughout the Twentieth Century and continues today. American servicemen stationed in bases such as Olangapo Bay required ‘R and R’ (Rest and Relaxation), sometimes referred to as “*I and I – Intoxication and Intercourse*” (Montgomery 2001, p198). Due to the country’s poverty and the relative wealth of the customers the sex industry grew quickly, offering shows, Western-style food, music and hotels. In time this sub-sector of the hospitality industry began to cater for non-military foreigners – sex tourists. Along with Thailand it fed

into and fed off the stereotype of the “*beautiful, pliant and docile Oriental women*” (Montgomery 2001, p198).

The Philippines have the fourth-largest number of child prostitutes in the world, estimated at around seventy-five thousand (Rowthorn, Choy, Grosberg, Martin and Orchard 2003, p36). The Cebu Office of the organisation ‘End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes’ (ECPAT-Cebu) placed the figure between sixty thousand and one hundred thousand in 1998 and believes that it may have risen since then (Bato-Lata 1999, p1). Various sources suggest that nine out of ten of their customers are Filipino (Bato-Lata 1999, p5 and Montgomery 2001, p194). When one considers that the vast majority of the world’s tourism is interregional this is no great surprise.

We have seen that the majority of abusers are local, national or inter-regional. This essay aims to look particularly at the other customers, Westerners, who are often referred to as ‘child sex tourists’. Due to the secrecy which inevitably surrounds the child sex industry it is difficult to find complete statistics, particularly regarding Western tourists’ involvement. There is no doubt that it exists. Seabrook’s book ‘No Hiding Place: Child Sex Tourism and the role of extraterritorial legislation’ (2000) uses examples involving the Philippines in over half of its case studies. The number of cases involving Western tourists referred to social workers has been rising since 1993 (Rowthorn et al. 2001, p36).

It has been questioned whether the term ‘tourist’ is appropriate when used to describe someone who is travelling with the sole purpose of sexually abusing a child. Harrison (2001, p27) notes that in terms of the differences between these people and local residents, there is usually a large contrast with respect to money and attitude. In the eyes of the locals there is often no difference between an ‘eco-tourist’ or a ‘mass-tourist’; “*anthropologists, military personal and surfers all fit into that category [tourists] together*” (Harrison 2001, p27). In terms of the services used by an ‘ordinary’ tourist and sex tourist there is also little difference; they travel with the same airlines, stay in the same hotels or resorts and require the same luxury goods. One interesting name given to tourists travelling for sex is “*whore-ists*” (Sunday Mirror 2003) which reflects their “*demonization*” referred to by Montgomery (2001, p193). This will be discussed in a later paragraph.

So who are these Westerners? In her essay about child sex tourism in Thailand, Montgomery notes that *“the usual stereotype of a sex tourist is of an old man who has to buy sex in Thailand as no-one in his home country will willingly agree to have sex with him for free”* (2001, p192). This view is questioned by studies which suggest that abusers can be of any age and from any section of society (Seabrook 2000, p104) and that *“little can be said with any certainty about men who travel to abuse children sexually. There is no convincing profile of a typical sex tourist”* (Montgomery 2001, p196). Perhaps there are some tentative generalisations which can be made. If somebody can afford to travel from their country of origin they can be assumed to be wealthy in comparison to many local people. With regard to the Philippines it appears that they are most likely to be male, although female sex tourists have been documented in other countries, as seen in the recent film ‘Heading South’ set in Haiti. Seabrook divides child sex tourists into two categories: circumstantial and preferential (2000, p.ix). People in the first group may sexually abuse a child if the opportunity presents itself; they are also referred to as *“casual sexual experimenters”* (Montgomery 2001, p193). Those in the second group set out with the intention of child abuse; their sexual preference is for the young.

