



Campaigning for open, accountable and responsible tourism in Burma/Myanmar

An Analysis on Sex Work and Sex Tourism in Myanmar

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Tourism Transparency

Tourism Transparency is a small independent non-governmental organization campaigning for an open and accountable tourism industry in Myanmar. We aim to contribute to the development of responsible tourism in Myanmar by raising awareness on responsible tourism practice and thus facilitating better choices amongst tourists, government, industry and civil society.

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Disclaimer

This report in no way intends to criticize the choices of individuals or diminish the legitimacy of sex work as a choice or as a means of income. It merely intends to address the health, social and economic issues that are associated with sex work and sex tourism, thereby creating a baseline understanding of the phenomenon taking place in Myanmar to ensure it is adequately dealt with to prevent further harm.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all interviewees for being so kind to take their time to talk with us and discuss their views on sex work and sex tourism in Myanmar.

Acronyms

ARV	Antiretroviral Drugs
CCP	Comprehensive Condom Programme
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DIC	Drop-in-centres
FSW	Female Sex Workers
INGO	International non-governmental organization
MARPs	Most At Risk Populations
MDM	Medicins du Monde
MANA	Myanmar Antinarcotics Association
MMK	Myanmar Kyats (local currency)
MSM	Men who have sex with men
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PSI	Population Services International
STI	Sexually transmitted infection
SWIM	Sex Workers in Myanmar Network
TOP	Targeted Outreach Programme
UNWTO	United Nations World Tourism Organization

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	6
1. Introduction	7
1.1 Purpose of the report.....	7
1.2 Methods.....	9
1.2.1 Limitations.....	10
1.3 What is ‘Sex Tourism’?.....	11
2. Civil Society Organizations Analysis	12
2.1 Sex Workers in Myanmar Network.....	13
2.2 Targeted Outreach Programme by Population Services International.....	15
2.3 Myanmar Anti-Narcotics Association.....	16
2.4 Medicins du Monde.....	16
2.5 United Nations Children’s Fund.....	17
3. Entering Sex Work	18
3.1 Reasons.....	18
3.1.1 Poverty and Unemployment.....	18
3.1.2 Rape.....	19
3.2 Process.....	19
3.2.1 Individual Conscious Choice.....	20
3.2.2 Trafficking.....	20
4. Realities of Sex Work	23
4.1 Underage Sex.....	23
4.2 Salary.....	24
4.3 Escape Attempts.....	25
4.4 Laws Against Sex Workers.....	25
4.4.1 Suppression of Prostitution Act of 1949.....	25
4.4.2 Barriers to Health Treatment.....	26
4.4.3 Condoms.....	27
4.5 Abuse, Discrimination and Stigma.....	28
4.6 Domestic or International Phenomenon.....	29

5. Sex Tourism in Myanmar	29
6. Conclusion	33
7. Recommendations	34
8. References	36

Executive Summary

With the borders of the country opening to tourists, a pervading question is the possibility of Myanmar following Thailand's footsteps in terms of sex tourism development. However, in Myanmar sex work has been a largely ignored and somewhat shameful topic, and information thereon is scarce.

By exploring the reasons and methods for entering sex work in Myanmar, the realities of sex workers lives and the current situation of sex tourism in the country, Tourism Transparency interviewed a number of individuals from an array of organizations currently based in Yangon who work with, or are knowledgeable on this topic. Precisely because of many differing opinions, this research project intends to create a platform for discussion on sex work and the sex tourism phenomenon, by analyzing the current situation on the ground and highlighting that sex tourism is not the problem some fear it is – yet. However, we are hopeful that prevention mechanisms will be implemented in Myanmar soon.

This does not imply the unlikely possibility of it burgeoning in the near future. Although sex tourism is currently not perceived as a 'big' problem yet that needs to be urgently dealt with, its possible increase ought to be continuously monitored, and potentially curbed. While figures estimating the percentage of tourists to Thailand that can be classed as 'sex tourists' are difficult to determine, it could be that an eventual increase of sex tourism in Myanmar can be observed vis-à-vis an increase of tourism *per se*. The predicted number was quoted by the ADB at 7.48 million visitors by the year 2020¹. Thus sex tourism prevention and preparedness strategies should be put in place.

¹ Ministry of Hotel and Tourism. 2013. *Myanmar Tourism Master Plan 2013-2020*.

1. Introduction

1.1. Purpose of the report

This report aims to provide an overview of the current situation of sex work in Myanmar as perceived by key stakeholders of Myanmar civil society. This report should be seen as an attempt to begin to shed light onto the current and possible future situation of sex tourism in Myanmar.

The theory of sex tourism is examined and compared this to the Myanmar legal framework. Moreover, key civil society stakeholders were identified to speak with for this project. This provides not only an overview of the work these organizations undertake with sex workers in Myanmar, but also explores the reasons and the process of entering sex work. Only through the experiences and realities of sex workers across the country can we begin to implement effective prevention mechanisms in Myanmar.

The Republic of the Union of Myanmar has long been a source of human trafficking into Thailand. Lured with economic prospects and promises, girls as young as 13 are brought to Thailand, the majority of which are unaware of the type of work that awaits them upon their arrival. Locked in brothels to prevent their escape, the girls are introduced to their futures as sexual slaves after one or two days of ‘acclimatization’. Between US\$400-800² is paid to the families accompanying the girls to the border by the recruitment agencies, which often becomes a debt to be paid by the girl through sexual servitude³. This is just one of many possibilities of girls taken across the border. Some are sent back home after two to three years to recruit new girls, who are then promised work as maids or cleaners. These procedures and personal stories have been well documented over the past two decades (see for example UNIAP⁴). Yet there remains a lack of information available about women who are trafficked internally and

² Asia Watch. 1993. *A Modern form of Slavery: Trafficking of Burmese Women and Girls into Brothels in Thailand*.

³ Chelala. 1998. *What's ailing Burma: The state of women and children's health*.

⁴ UNIAP Myanmar: <http://www.no-trafficking.org/myanmar.html>.

work as sex workers within Myanmar *itself*. An important driver for this report is the legal aspect, as sex work is illegal in Myanmar, which is determined by the Suppression of Prostitution Act of 1949. However, specific figures on the number of cases of sex workers being arrested according to this act are not readily available, should they exist at all.

