

Submission to the Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality.

By

Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, Ireland.

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Introduction.

1. The Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd is more widely known as Good Shepherd Sisters. We are an International Catholic Congregation of Women Religious, numbering almost 4,000 members in over 70 countries worldwide.
2. Since 1996 Good Shepherd Sisters have been affiliated with the United Nations as a Nongovernmental Organization (NGO) in consultative status with ECOSOC. Good Shepherd Sisters' position on prostitution echoes the UN 1949 Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others "that prostitution is incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person, and endangers the welfare of the individual, the family and the community..."
3. In Ireland we are involved in a range of services, working in particular with women and children. Ruhama, which was established in 1989 was founded as a joint initiative of Good Shepherd Sisters and Our Lady of Charity Sisters, both of which had a long history of involvement with marginalised women, including those involved in prostitution. Ruhama is a Dublin-based NGO which works on a national level with women affected by prostitution and other forms of commercial sexual exploitation. Ruhama will make a separate submission.
4. The purpose of this submission is to demonstrate that as well as our national experience through the work of Ruhama our international experience shows that:
 - a) The prostitution of women and girls is a chronic form of gender violence that has been structurally embedded in societies over the centuries.
 - b) Prostitution is, by its nature, exploitative and is never part of a global decent work agenda.
 - c) The system of prostitution of women and girls is based in socio/cultural perceptions and attitudes about the relationships between men and women.
 - d) It is rooted in economic systems, now structured in a globalized economy that has seen rapid growth of women in extreme poverty; it is supported by political structures and systems that devalue and exclude women and do not evaluate gender outcomes. (GS NGO statement to Commission on the Status of Women of the UN, 2005).

- e) The root causes of prostitution are tied to poverty, patriarchy, male privilege, extreme wealth, racist attitudes, militarization, and the demand by men for women to be available for sexual purchase.

International evidence-based research: Thailand.

5. To support our view, we attach the most recent research undertaken by a Good Shepherd Sister from Ireland, as part fulfilment of a 2009 MA degree in Development Studies in Kimmage Development Studies Centre, Dublin.
6. The thesis set out to investigate the reasons why some Thai women engage in tourism-related prostitution. The women who participated in this piece of research were accessed through a women's support centre called the Fountain of Life Centre in Pattaya, Thailand. This is a project of Good Shepherd Sisters.
7. The organisation aims to provide alternative opportunities for women involved in prostitution or who are otherwise vulnerable to exploitation e.g. unemployed women living in Pattaya (Fountain of Life 2008). The centre seeks to offer a place where friendship, education, counselling and support are provided in a safe and caring environment. Activities taking place in the centre include literacy classes, Thai as a foreign language, English and German classes, vocational training, cultural events and seminars on issues such as Human Rights, HIV, Human Trafficking etc. Local staff and international volunteers run the day-to-day activities. Fifty percent of the staff are former students of the centre. The centre facilitated access to the women who participated in the research and the interviews were generally conducted on site.
8. While some of the conclusions of the research are specific to the socio-economic culture of the country, there are clear generic issues that relate to the Irish situation. For example, societal attitudes towards prostitution, poverty, violence and gender. These issues have been highlighted, in *the 2005 The Next Step Initiative Research Project* (e.g. Chapter 4, 5 and 7) undertaken by Ruhama and most recently the *2011 Ruhama Annual Report* (e.g. p19 and p20).
9. Poverty, gender, obligations towards parents, sexuality, gender-based violence and identity were some of the key findings for the reasons why women engaged in prostitution in Thailand. While the full thesis has been sent with this submission as an attachment, some key points from the research include:
 - i. The women interviewed described the conditions of poverty in which most grew up and continued to experience for much of their adult lives.

- ii. However, economics is not the only reason. Most women had negative experiences in their relationships with Thai men from their fathers to their intimate partners. Many had been married to a Thai man and had children, only to be disappointed by their husband's infidelity, abuse and their failure to provide for their children. The breakdown of these relationships left women alone, with little means of earning enough income to support themselves and their children.
- iii. The effects of women's experiences of gender based violence led them to be more likely to engage in risky behaviour. The link between experiences of child sexual abuse and risky sexual behaviour, including prostitution is well documented (Alexander 1998, The Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault 1995, McGee et al 2002, Lynderson 2007 etc.). Women's involvement in prostitution is generally the culmination of a series of abusive experiences (Pearse 2002) and such has proved to be the case for the women in this research. All of the women interviewed had experienced gender based violence in her family home, in intimate relationships or been raped by someone outside the family.
- iv. While Thailand has made significant progress on many development issues, inequality in society is a major problem. The difference in income levels between rural and urban areas, the inequality that exists between men and women, demonstrated for example by the prevalence of gender based violence, and the disparity in lifestyle between tourists and the majority of the local Thai population.

Our recommendations for the review of Irish legislation.

- 10. From our experience and work with women affected by prostitution we recommend the partial criminalisation legislative approach as in Sweden where those who buy or facilitate the buying of sexual services are criminalised is the most socially just way to proceed.
- 11. That under such legislation those found guilty of such crimes of violence against persons receive an appropriate sentence that reflects the seriousness of the offence and unambiguously sends a message that all violence against persons will not be tolerated in Irish Society.

References.

Ruhama. Supporting Women Affected by Prostitution. Annual Report 2011. <http://www.ruhama.ie/easyedit/files/annualreport11.pdf>

Good Shepherd Position Papers—Trafficking/Migration/Economic Justice/Prostitution/Girl-child/Ecology. <http://www.buonpastoreint.org/jp-en>

“The Search for a Farang”. Gender Based Violence and Women’s Involvement in Tourism-Related Prostitution in Pattaya, Thailand. A thesis submitted to the Kimmage Development Studies Centre, Dublin, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MA in Development Studies. Kimmage Development Studies Centre 2009 by Margaret Lynch. (attachment).

The Next Step Initiative Research Project undertaken by Ruhama and funded by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform under the Equality for Women Measure. The Next Step Initiative Report is the result of that research and was published in 2005. <http://www.ruhama.ie/page.php?intPageID=206>