The prevalence of child sex tourism in the Philippines must be understood in the wider context of poverty and desperation. As we have seen above, the presence of the US military has played a part. The broader history of the islands, through colonisation, missionaries, development workers (NGOs) and tourism, both locally, within South East Asia (notably Japanese visitors), and internationally, has led to a particular relationship with foreigners. The traditional culture of hospitality, with the common invitation “Let’s eat!” is in conflict with recognising the opportunities offered by the, at least comparatively, wealthy non-Filipinos. For a poor Filipina, marrying a Westerner has a great number of potential advantages. At a personal level it may allow her access to a ‘higher’ standard of living in a more ‘developed’ country (which begs the question: Higher by whose standards? In my opinion the people of Pasil are often wealthier in terms of community, family and faith. However, when I asked my students what they wanted from life they invariably mentioned big houses, fast cars and so on. Obviously there are other benefits to the developed world, such as the provision of medical health care and a higher and more accessible level of education.) Such a marriage may also allow her to support her family financially and potentially offer a ‘better’ future to her own children. One of the most unpleasant experiences

of my year in the Philippines was attending the wedding of an 18 year old Filipina and a retired Texan. Although the girl claimed to be in love with her groom, it was confided to me by one of her friends that she was making a “*sacrifice to help her family*”.

As a 26 year old white male living in a slum I was regularly confronted by this reality and had to make very clear that I was not ‘available’. Although at times it was both flattering and irritating, I eventually accepted it for what it is: a livelihood strategy. The two internet cafés in Pasil would often be filled with young Filipinas chatting and flirting online with men around the world. When I became aware of this I organised a series of classes for my female students, with the aim of making them aware of some of the risks (links to trafficking, forced prostitution, forced care-giving and so on). They listened politely but made clear to me that it was a gamble they were willing to take. One of my students left midway through her second semester when a French man she had been in email contact with came to visit her. For three weeks he took her to various exclusive tourist spots around the Philippines, before bringing her back to Cebu and leaving for France without her. She had lost her place on the vocational training program and did not hear from him again. It must be noted that this negative livelihood strategy is not only attempted by the young and uneducated.

The ‘supply and demand’ market of Filipinas and foreigners also opens up other livelihood opportunities. The below quote is from a flyer handed out in the slum.

*“Hi Filipinas, welcome to my agency to meet. Single Canadien [sic] men are interested to correspond with you for love and to get married. If you are sixteen years old and more, serious and interested also to correspond and to get married with a Canadian gentleman, just complete your bio-data, send it to me with a whole body picture from you.”*

Flyer distributed to girls in Pasil 2006 – see Appendix

The role of arranging a marriage in this context becomes a livelihood opportunity; girls’ details can be sold to internet sites or directly to foreign men. Here the line between matchmaker and pimp becomes blurred. Are people looking for love or is it a business transaction between two parties, involving sex/company and money/opportunity?

In the context described over the previous paragraphs it is easy to see how the prostitution of a child can become a livelihood strategy, due to the huge inequality existing between the child or family in poverty and the tourist in a financial position of strength.

*“It cannot be expressed too strongly that the vulnerability of children in the cities and villages and on the beaches of the Third World is occasioned by the same gross inequality that permits their tormentors to visit their countries and take advantage of their desperation. In other words, there is an organic connection between the kind of privilege that enables abusers to travel, and the poverty that compels poor children onto the streets, and into prostitution.”*

Seabrook 2000, p133

People take advantage of the poor, who due to their desperation are not in a position to bargain; they are forced to take any opportunities they can. Chambers quotes a woman in Kerela (India) who is working in terrible conditions without knowing how much she will get paid. *“What can we do? Can we sit at home and listen to the cries of hunger from our children? For one or two nights we can bear it, but then we will come to whoever offers us some work”* (Chambers 1983, p135). The work referred to in the quote is agricultural, but could equally well be used to explain why people are driven to all kinds of negative livelihoods, including sweatshops, crime, prostitution and the prostitution of children.

At this stage it is important to draw attention to the question of who financially benefits from the prostitution of a young person. There are two possible situations (Seabrook 2000, p121). Most commonly, the young person is ‘prostituted’; a pimp (who may be a family member) rents him or her out and is in control of the business transaction. Alternatively, the young person prostitutes him- or herself ‘voluntarily’ (although as we have seen in preceding paragraphs there are serious doubts as to whether this can truly be considered as a voluntary choice). In either situation, the wealthier Western tourist is then seen as preferable to the local customer.