With an estimated 60,000 female sex workers (FSW) in Myanmar and approximately 15-20,000 of them situated in Yangon, the former capital is considered to have the highest number of FSW in the country, closely followed by Mandalay. These figures are to be viewed with caution, as various groups cite differing numbers. This is in part due to the illegal and underground nature of the trade, as well as the lack of resources and surveys conducted to establish the number. This in turn skews the data available and brings into questions its reliability. However, as this is the only estimate to go on, most organizations within Myanmar use 60,000 FSW as a baseline statistic to work with and to develop their programmes and projects with. According to one interviewee, a countrywide survey to determine the number of FSW is expected to take place in 2015, but more on this is not yet known.

In Myanmar, recent reform and economic liberalization processes resulted in the lifting of international sanctions. The lifting of the long-running tourism boycott also led to Myanmar becoming more accessible to outsiders (see Tourism Transparency accessible areas map⁵). Tourism country-wide has seen a steady increase over the past three years, with reportedly 2 million visitors arriving in 2013 (see Ministry of Hotels and Tourism statistics⁶).

The sex tourism sector in Thailand developed during the Vietnam War days when American GIs visited for relaxation. Today Thailand is an international tourist hotspot,

⁵ Tourism Transparency. 2014. Accessible Areas Map:
<http://www.tourismtransparency.org/content/myanmar-no-go-zones>

⁶ Ministry of Hotels and Tourism. 2014. Statistics:
<http://www.myanmar-tourism.org/tourismstatistics.htm>

and is often perceived as a ‘sex tourism destination’. This is not only due to the media selling it as such⁷, but also due to the Thai government doing fairly little to change the lucrative sector. Thailand’s economy has developed considerably during the past decades, yet the levels of development vary significantly between urban and rural areas. Thailand’s rural poor make up a large percentage of Thai sex workers.

Bearing the similarities of Myanmar and Thailand’s poverty and decades of military rule in mind, it is very likely that the increase of tourism in Myanmar will bring with it crime and prostitution. If not managed sensibly, the country may follow Thailand’s sex tourism development footsteps (Paquette, 2012). Yet the lack of information available on sex tourism and sex work in general in conservative, military-led Myanmar has made it very difficult to understand and determine ways and means to curb the allegedly burgeoning industry.

While the majority of research on sex work in South East Asia has focused on Thailand and Cambodia, the increase in tourism in Myanmar and its effects on sex tourism has not been researched thus far. The future could see a burgeoning sex tourism industry in the country. Due to the significance of this emerging research topic, the present report will hopefully motivate the beginning of research projects conducted by and for a variety of people involved. Ideally such research should be cooperative and should be aimed for the long-term. We hope many people, organizations and ministries will find ways to help us address the potential future socio-cultural impacts of tourism in Myanmar. The importance of on-going research cannot be stressed enough.

1.2 Methods

This report is based on a thorough literature review of sex tourism and its implications in other countries, and interviews with seven key organizations with experience and expertise on sex work in Myanmar. Due to financial and time limitations, the interviewees were focused only on the third sector, and included representatives of

⁷ Huffington Post. 2009. *Thailand: The World’s Sex Tourism Capital*.
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/wires/2009/08/14/thailand-the-worlds-sex-t_ws_259562.html.

NGOs, INGOs and local civil society organizations located in Yangon. The constraints did not allow for further interviews to be conducted in other locations and the focus was thus on Yangon itself.

The questions were be open-ended to avoid leading interviewees in a certain direction and to enable them to expand on their explanations and examples as they saw fit. The interviews were mainly conducted in English, and an interpreter was present in cases where the interviewee was unable to speak English. The interviews were recorded and notes were also taken during the interviewing process.

Qualitative research was chosen in order to develop a deeper understanding of the underlying causes of a potentially growing phenomenon. This topic can currently only be studied with qualitative research methods in Myanmar, due to the lack of statistics, communication and further limitations that will be listed below.

1.2.1 Limitations

Due to the restricted time allocated for this research, as well as the focus being on Yangon, organizations outside of Yangon were not interviewed, which greatly limited the scope of this research. Moreover, some organizations were initially based in Yangon, but had recently relocated to Naypyitaw and had not yet updated this information on their websites.

As we only interviewed CSOs (due to them largely being excluded in the Tourism Master Plan⁸), the limitation of participants is important to consider, and what this means for the data gathered. A more comprehensive overview of the sex tourism industry in Myanmar is required and future research will have to include other stakeholders, including but not limited to, government ministries and the tourism private sector, particularly the hospitality industry.

⁸ Ministry of Hotel and Tourism. 2013. *Myanmar Tourism Master Plan 2013-2020*

A great limitation that is often faced by many researchers in Myanmar is the problem of reaching organizations that are not registered, but operate knowingly. With phone numbers and email addresses only obtainable through private networks, trust issues on behalf of the organizations, it is difficult to arrange interviews with them. Most interviews were arranged through referrals by other organizations.

Last, due to the sensitive nature of this topic, as well as the cultural phenomenon of “ah-na-de” (the Myanma cultural and social value of hesitating against asserting oneself in fear of offending someone or causing them to lose face) for the Myanma interviewees, there is a possibility of answers being biased in favour of what they feel the researcher may have wanted to hear and what was expected of them to respond to.

1.3 What is ‘Sex Tourism’?

Defining sex tourism in the late 80s and early 90s predominantly featured on the need for an underprivileged third world country with women of colour to appeal to men from more affluent countries, thereby forging a socio-economic connection with foreign currency and tourism through businessmen who are willing to invest in travels exclusively for sex⁹. This understanding and definition of sex tourism has evolved over the past two decades and today is more inclusive of a variety of aspects that contribute towards the phenomenon.

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines sex tourism as “trips organized from within the tourism sector, or from outside this sector but using its structures and networks, with the primary purpose of effecting a commercial sexual relationship by the tourist with residents at the destination”. According to UNWTO, sex tourism can be both domestic and international¹⁰.

Scholars, however, have debated the definition of sex tourism for decades, refuting the notion that sex tourism at its most basic can be defined as travel exclusively in search of

⁹ Enloe. 1989. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*.

¹⁰ UNWTO. 1995. *UNWTO Statement on the Prevention of Organized Sex Tourism*.

sex, which Ryan and Hall¹¹ also reprove, stating that there “is no single paradigm of sex tourism, but many”. This in itself shows the widely disputed concept of sex tourism, showing the importance of the differing understandings individuals have of sex tourism.

