**Introduction**

Sexual crimes against children in South East Asia is a major issue that threatens the livelihood, safety and wellbeing of millions of children. This problem has always been prominent in the region, but as tourism and media interaction grows, so too do the numbers of children impacted by this devastating industry. Over two million children a year are affected by child prostitution and sex trafficking, whose ages range from toddlers to teenagers. The industry is worth over twenty billion dollars.

Countries such as Cambodia, Philippines, Thailand, and Laos all have major child sex trades and are making efforts to end the cruel industry. Tourism is becoming increasingly responsible for supporting this industry as it draws foreigners who seek child prostitutes. In addition, the rapid growth in internet usage has also contributed dramatically to the publication and awareness of this issue, in both good and bad ways. There have been significant rises in websites that provide more opportunities for children to be placed in situations where they can be sexually exploited. The dark web is also responsible for presenting a dangerous situation for young people. Victims of this industry can be put into the trade by their family members, choice, or force from outside sources. Governments must be held accountable by themselves and must uphold the laws and standards they set for themselves.

**Definition of Key Terms**

**Sex Tourism**

It is known that tourism draws attention to countries and certain activities that they advertise. Unfortunately, the sexual exploitation of children (SEC) is a growing industry that
attracts foreign travelers to take advantage of the large amount of children exploited by prostitution. There are establishments designed to attract foreigners, such as bars, karaoke venues, and brothels. Specific travelers are aware of the accessibility of sexually exploiting children. The legislation in South East Asia regarding this issue is not as strong as it would be in more developed regions. An example of a comprehensive strategy would be “The Arab Initiative to Build National Capacities to Combat Human Trafficking in the Arab Countries”. Key achievements of this strategy would be incorporating criminal justice practitioners who can manage cases of human trafficking internationally, raising awareness on the topic through media, education, and advertisements. Also, establishing an Arab Regional Partnership to fight the expansion of human trafficking. More countries should be encouraged to take note of the Arab Region’s productive action towards this issue.

**Media**

In recent times, it is apparent how instrumental media is in advertising the sexual exploitation of children. It has allowed the industry to be exposed and has emphasised the importance of ending it, although it has created a more global platform to make sexual exploitation increasingly available. Online grooming is also common, which is when a user builds a sexual relationship with a child through online communication. According to a study made by UNICEF, “Child Online Safety”, it claims that the absence of research dedicated to cyber security is dramatically responsible for children being exposed to an online grooming situation. In Indonesia, roughly 60% of children have access to internet on mobile devices, and since there is an insufficient cyber security system, it makes these children more available to being presented with online sexual situations. Only four out of the ten countries part of the ASEAN have established grooming laws, these include, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Brunei. The ASEAN claims that once all ten countries criminalise grooming, the effects of this industry can begin to decrease. Due to the lack of evidence and strategies focused on child online grooming, there is an absence of support in criminalising this issue. Online child pornography is largely responsible for the rise of child trafficking in the Southeast Asian region. The industry generates $3 - $20 billion in profit annually. Cambodia and Thailand are known to be popular distributors of child pornographic content.

**Gender Inequality**

Human rights are often overlooked when it comes to the sexual exploitation of children, but for women and girls it is even more discredited. In South East Asia, girls are of lower social status than boys, which results in them being withheld from certain opportunities and rights.
Young girls are more vulnerable to violence and being exploited in the industry. In Thailand, some young girls feel a responsibility to financially provide for their families; this results in many joining prostitution in order to receive money. Being married so young often prohibits the girls from attending school, as they are expected to start a family.

**Child Marriage**

Child marriage is also a form of the sexual exploitation of children. Children can be forced into marriages and made to engage in sexual intercourse with an adult. Families sell their daughters into these marriages in order to receive the dowry. Often times, temporary marriages ensue, but when the young girl loses her virginity, she might be abandoned by her spouse and unable to survive without entering the commercial sex trade. In Indonesia, these types of marriages are increasing, with men from Saudi Arabia marrying them. Virginity is mostly viewed as valuable in the industry and is held at a higher standard. Young women’s virginity is often sold for high prices. There are only six countries that do not present a specific age for marriage and it is allowed in at least 117 countries around the world. Child marriage is detrimental to young women’s health as they are more susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases, domestic abuse, and often leave school early. The effects of child marriage are obviously harmful to the individuals who are situated in them.