It is also possible that the very presence of the sex industry in particular areas over time causes it to perpetuate. Local people may see the ways in which their so called ‘developed’ visitors behave and seek to emulate them. This demonstration effect *“where the values of materialism and hedonism, imported by tourists, creates a demand for Western lifestyles and attitudes among hosts”* (Smith and Duffy 2003, p5) certainly exists. Whether it can be so

powerful as to influence a society's standards of sexual morality in such a way is not clear. At an individual level it appears to; when one of my students was experiencing the 'high life' of the Philippines with her visiting Frenchman, her classmates were envious and expressed a desire for the same opportunities.

For the Filipino child, pimp or family, prostitution is a way of tapping into the large amounts of money involved in tourism, which rarely reaches them in their local community. Visitors to developing countries pay for long-haul flights, accommodation in high class hotels, Western-style food and drink and numerous other luxuries. However, it has been consistently claimed that due to 'leakages' this money scarcely benefits the local economy and thus the local people. "*Leakages are payments made outside of the destination economy: in other words, the proportion of the total holiday price that does not reach or remain in the destination*" (Mitchell and Page 2006, p5). Airline companies and hotel chains are usually based in the developed world. Western food and drink is often imported. Tourism Concern has suggested that leakages may account for up to 90% of the holiday costs. Even if the actual figure is lower, as suggested by the Pro-Poor Tourism Partnership, it is certainly true that a significant amount of money by-passes the local community. This, in combination with a variety of other factors, results in negative livelihood strategies. The next paragraph begins to consider why foreigners 'get away' with child sex tourism in the Philippines. We will see that poverty, desperation and leakages also play a role here.

For the 'preferential' (and to a lesser extent, the 'circumstantial') abuser of children, the attraction of countries like the Philippines and Thailand is that, because of the poverty and desperation discussed above, there is a market for their custom. This remains true only as long as they are relatively safe in carrying out such abuse.

*"There is no doubt that with the great increase in intercontinental travel and its relative cheapness, the opportunity has arisen for far more people to seek to circumvent the law in their own society by visiting countries where they imagine ... that they will be able to get away with it."*

Seabrook 2000, p122

It is clear that for the most part they do "get away with it". Why? There are laws in place both nationally and internationally (briefly discussed later) which make child sex tourism illegal and require the general public to report anything suspicious they see. These should

make such abuses impossible or at least extremely difficult to perpetrate. Here poverty once again is a factor. People will break (or ignore) the law in desperation; the following quote refers to breaking environmental laws but is equally relevant here: *“putting it bluntly: hungry people are more likely to eat turtles...than those who are well fed”* (Harrison 2001, p 255). This is true in terms of making themselves or their family members available for a tourist’s sexual abuse, but also in terms of not reporting things that may damage their own livelihoods. This becomes clearer when one considers the number of people who must turn a blind eye to child sex tourism: taxi drivers, receptionists, security guards, bar staff, hotel maids and so on. During my time in the Philippines I discussed this issue with numerous taxi drivers, reminding them of the law and asking them what they would do if they had suspicions about a white tourist with a Filipino child. Almost all of them said they would feel sad and disgusted. Only a few said that they would report the incident to the police. I suspect that these few were among the lucky ones who owned, or part-owned, their vehicles. The others could not afford to report their suspicions as they could not risk losing their jobs. One of the case studies in Seabrook describes a situation in which the abuser was denounced to the police. Ironically this was done by a child that he had earlier rejected for sexual contact (2000, p35). Generally though it seems fair to say that the wealth of the tourist and the needs of those who rely upon the tourism industry provide a *“shield against scrutiny”* (Seabrook 2000, p.iix) and, perhaps more importantly, against being held to account.