The interviewees each understood and described sex tourism differently, either defining it as tourists coming into a country with the sole purpose of engaging in sexual activities, or tourists already in a country deciding to engage in sexual activities despite this not being the sole or initial purpose for their visit. Others grouped these two aspects together to define sex tourism as a two-pronged phenomenon. Thus individual understandings of sex tourism are important as they influence and shape each individual’s opinion on sex tourism’s prevalence in the country.

A wide range of different understandings and conceptualizations of sex tourism across was evident in all interviews, leading to different answers on their estimation about the current or potential problem Myanmar faces in terms of sex tourism. This is shown in section five, which describes the current and possible future of sex tourism in Myanmar from the perspectives of the various interviewees.

2. Civil Society Organizations Analysis

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) were purposefully chosen for this first report on the topics of sex tourism. The Myanmar Tourism Master Plan¹² lists a variety of stakeholders such as – the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism (MoHT), Ministry of Social Welfare Relief and Resettlement (MoSWRR), Ministry of Education (MOE), Ministry of Health (MOH), Ministry of Information (MOIN), Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security (MOLESS), Myanmar Hotelier Association (MHA), Tourism Technical Authority (TTA), Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) – to raise awareness,

¹¹ Ryan & Hall. 2001. As cited in Williams, 2012, *Sex Tourism – Entry in Encyclopedia of Globalization*.

¹² Ministry of Hotel and Tourism. 2013. *Myanmar Tourism Master Plan 2013-2020*

report on and create recommendations on the prevention of sex tourism in Myanmar thereby combating “sexual exploitation of children and all forms of sex tourism”¹³, as well as supporting research to “determine the extent of sex tourism...linked to the tourism industry”¹⁴.

Thus, while it may be considered a limitation to only focus on CSOs in this analysis and report, the exclusion of these critical stakeholders in the Tourism Master Plan, provide clear justification of why they need to be focused in our first report on the topic – namely the beginning of our research on sex tourism with the views of CSOs, as they are just as important in tackling the issue of sex tourism within a collaborative process with various government departments.

The interviewees were from the following organizations: Sex Workers in Myanmar Network (SWIM), Targeted Outreach Programme (TOP), Medicins du Monde (MDM), United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), Equality Myanmar, Myanmar Anti-Narcotics Association (MANA) and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS).

For the purpose of this CSO analysis, only organizations working directly with FSW and/or ongoing projects and programmes aimed specifically at them were included.

2.1 Sex Workers in Myanmar Network (SWIM)

Founded in 2011, SWIM focuses on HIV treatment, education, information dissemination and advocacy. The organization works with various stakeholders in line with their overall focus – by providing information on HIV testing, the treatment options and the counseling centres available to sex workers, as well as their legal rights, in particular the right to carrying condoms without being arrested (see subsection 4.4.3 for further information regarding this). SWIM educates village leaders on facts about

¹³ Ministry of Hotel and Tourism. 2013. *Myanmar Tourism Master Plan 2013-2020*, pp. 47

¹⁴ Ministry of Hotel and Tourism. 2013. *Myanmar Tourism Master Plan 2013-2020*, pp. 64

HIV and sex work to help reduce the stigma and discrimination FSW and those infected with HIV are faced with.

In a country with high unemployment rates, particularly amongst youth at 4.02%¹⁵, individuals living with HIV find it difficult to apply for and gain employment, but HIV positive sex workers applying for work find it even more difficult to do so. Faced with a double barrier to alternative employment HIV positive sex workers are particularly vulnerable. SWIM addresses this discrimination within communities by openly speaking about sex and sex work. Although a slight decrease in discrimination has been evident amongst the communities they work with, SWIM feels that it is nowhere close to what it should be and they are continuing with this line of work in the years to come.

While they do not support sex work in itself, despite many volunteers and employees being previous sex workers themselves, they are committed to raising awareness on HIV/AIDS, other STIs, safe sexual practice and the legal rights of sex workers. They do not administer treatment, but work as a referral mechanism, in which to point sex workers to safe, non-discriminatory centres for testing, treatment and counseling.

To receive treatment, HIV positive individuals have to register when discovering their status. However, many are unable to do so due to the high illiteracy rates in the country. SWIM thus helps HIV positive women with these relevant documents, to ensure that they are able to receive treatment. A major obstacle they are faced with is the discrimination certain ARV treatment centres have against sex workers. Due to the limited amount of ARVs available, some clinics prefer to give them to HIV positive individuals who are not sex workers. Despite this, a number of treatment clinics, predominantly run by other INGOs and NGOs, are not discriminatory and do provide treatment particularly for FSW. Such organizations include, but are not limited to MDM, TOP and MANA, which were also interviewed for this report.

¹⁵ Trading Economics. 2013. Myanmar Unemployment Rate.

2.2 Targeted Outreach Programme (TOP) by Population Services International (PSI)

Targeted Outreach Programme is a PSI initiative that provides HIV prevention services, as well as social, civic and educational programmes for sex workers and men who have sex with men (MSM). Initially started in 2004, today TOP is the programme that provides the greatest access to sex workers in the whole country. It began as an outreach programme, which gradually extended to become a comprehensive programme including four components, namely outreach, drop-in centres (DICs), clinical services and HIV care and support. These services are specifically for FSW and MSM to provide non-discriminatory support, and are located in 18 different locations across the country.

For TOP's outreach component, outreach workers, who were former FSW or MSM themselves, go into the field to meet with their friends and other FSW and MSM. Through this outreach they provide health education sessions, after which they distribute condoms and gels and provide them with further information on their drop in centres. The centres provide a safe haven for FSW and MSM to discuss emotional, health, business or any issues they are dealing with, with peers and amongst friends. They are able to speak freely and are offered various counselling services, including HIV, TB and STI counselling. Should they require physical health services they are referred to the clinics, which provide HIV, STI and TB testing and treatment, reproductive health services and cervical cancer screening and treatment. For further HIV care, ARV treatment is nearby. TOP have previously referred HIV positive clients to other organizations, but have developed their own ARV programme to administer this treatment themselves, thus closely linking the four components to provide the most comprehensive and non-discriminatory care for FSW and MSM.

