

Virgin trade evades law

Claire Knox

SEVENTEEN-YEAR-OLD Chann, not her real name, was first approached by a female sex broker hovering by the gates of the Kandal province garment factory she had spent the past few years working at.

Tangled in a web of poverty and physical toil, the promise of US\$2,000 in exchange for her virginity was an alluring one.

Chann agreed to sell herself, and within days was swiftly whisked away

to the capital, and sold to a Chinese customer waiting in a hotel room.

However, the prospect of the broker or the Chinese customer ever seeing the inside of a prison for their crimes is slim.

According to anti-exploitation groups, the virgin trade in Cambodia is rampant and has been thrust underground, no longer hiding behind the crimson glow of Tuol Kork brothels and the cacophony of karaoke bars – making investigation of the crime almost impossible.

Rather, men are now purchasing sex

with virgins through “brokers”, who they call to arrange young girls delivered to discreet locations.

“There are loads and loads of brokers out there – you go to any Khmer beer garden, ask for a virgin, and if you are Khmer, I guarantee 90 per cent would be able to arrange it for you,” Eric Meldrum, operations director for anti-human trafficking and exploitation group SISHA, said.

“This is an overwhelming, massive problem – Khmer men having sex with under-age girls – it’s been pushed underground now and po-

lice are unable to use a lot of covert tactics that would really assist them to find and prosecute people.”

Although police crack drug syndicates through undercover investigations, the legal framework surrounding trafficking and exploitation means it is illegal for police to do the same for sex crimes, Meldrum said.

“Sex trafficking is an invisible crime – it’s gone underground. You have to use covert tactics. One of your main covert tactics is going undercover ... but you can’t do that with human trafficking; its never been written

into the law and it is illegal – so you’re taking away one of the main ways of getting evidence against brokerage and ... it’s the single biggest hurdle in combating this,” he said.

The US State Department’s *2012 Trafficking in Persons Report* stressed the sale of virgins continues to plague Cambodia, with Khmer men forming the largest source of demand for child prostitution, and that the government did not comply with the minimum standards for eliminating trafficking.

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The Svay Pak brothel area outside Phnom Penh, where children are exploited in the sex trade, continues to operate despite numerous attempts by police to close it down, it said.

A senior Phnom Penh police officer who spoke to the *Post* on condition of anonymity said the police force's lack of ability to investigate undercover and government corruption was incredibly frustrating.

"This is a big problem. Even if we could investigate more I believe that we would only catch the broker, but how do we get the person at the top? They're too protected, very powerful. These are intricate networks - there are lots of people involved. In Cambodia, the chiefs of police will never crack down on the real offenders; they think about the politics more."

He said he had been approached by brokers, while in uniform, to purchase sex with a virgin. Price was determined by beauty and age, with up to \$5,000 paid for a 13-year-old escorted to a hotel room, he said.

"No Khmer men have been convicted of charges of buying virgins - 0.0 per cent," he said.

But Chou Bun Eng, secretary of state at the Ministry of Interior, said that while she could not provide figures on the number of virgins trafficked, combating the virgin sex trade was a priority of the government's.

When asked about the police

force's power to investigate the crimes, she said it was a "technical issue", but declined to elaborate for fear of tipping off sex criminals.

In Cambodian and other Asian cultures, many men hold the superstitious belief that sex with a virgin will restore youth, cure illnesses such as HIV and harvest a longer life.

"This Asian traditional thinking about magical powers is a heavy and often unchecked engine for the sexual abuse of young girls," president of human rights group Licadho, Dr Pung Chhiv Kek, said.

"What is needed is education, harmonious development and, above all, political will to fight against all the hidden engines of the abuses, including the cultural ones and the implication of powerful people," she said.

The Cambodian Center for the Protection of Children's Rights house 100 trafficked and sexually exploited women and children in rehabilitation shelters in Phnom Penh and Svay Rieng.

Executive director Nget Thy said there had been a shift in sex crime patterns.

"They work underground and in a different way to what they did before, often they are rich, powerful customers ... also it's difficult to get information from the young girls; often they are ashamed, some of them are there willingly," he said.

"Sometimes the brothel owners would take the girls away before we could reach them." ■