This unwillingness to confront the problem exists at an institutional level as well as at a personal one. The same financial reasoning applies:

*“Governments in LDCs often lack the will to implement policies... One result is that while lip service is given to the importance of social issues, rhetoric is not matched by state action, which is more directed towards economic objectives”*

Harrison 2001, p38

At a political level, Montgomery quotes the Deputy Prime Minister of Thailand who acknowledged that there were some forms of entertainment that may be considered *“disgusting and shameful because they are...sexual...[but they must be tolerated as] we have to consider the jobs that will be created”* (2001, p200). To make a stand against child sex tourism would have a huge knock-on effect, in terms of job losses, reduction of investment (even when leakages are taken into account) and on the country’s image to tourists. This will be discussed at a later stage.

For the ‘circumstantial’ abuser another reason they are more likely to engage in child sex tourism in a country such as the Philippines is social distancing. Tourists are away from those who know them in their home communities and far from the social norms that may usually restrain their behaviour. This is not a new phenomenon: *“By the 4<sup>th</sup> Century AD growing numbers of Christian pilgrims were criticized for opening themselves to ‘moral mischief’”* (Gregory of Nyssa, quoted in Harrison 2001, p2). In the recent film ‘Heading South’ a character reassures a friend who is having qualms about the relationships developing between the wealthy foreign women and a number of young male locals. She says *“Everything’s different here. It’s OK.”* When considering the Philippines or Thailand, the long term existence of the sex industry and the stereotype of the sexual but docile Oriental female must be taken into account alongside social distancing. Montgomery quotes studies which suggest that *“tourists are more likely to follow paedophile urges when away from home, because exotic and unusual surroundings encourage the view that differences in climate and culture will be accompanied by differences in morals”* (2001, p196). Child sex tourists may feel they are in a situation where their actions are acceptable; that is certainly the picture those who profit from the industry would like to paint.

Up until this point the question of age has not been discussed. At what age does a young person become an adult with respect to sex? Adult prostitution is a huge moral issue as there are still questions regarding power inequalities and ‘freedom’ of choice. However it is clearly different from child prostitution; *“by definition, children are under the age of consent, and therefore do not have a right to exchange their sexuality for money”* (Montgomery 2001, p193). The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child to be a person under the age of eighteen, but this is contradicted by the fact that many countries have an age of consent below this. Rosen notes that age and childhood are contested domains:

*“Chronological age has no absolutely fixed meaning in either nature or culture. Like ethnicity, age categories such as ‘child’, ‘youth’ and ‘adult’ are situationally defined within a larger system and cannot be understood without consideration of conditions and circumstances.”*

Rosen 2005, p133

The same is true of child prostitution; can a sixteen year old be mature enough to choose to fight in a war or parent a child but not to sell their own body? Many prostitutes certainly



begin at a young age, but after puberty. The media has certainly been guilty of using some of the most shocking examples to bring attention to the issue of child sex tourism. The combination of paedophilia (a 'hot' topic itself in the developed world) with concepts such as "*whore-ism*" (Sunday Mirror 2003) has led to the "*demonization*" (Montgomery 2001, p193) of the sex tourist. Seabrook notes that although it is not paedophilia if the young person has passed the age of puberty, there are still moral problems regarding the "*huge imbalance of power between prostituted juveniles and their clients*" (Seabrook 2000, p124).

What motivation is there to end child sex tourism and who should be involved in doing so? We have seen that at a local level, the prostitution of children is closely linked to poverty. Local people sometimes cannot afford to act. What about the tourism industry itself? Powerful organisations such as airlines, hotels and travel companies have attempted self-regulation via voluntary codes, such as the WTO's Global Code of Ethics for Tourism. These have been criticised as being "*little more than aspirational documents*" (Smith and Duffy 2003, p87) which lack teeth; their purpose is more the avoidance of external legislation than actually attempting to bring changes. Smith and Duffy pose the vital question: "*Can the tourism industry 'afford' a conscience?*" (2003, p7). As businesses the industry will only police itself when its profit is threatened. This is where campaign organisations such as ECPAT have been able to use the media to mobilise public outcry. The media has played a large role in drawing the world's attention to child sex tourism. A good example is the Sunday Mirror article quoted in the previous paragraph. It appears that the public do care about the issues raised. A recent survey by First Choice showed that 30 percent of overseas holiday makers are '*concerned*' about the impact of their stay on a destination (Ashley and Ashton 2006, p3). A 1998 Eurobarometer Survey found that 54 percent of Europeans would choose not to go if they "*learnt that one of their holiday destinations is known to be a place where child sex occurs*" (INRA Europe 1998). Although this use of the media must be largely considered as a positive there are some questions. Is there a danger that such reports actually publicise the Philippines as a country where sex with children is available? Unless these reports are closely linked to action they may do more harm than good.