In 2013 alone, PSI reached 40,000 MSM and 40,000 FSW and administered 17,000 HIV tests across the whole country, reaching approximately 67% of all FSW. While they are faced with challenges, their perseverance sees them overcoming these challenges and barriers, proof of which is that they now operate out of 18 centres across Myanmar.

2.3 Myanmar Anti-Narcotics Association (MANA)

MANA started their HIV Prevention Project in 2012, working with most at risk populations (MARPs), which include FSW, MSM and clients who have sex with sex workers, with a specific focus on HIV prevention and control. As with other organization, this is achieved through peer workers that come from the MARP population, sending former FSW to current FSW, former MSM to current MSM and former clients of FSW to current clients of FSW. Since having started more than 200 peer workers have attended training on the subject of HIV infection, transmission and prevention, as well as overall reproductive health knowledge, which they disseminate in the field. MANA's outreach workers also distribute condoms amongst MARPs as part of their information dissemination.

Surpassing their annual target for both 2012 and 2013, as well as distributing 200,000 condoms per year, MANA have an additional facet to their training which involves educating policemen and their spouses about condoms and thus reducing stigma. Through this, those attending the workshops now understand the uses of condoms as both preventing infections and as a means of family planning, or what is locally termed as 'birth spacing'. The recent development of this project, however, means that there remains a large scope of individuals to be involved in such stigma-reducing workshops, which MANA plans to reach in the future.

2.4 Medcins du Monde (MDM)

Comprising of three different programmes, MDM's largest specialized area is harm reduction, followed by two smaller programmes, one in Kachin State supporting medical services for displaced persons and another programme in the delta areas on mother and child healthcare. Their highest priority in Myanmar is harm reduction, focusing on people using drugs, FSW, MSM, transgender, and HIV positive individuals. This in itself is split into working with FSW and MSM in Yangon and drug users in Kachin State, as the programmes are largely driven by the population itself, with the HIV epidemic largely driven by drug users in Kachin State and the sex industry in Yangon. As MDM is not an abolitionist organization, they do not assume that sex work

should not exist or should be abolished. They take on a pragmatic approach to ensure that while sex work is a reality, the focus should be primarily on harm reduction.

MDM also have the outreach worker approach. Social workers, who are themselves from the communities MDM targets, go to those areas where risky health behaviours, in this instance unsafe sexual behaviour, take place. Community members are chosen for this, to build up a sense of trust, confidence and empowerment between outreach workers and those they target. This outreach includes health education, the distribution, promotion and demonstration on how to use condoms, as well as explaining the overall work that MDM does and the services that are available in their clinics and drop-in centres (DICs).

The MDM DICs are safe environments for individuals to rest. A number of entertainment activities pertaining to health education are present, as well as showers, TVs and beauty sessions for manicures, thereby providing an overall space where they feel comfortable, welcome and interact with their peers. The clinics are attached to the DICs and offer a variety of medical services, from HIV testing, counselling and treatment, STI treatment and prevention and opportunistic infection treatment. Having reached 6,730 FSW in Yangon in 2013 alone, MDM is making great strides at accessing at risk populations and providing them with health care and information.

2.5 UNICEF

UNICEF's main focus in Myanmar is on child trafficking across borders into neighbouring countries. They are currently working with the Myanmar government to implement child labour laws and strengthening the legal aspects for child protection within the country. They intend to move away from individual child protection to building a system for prevention, by working with the highest level of government to create policies surrounding this.

There is currently no programme in place that focuses on the trafficking of children into the sex tourism industry, however, the intention to develop a prevention programme for this specifically in the near future is there. Given the lack of knowledge, statistics and

information on this topic, it is important for UNICEF to gain better knowledge in order to plan and develop a thorough programme.

Thus far, UNICEF refers to three important phases, namely – prevention, response and enforcement. While the majority of organizations in the country and those interviewed for this report focus on the latter two, it is a positive notion that UNICEF intends to work towards creating a programme to address *prevention*, as this is non-existent as of yet.

3. Entering Sex Work

As with all social issues, there is no clear-cut path in terms of reasoning and the process of entering into sex work. Individual narratives are common, as was evident in certain stories told by a number of interviewees, some who were previous sex workers themselves. Some overarching themes emerged during the interviews, particularly those narratives that highlighted poverty and unemployment as the main reason for entering sex work, with rape as a secondary possibility. Individual conscious choice and trafficking are the most common processes of becoming sex workers.

3.1 Reasons

3.1.1 Poverty and Unemployment

The organizations interviewed for this report all concurred that poverty and unemployment in rural areas were the main driving forces leading women to seek employment within larger cities, and the unemployment within the cities led them to enter sex work as a source of income. The low basic salary per month (which is disputed in section 4.2) causes those working in factories or restaurants to have insufficient means to survive on, with rent barely being covered in larger cities. Often in desperation women become sex workers to improve their chances of survival and to better their lives financially. The widespread sex trade may thus be mainly attributed to

unemployment and poverty particularly amongst women from remote areas and border regions (see also Swe & Rashid, 2013; ¹⁶; ¹⁷).

3.1.2 Rape

One interview revealed the often-hidden reasoning of rape. While this was not mentioned in any of the other interviews, it is an important aspect to consider given experience with shame in other countries in the region, particularly in the cultural context in Myanmar, where a girl is considered ‘ruined’ or ‘unmarriageable’ once she has been raped. One of the interviewees knew of other sex workers who were raped by relatives (in these cases their uncles and cousins), and turned to sex work post-rape, as this was considered the only possibility for them to contribute towards the family income.

3.2 Process

With the overriding reason for entering sex work being poverty and unemployment, women and girls seek employment through individual means or through brokers. Brokers, however, can often lead to trafficking and forced sexual slavery. The majority of interviewees mentioned trafficking and individual conscious choices as main reasons to get into sex work during the interviews. As in other areas in Myanmar, concrete facts and figures highlighting the reasons for entering sex work are elusive, making it difficult to understand the processes in which girls and women become sex workers within Myanmar. While there is no ‘one’ process as such due to the myriad of differing stories and socio-economic situations, for the purpose of this report it is sufficient to highlight the two overriding processes, namely individual conscious choice and trafficking, as these were the most commonly mentioned processes during the interviews.

¹⁶ Brown et al. 2006. *Challenges faced by women working in the inner city sex trade.*

¹⁷ Manopaiboon et al. 2003. *Leaving sex work: Barriers, facilitating factors and consequences for female sex workers in northern Thailand.*

3.2.1 Individual Conscious Choice

The high rate of and widespread unemployment and poverty throughout the country leads many women to make the conscious decision to become sex workers. While some make the journey by themselves, others come with their families (husband and children). In the case of the latter, the husband's income is often not sufficient or he cannot find employment himself, leading the wife to turn to sex work to make ends meet. This is done either with or without the husband's knowledge and varies between cases, according to one respondent.

Some wives approach taxi drivers and inform them of their available services should anyone ask the driver. However, those who do not do this on a daily basis do not consider themselves to be sex workers, making it more difficult for organizations to provide outreach services to them.

Whether they are from rural villages or the cities in which they work, some women are consciously aware of the work that they embark upon once they enter sex work. This 'conscious awareness' indicates their knowledge and understanding of the work they are about to embark upon, as this is a decision they have made themselves. Other women may not find themselves in such a 'fortunate' position, in that they are unaware of the situation they find themselves in, often believing to start a different type of job, and are instead trafficked into sex work.

3.2.2 Trafficking

An estimated 10,000 girls and women are trafficked into Thailand from neighbouring countries per annum for sexual servitude and slavery¹⁸, of which the majority originate from Myanmar¹⁹. UNICEF²⁰ proposed that as many as 10,000 girls are trafficked into Thai brothels annually from Myanmar alone. While there is some disparity over cross-

¹⁸ Asia Society. 2014. *Trafficking of Children for Prostitution and the UNICEF Response*.

¹⁹ Asia Watch. 1993. *A Modern form of Slavery: Trafficking Burmese Women and Girls into Brothels in Thailand*.

²⁰ UNIAP. 2009. *SIREN (Strategic Information Response Network) Human Trafficking Data Sheet: Myanmar*.

border trafficking, there is an even greater lack of information and accurate statistics depicting the internal trafficking situation within Myanmar itself.

With only 15 reported cases of internal trafficking in 2008 (UNIAP, 2009) and no up-to-date information available due to UNIAP's current lack of presence within the country, the true extent of the situation is unclear.

With internal trafficking occurring from rural villages to urban centres, military camps, border towns, and fishing villages, women are often lured into sex work by the promise of legitimate jobs and substantially higher pay²¹. Locally, there is a severe lack of knowledge and evidence on internal trafficking. While some organizations alluded to the fact that there are a number of situations in which internal trafficking occurs, the percentage of sex workers working in Myanmar that are trafficked internally is unclear.

Research that has been conducted thus far has examined the cases of cross-border trafficking, mainly of Myanmar women to Thailand, China, Malaysia, South Korea and Macau, with Myanmar also being used as a transit country for trafficking Bangladeshis to Malaysia and Chinese to Thailand. The most common borders used for this are Tachileik to Mae Sai, Myawaddy to Mae Sot, and Kawthaung to Ranong to get women into Thailand and further thereafter, with Ruili used as the border crossing into China²². However, as mentioned above, specific statistics tend to be unreliable, with differing sources citing varying figures. It is therefore unclear what the potential effect of the opening of Myanmar's borders will have on these numbers in the future. Without ongoing research, only speculation will remain.

With the majority of trafficking cases occurring cross-border, as those mentioned above, it is assumed that the number of internal trafficking cases is relatively low. UNIAP, responsible for statistics and information, in collaboration with various governmental departments, INGOs and NGOs, has also solely focused on cross-border trafficking and

²¹ Chelala. 1998. *What's ailing Burma: The state of women and children's health*.

²² UNIAP. No date. *The trafficking situation in Myanmar*.

they currently do not have a programme running in Myanmar (UNIAP, no date). Specific statistics regarding this are therefore unknown.

3.2.2.1 Timeline

As it emerged in the interviews, trafficking generally follows a process described in the following: The girls and women trafficked are brought into Yangon by brokers from the countryside in search of better employment opportunities. The women are promised a job, be it as cleaners or in a factory, they pay a fee to their broker to find them employment and are then handed over to brothels, massage parlours or KTV bars, who also pay the broker a fee to find them female workers. The women are then forced into sex work – a form of sexual slavery that has become an overriding phenomenon in South East Asia²³ (see also Cambodia and Thailand²⁴). The high debt they are entangled in and the possibility of abuse on part of their ‘employer’ makes it difficult and close to impossible for FSW to escape the industry. Many do not receive their salary as this is paid back to their boss to pay off the debt they owe. They are often not aware of the amount or how long it will take to settle this debt. An alternative is that they start working in a factory, but earn so little that they are unable to afford renting a room. In addition to this, the need to earn money to send back to their families often leads them to turn to sex work to better their income.

Given the reasons and processes for entering into sex work, it is important to further explore the issues to better ascertain the recommended course of action for governmental departments. A sensible course of action would improve the prevention and protection of women, girls and MSM entering sex work and ensure the prosecution of those responsible for trafficking, should this be the case. This would bring great positive social impacts to Myanmar.

²³ Not Abandoned. 2014. *Sex Slavery 101*.

²⁴ Human Trafficking. 2006. *Cambodia and Thailand*.

4. Realities of Sex Work

Individual experiences and realities of sex work differ from one FSW to another. Despite this, certain similarities are present within such realities and can be categorized according to the following themes: age; salary; escape attempts; laws against sex workers; abuse, discrimination and stigma; and domestic or international phenomenon.

4.1 Underage sex

Some studies suggest that 60% of girls working as sex workers in Myanmar are under the age of 18²⁵. More recent information is lacking however, as very little information on this sensitive topic exists. The research topic is therefore ‘new’ in the country, given the scarce information that is available. This immense gap in research about the sex tourism sector shows perhaps the difficulty and sometimes dangerous aspect of studying topics such as this in Myanmar. For example, ascertaining the ages of sex workers and the possibility of underage sex workers during the interviews was difficult. With participants responding on the age of sex workers ranging from ages 17-20, or 18-55, adults were implied as being over 18 years old, and reproductive age from 16 years and above. The exact ages of sex workers in Myanmar are therefore unclear.

None of the organizations were able to confirm the extent to which under-age girls were working as sex workers within Yangon and Myanmar overall. While they all agreed that there are child sex workers, it was mentioned as being very difficult to determine the exact number. One interviewee responded that the women do not reveal to them if they are underage. They generally state that they are 18 years old or above should they be asked. Due to the stigma attached to this topic and the severe lack of statistics, it is very difficult to prove the exact ages of the sex workers, which is true for not only Myanmar, but also its neighbouring countries.