What about governments? Clearly, at an international level the reduction of poverty must be a priority. This would remove many of the factors discussed in this essay. At a less idealistic level, there are actions being taken. Governments in tourist receiving countries such as the

Philippines realise that their image, and thus income from tourists, is damaged by the negative publicity about child sex tourism. The danger is the problem may be 'swept under the carpet' rather than reduced. One particular area of concern, a result of Government inactivity, is the generally poor level of provision for counselling and rehabilitation of young people who have been abused. Seabrook's book contains numerous statements similar to this one: "*the boys...received no official protection, counselling or follow-up*" (2000, p84). Such provision is vital as it is generally recognised that many who are abused will in later life become abusers without intervention. Campaign organisations must hold their governments to account.

Governments in developed countries have introduced legislation which allows for the prosecution of extra-territorial crimes against children. It is hoped that the punishment of offenders will act as a deterrent to others. This may have some success with 'circumstantial' abusers but is unlikely to effect 'preferential' child sex tourists as they are considered far more determined to abuse, and the risks of being prosecuted are still less than in their home countries. They have also been criticised as providing a "*moral high*" in bringing individuals to justice without tackling the root causes (Seabrook 2000, p133). Perhaps these governments could do more to enforce ethical standards on the tourism industry, particularly with regard to reducing 'leakages' to allow local people a fairer share of the profits of tourism, potentially leading to a reduction in negative livelihood strategies.

In conclusion, we have seen that the existence of child sex tourism in the Philippines is directly related to the inequalities in wealth that are present between the developing and developed world. Additional factors include the historical context of foreigners in the islands and the images and stereotypes of Orient sexuality. The way forward must include all actors: local people, governments and the tourism industry. However these do not necessarily have the opportunity or motivation to act. Therefore there is a crucial campaigning role to be played by civil society and, in particular, the media.

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## CANADIAN PENPAL

### Filipinas in demand for love and wedding with men in Canada

Hi filipinas, welcome to my agency to meet. I introduce myself, Michel Grondin from Canada. Single Canadian men are interested to correspond with you for love and to get married. If you are sixteen years old and more, serious and interested also to correspond and to get married with a Canadian gentleman, just complete your bio-data, send it to me with a whole body picture from you. I will introduce you to single men. Please note : that I don't sell your address on internet, I prefer to meet in person single. So, if you receive penpals, it mean that they are truly interested to know, to love and to share theirs lives with you forever .

#### Bio-data

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Age \_\_\_\_\_ years old

Height \_\_\_\_\_ ' \_\_\_\_\_ ''

Weight \_\_\_\_\_ lbs

Health \_\_\_\_\_

Religion \_\_\_\_\_

Personalities \_\_\_\_\_

Hobbies \_\_\_\_\_

I have \_\_\_\_\_ childs, \_\_\_\_\_ years old.

I want childs  (my own), it depend of my husband

Disponible now to get married  yes  no, if no when?

I would like to correspond with marriage minded gentlemen between the ages of \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_.

Send to, CANADIAN PENPAL  
545, 25<sup>e</sup> Rue  
St-Georges (Qué)  
Canada, G5Y 4L6

Write on back, your address, e-mail and phone number.  
Best of luck

*Michel Grondin*  
mgrondin67@hotmail.com

### Appendix 1

Flyer distributed in Pasil 2006