²⁵ Hughes, Sporic, Mendelsohn & Chirgwin. 1999. *The Factbook on Global Sexual Exploitation*.

4.2 Salary

With the biggest reasoning and motivation for entering sex work being unemployment and poverty, the salary FSW receive is important when considering the scope of their realities. The basic salary in Myanmar is MMK 30-40,000 (±US\$ 30-40) per month according to one organization, and MMK 70-80,000 (±US\$ 70-80) per month according to another. This is in contrast to the wages sex workers receive in Thailand, which are estimated at around 1,500 Baht (± US\$ 50) per client per night²⁶. It is difficult to ascertain if the lives and incomes are improved for those who turn to sex work in Myanmar, as there is no basic wage guideline in Myanmar to compare differing salaries to.

This discrepancy is highlighted by the lack of an official minimum wage in Myanmar. While the New Law of Minimum Wages was announced in March 2013, these were only guidelines for determining the minimum wage, but have failed to include specific amounts²⁷. Despite the lack of a general minimum wage in Myanmar, certain standards have been set forth by ASEAN Briefing²⁸, calling for public employees to be paid a minimum of MMK 50,000 (±US\$ 50) per month and day labourers to be compensated with at least MMK 2,000 (±US\$ 2) per day of labour.

According to the interviews, salaries differ across the board and depend on the type of employment and work place. One organization reported that the lowest salary for a sex workers working in KTV bars was MMK 5,000 (±US\$ 5) and the highest was MMK 10,000 (±US\$ 10) per month. The larger KTV bars pay up to MMK 20,000 (±US\$ 20) per month. However, some women have to return a part of their small salary to their bosses, particularly those who are indebted to their bosses. In the majority of these cases, the FSW are not aware of the amount that they owe or what the payback scheme is. They do not know how long it will take to pay their debt back and are thus entangled in a vicious circle of dependency that is difficult to escape.

²⁶ Bangkok Red Eye. 2014. *Where to find Prostitutes in Bangkok*.

²⁷ Bu & Naing. 2013. *Highlights of Myanmar's New Law on Minimum Wages*.

²⁸ ASEAN Briefing. 2013. *Minimum Wage Levels Across ASEAN*.

For street-based FSW who work for themselves the average amount earned per sexual act is around MMK 20-30,000 (\pm US\$ 20-30) according to one organization. Their monthly salary thus depends on the number of clients they have and how often they work. However, these figures differ depending on the individual spoken to, and as with the minimum wage of the country, the accurate earning potential can therefore not be determined. The extent to which FSWs are able to earn more than alternative employment is unclear.

4.3 Escape Attempts

In the interviews it emerged that women trafficked into sex work are done so through force and duress, thereby becoming sexual slaves. With no opportunity of leaving until their debt is paid back (an amount they often are not privy to and thus are not aware of how long it will take to work off), their only option is escape. However, this is in most part very dangerous, if not impossible.

The majority of women are unable to escape and many do not attempt this due to the high amount of debt they are in and the fact that their 'provider' knows the details of their families and threatens to disclose the truth of her earnings to them. Those that do escape and are caught again have to pay their boss the amount stipulated in their contract, thereby further indebting them. This amount varies, but is included in the contract in the eventuality of an attempt at escape. One interview revealed that the degree of chance of escape depends on the location of where the women work, with brothels being the most difficult to escape from, as they are constantly watched.

4.4 Laws Against Sex Workers

4.4.1 Suppression of Prostitution Act of 1949

In Myanmar the Suppression of Prostitution Act of 1949 stipulates that the act of soliciting or seducing in public is illegal, with offenders facing one to three years of imprisonment. Should the offender be a woman, her imprisonment will take place in a

prescribed centre²⁹. The punishment is aimed solely at the sex workers and clients are not punished under the law, leading one interviewee to call for the amendment of this Act to include those buying sex from sex workers.

The prescribed centre that FSW are sent to after being arrested are termed “Resettle Camps”. While they are not called prisons, some respondents stated that it is very similar to a prison. FSW are brought there for one year and are taught to sew, in order to obtain a ‘normal’ or ‘respectable’ job once they are released. This is not without problems. Often the women do not know how to find alternative employment, they may not have the necessary start-up capital for a new venture (cost of purchasing a sewing machine) or their new job does not pay well, leading them to return to sex work. Moreover, in many cases pimps are waiting outside for the women when they are released and lure them back into sex work. Some organizations have someone waiting outside of the resettle camps, and will help the women once they come out – but only if the organization has the capacity to do so.

An additional problem to FSW being arrested is the high cost of hiring a lawyer for when they go to court. This places them and their families into a large debt, which they then often pay off returning to sex work after they are released. In many instances their siblings also turn to sex work to help pay off this debt, thereby further increasing the number of sex workers in the country.

4.4.2 Barriers to Health Treatment

Government figures estimate that there are approximately 60,000 sex workers in Myanmar, of which 9.4% are HIV positive in comparison to the 0.5% among the general population, making them an at risk population. There is evidence, however, that the HIV/AIDS prevalence is decreasing amongst this vulnerable population. The prevalence of HIV/AIDS in Myanmar stood at 18.4% in 2007³⁰, which has dramatically been reduced to 9.4% amongst FSW according to the HIV Sentinel Sero-surveillance

²⁹ Human Trafficking. 2006. *Government Laws: Suppression of Prostitution Act*

³⁰ HIV and AIDS Data Hub for Asia-Pacific. 2010. *Sex Work and HIV: Myanmar*.

survey of 2011³¹. This has been achieved through sex worker-run programmes that use empowerment-based models as opposed to coercive testing models that are being used in Thailand and Cambodia³². This finding may be attributed to the organizations detailed in the CSO analysis of this report. As one of the organizations interviewed that has the strongest outreach team in Myanmar, they are perceived as a key contributor towards the stark decrease in HIV prevalence in their target locations. However, the fear of prosecution is a major barrier for sex workers to seek health services. Sex workers do not want to get tested for fear of the consequences thereof, particularly the real threat of arrest.

4.4.3 Condoms

This vulnerability and threat is extended to the possession of condoms, as the police are known to interpret condoms as circumstantial evidence of prostitution. While there is no law that is able to enforce this legally, a large portion of police have adopted using the possession of condoms as evidence that a female is a sex worker, but are prosecuting them under a different law. One interviewee mentioned the right of police to prosecute anyone considered to be loitering with intent to solicit, as well as loitering after dark. Thus, the police use the discovery of condoms in a female's purse as evidence that she is a FSW, and then often charge her under an enforceable and prosecutable law. This inhibits FSW to carry condoms for fear of discovery and prosecution, thereby creating an additional barrier to her seeking health services.

With this in mind, one organization developed the Comprehensive Condom Programme (CCP) in 2012 in which they work directly with police members and their spouses to dispel the notions that condoms are only carried by FSW. Holding regular workshops, their outreach workers educate the police and their spouses on the uses of condoms – from disease prevention to contraception, or what is called birth spacing. This education has led policemen and their wives who have been targeted by these workshops, to not

³¹ National AIDS Programme. 2012. *Results of HIV Sentinel Sero-Surveillance 2011 Myanmar*.

³² Tolsen. 2013. *Myanmar's 'Big Sister' Leads in HIV Fight*.

only use condoms themselves, but also for the police not to judge the discovery of condoms in a female's possession too harshly and immediately label and assume that she is a sex worker. These workshops have resulted in the targeted policemen not to use condoms as circumstantial evidence in arresting FSW.

With one organization focusing largely on the police population in educating them on the legal nature of carrying condoms, another organization works in villages and cities around the country informing FSW of their rights to carry condoms and the illegal aspect of being arrested for this. With this knowledge FSW are able to stand up for themselves should police attempt to arrest them for possession of condoms, thereby avoiding arrest in many situations. Since then the systematic use of condoms as proof of sex work has decreased significantly in recent years, reported one interviewee. While there remains some anecdotal evidence of harassment occurring against sex workers carrying condoms, this is largely done to further an investigation or in an attempt to receive bribes – either monetary or sexual in nature.

4.5 Abuse, Discrimination and Stigma

All the organizations and individuals interviewed reported a perceived reduction in discrimination and stigma in recent years. This reduction can be attributed to the expansion of educational programmes and workshops undertaken by a variety of stakeholders, not least of which are those interviewed for this report.

It has, however, certainly not been eradicated and is still ongoing. Many FSW face a daily battle against harsh opinions due to their profession and abuse by police is a widespread occurrence in terms of sexual torture, interrogation and sexual favours or bribes. Due to the illegal nature of their work, FSW have no form of protection and are most often unable to bring the perpetrators of abuse to justice.

The continuation of current projects aimed at addressing and reducing abuse, discrimination and stigma are vital. Their effectiveness in raising education standards has already been proven, as mentioned by all organizations interviewed.

4.6 Domestic or International Phenomenon?

All interviewees agreed that the current clientele base in Myanmar is mainly local, and that the Myanmar customers sustain the sex industry in Myanmar. With only very few reporting foreigners as clients, the impression created was that the sex work industry in Myanmar is currently largely a *domestic* phenomenon. Some of the few foreign clients tend to be expatriates living in Yangon and are not considered to be tourists as such.

In a culture where couples date for an average of seven years before marriage, in addition to not having sex before marriage, many local men search for sex elsewhere. Former sex workers interviewed reported that men have ‘needs’ that need to be fulfilled, thereby justifying their behaviour. The consideration of women’s needs was ignored and not fully understood when questioned by the interviewer. Women’s sexuality is overlooked due to the cultural taboo associated with sex and speaking about it in Myanmar. It is thus uncommon for women to seek out sex workers.

In border areas there are more foreigners who are the customers. Some FSW working in border areas reported that most foreigners (largely from neighbouring countries) use condoms. Some FSW mentioned that they do not have to ask for condoms to be used as the clients do so themselves, and expect this right from the start. This is in contrast to local clients who do not use condoms, possibly due to the lack of education on this topic. Some organizations therefore stress the importance of educating local clients on the importance of using condoms.

With the majority of clients being local and only few reported foreigners (some of who are tourists) that are seeking out sex workers, this begs the question if Myanmar is or will be a sex tourism destination of the likes of Thailand and Cambodia.

5. Sex Tourism in Myanmar

Officially, Myanmar authorities want to keep sex off the list of tourist attractions. With the highest prevalence of HIV in neighbouring Thailand, and Cambodia’s thriving child sex industry, their concerns are warranted. Given Myanmar’s history of trafficking girls

across borders and countries, the fears of some of the CSOs interviewed are not unfounded. So while sex tourism in the country has been largely kept at bay due to the relatively few tourists it has received in the past, this may be changing quickly with the opening of more border crossings and the predicted continued rise in tourist arrivals^{33 34}

35

The presence of sex tourism is a highly contested issue, with a split opinion amongst the interviewees as to its current existence or its possible future existence. This is in part due to the lack of a general conceptualization of what constitutes ‘sex tourism’, as discussed in the introduction of this report, as well as the novelty of this concept in itself. Myanmar has not had to deal much with sex tourism before and a united and common understanding of its impacts does not exist.

The reform process and the opening of the borders has seen a steady increase in tourism over the past three years. With this increase the possibility of a rise in sex tourism is inevitable. Some interviewees expressed the fear of Myanmar following Thailand’s footsteps, and the societal and health challenges that come with it.

One of the interviewees denied the presence of sex tourism in Myanmar. It was his understanding that ‘sex tourism’ is the presence of tourists for the sole purpose of engaging in sexual activities, and he expressed disagreement that the practice currently exists in Myanmar. While agreeing that there are some tourists who visit sex workers once they are in the country, this did not fall into his understanding and definition of sex tourism, thereby leading to his conclusion that the phenomenon is not a problem.

An increase in sex workers is expected, according to another interviewee, but there is a slight concern that sex tourism will become an issue in the future with the borders having been opened. However, this largely depends on the government and law

³³ Bergman. 2013. *Can Burma Avoid the Curse of Sex Tourism?*

³⁴ Paquette. 2012. *Beaches, Temples and Sex – Will Burmese Tourism Follow the Thai Model?*

³⁵ Ministry of Hotel and Tourism. 2013. *Myanmar Tourism Master Plan 2013-2020*

enforcement officials. With Thailand's problem partly being the lack of law enforcement and turning a blind eye to the current situation, this interviewee felt that control and education are key to preventing the industry from escalating into its neighbouring country's current state. In addition to this it was argued that providing employment, increasing the minimum wage and increasing education levels on part of the government can contribute towards preventing girls and women from turning to sex work, thereby lessening the chance of sex tourism from increasing.

Another organization believed that sex tourism will increase in the years to come. This organization's policy is not asking too many questions, thereby being unable to respond to questions regarding the current sex tourism status in the country. More specifically, another interviewee argued that foreign tourists (Asian or Western in this case) look for cheap, young women, and like the 'young look' of Myanmar girls. With more tourists visiting the country, this puts them at risk for an increase in sex tourism. Additionally, it was stressed that gay sex tourism is also on the rise. Young Myanmar men believe that Westerners are less homophobic than locals, and therefore look to them for a 'sugar daddy' or for just one night.

Some organizations embraced the dual nature of sex tourism, by understanding it as tourists coming into the country for the sole purpose of engaging in sexual activities, as well as tourists deciding to engage in those activities once they are already present in the country. With this in mind, one respondent firmly believes that sex tourism will increase due to the knock-on effect – as tourism increases so will this trade. The participant distinguished between different types of sex workers – those for foreigners and those for locals. The former are able to speak English, whereas the latter cannot. In agreement with another interviewee, this participant also believed the government should make more jobs available and increase the minimum salary in the country, to ensure the prevention of sex tourism rapidly increasing in the coming years.

With one interviewee firmly including expat residents into the category of 'locals', in addition to the majority of clients being local, the existence of sex tourism in Myanmar

was disputed. So without evidence showing a significant increase, no concrete proof has been found that the country is heading towards a Thailand-like situation - yet.

While this evidence currently does not exist, and all participating parties have agreed upon the lack of current sex tourism in Myanmar, some interviewees believed that the future possibility of a sharp rise is also unlikely. With the relevant authorities now deeply concerned about the country's image, this CSO believed they would not allow the sex work industry to become a tourist attraction. The conservative nature of the country and its belief that selling sex is immoral, would not be a deliberate economic choice on part of the authorities to promote tourism in the country. For these reasons, the CSOs strongly believe that Myanmar is not heading towards a situation like in neighbouring countries. While it was argued that the increase in tourists would lead towards an increase in sex work, it was not believed that it would develop into a separate autonomous industry as it is in Thailand.

With these conflicting views and opinions, it is difficult to surmise the future of sex tourism in Myanmar as perceived by a sample of civil society actors. While it is agreed upon that sex tourism is currently not a problem, foreseeing its future progression is impossible and can only lead towards speculation. Despite this unknown element, Myanmar is in the fortunate position in that it has not developed into a full-blown industry as of yet. The possibility of preventing an increase or preparing itself for the possibility of such an increase gives Myanmar the upper hand, as the country would be one step ahead of the problem.

For prevention mechanisms to take shape, boundaries have to be established. Questions such as: "when does sex tourism become a problem?", "at what stage is it causing more damage versus the normal progression of the sex work industry?", and "who decides when it is a problem?", need to be addressed and determined in order to effectively establish a realistic plan of action to tackle the problem once it arises, should it do so.

6. Conclusion

This report has provided baseline data to understand the current sex tourism phenomenon taking place in Myanmar. The lack of previous research on this issue has made it difficult to track the process and progress of both sex work and sex tourism industries, which in the past led to uninformed assumption-making and drawing hearsay-based conclusions. By having data against which to compare the potentially growing trend of both sex work and sex tourism within the country, more effective programmes can be implemented to address this social issue. Without this information and further ongoing research, it will be difficult to determine if it ever will be a problem.

Despite slightly differing opinions amongst interviewees, it is generally agreed upon that poverty and unemployment are the main driving forces leading girls and women to turn to sex work and that the number of sex workers are increasing annually. This trend needs to be closely monitored countrywide, to ensure that an exponential increase is prevented. It is common and natural for sex work and sex tourism to increase over time, particularly if more tourists enter a country, which is true for any destination in the world. This increase, however, should be monitored to ensure that sex tourism will not become the primary purpose of travel and visitation.

The data shows that many organizations are particularly focused on response tactics pertaining to HIV. As critical as this is, there is a perceived lack of projects that focus on other aspects, such as skills training or addressing economic aspects. Moreover, it is noticeable that there is a lack of organizations addressing *prevention*, as most focus on *responding* to the issue. While these response programmes are necessary and vital, it is also important to be one step ahead before the potentially devastating effects on a society of a burgeoning sex tourism industry take shape. Therefore, while sex tourism may currently not 'exist' according to some interviewees, or be relatively lower than expected, according to other participants it is important not to ignore it now or only deal with it once it becomes a problem. Strategies of prevention and preparedness have to be created to ensure that the increase is on par with the average increase evident in

‘normal’ circumstances. In other words, as tourism increases, so does crime and prostitution. It is critical to create prevention strategies to ensure that these knock-on effects of an increase in tourism do not surpass the average and ‘expected’ increase in prostitution, as is noted in Myanmar’s neighbouring countries. Prevention mechanisms should increase beyond this, to include policies and plans in place. As with many social phenomena, it is important to address the underlying causes and processes for entering sex work in order to ensure the effective prevention thereof. Given the results of this report, there is still time to plan for *prevention* in Myanmar.

7. Recommendations

1. Future research

- Additional research would be very useful across more locations in Myanmar, including border towns and Mandalay due to the high number of sex workers in these regions, as well as rural villages to determine the trafficking situation there – both of underage girls and women.
- More detailed information regarding the overarching reasons for entering sex work could be explored and researched to better ascertain the course of action that needs to be taken by governmental departments and organizations to improve the prevention and protection of women and girls entering sex work and the prosecution of those responsible.
- A greater variety of stakeholders need to be incorporated into ongoing discussions, which could be managed by future DMOs (destination management organizations).
- Awareness raising for NGOs to:
 - Build awareness among the tourism sector, government and tourists.
 - Encourage the tourism industry to engage in good ethical practices.
 - Mobilize the government to take legal measures and strengthen its legislation against the sexual abuse and trafficking of women and children in tourism, along with improving law enforcement for their protection.
- Encourage the cooperation between tourist generating and receiving countries to determine the jurisdiction and punishment of those involved in illegal practices.

- Advocate for the tourism image and marketing campaigns to be designed accordingly (not promoting the KTV and bar girl scene for example).

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