**Background Information**

**Causes**

Child prostitution and marriage are not new practices in Southeast Asia; they have been prominent throughout history as cultural influences. South Asia is responsible for nearly half of all child marriages globally. There are various reasons why child marriage has operated for so long, including economic circumstances, social expectations and more. In 2010, it was reported that over 46% of young women in the ages of 20-24 were married before the age of 18. It has been estimated that from the time of 2010-2030, over 130 million young girls will be married in the South Asian region. Society has only developed a greater awareness and sensitivity surrounding these topics in recent times, however. Governments in South Asia do not obey their responsibility to eliminate child marriages, so they continue to occur due to the lack of action from countries. More people have taken action on the fact that the industry is exploitation and violates human rights. An example of this is UNICEF’s “South Asia Framework to End Child
Marriage”. The aim of this strategy is to combat child marriage in five steps, which include, increasing resources for young children either married or at risk of, especially girls, improving legal actions to protect adolescent children’s rights, tracking progress and programming, strengthening systems that support the needs of young children at risk, and altering the social focus on young boys and girls. Although the rates of child marriage are declining in South Asia, the numbers are still high. If the decrease of child marriages continue at the rate they are, by 2030, there will be a 20% decline in women being married before the age of 18.

**Poverty**

Poverty is the leading cause responsible for child prostitution. Impoverished children are more susceptible to being part of the child sex industry because they and or their families are in need of money. A study made by UNICEF states that over 30 million of the 93 million children that populate East Asia suffer from poverty. There is a large power imbalance as the child usually does not have a choice whether to join prostitution or not. Family members often force their child to supply funds for the family, or the child feels obligated to provide. Children who do not have access to education have a higher risk of partaking in the industry. It is reported by the ASEAN Post, that there are over 40,000 prostitutes in Thailand under the age of 18.

**Orphans**

Orphaned children are placed in a dangerous situation when they attempt to seek work. Compared to other work, prostitution is the most accessible and the most profitable, meaning that an orphan that leaves the institution they lived in are ten times more likely to enter prostitution.
War and Conflict Zones

Certain countries in Southeast Asia including Indonesia, Thailand, and Myanmar have experienced violent conflict in recent times. These situations result in children being orphaned and more vulnerable to being sexually exploited. Young children have also been recruited by armed groups to work either as informants, and even to provide sexual favors to the service members. The Rohingya Crisis is an ongoing genocide occuring on the border of Myanmar and Bangledesh. According to a report made by the United Nations, as of 2018, the population of the Rohingya refugees in the Cox Bazar District is 55% children. It has been claimed that there is a large risk of younger children being sexually abused by those in the camps.

Refugees

Child refugees are placed in unsafe situations when they are without a home and or place to live. This makes the chance of being sexually exploited even higher due to the absence of security that a home and community provides. According to an article released by The Guardian, child refugees can be put in confined environments, such as cells and cages. They are most likely surrounded by many others, without sufficient resources of food and medical supplies. The children are frequently separated from their family members, and are placed in groups that range in ages, from babies to adults. These put the refugee children at risk of being sexually abused by opportunistic predators.

Child Trafficking

Southeast Asia has often been known as a prominent region for traffickking sexually exploited children. Irregular migration, lower employment rates and lack of education are contributing factors to the continuation of trafficking. A method used for trafficking these children is through fraud booking agents who promise actual jobs in the final destination, but turn out to be illegitimate. Children can also be enforced by their family to join exploitative labor but end up in the sex trade. These dangerous arrangements are made without heavy legal supervision; this allows them to occur so frequently. Government corruption such as bribery and theft lead to less resources dedicated to law enforcement.
Consequences

**Sexually Transmitted Diseases**

The epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases is prevalent around the world. Child prostitutes have a higher likelihood of being exposed to infections due to lack of protection during intercourse and the absence of medical support for impoverished children. In Thailand, 28,000 cases of HIV/AIDS appear every year, with 50-60% of those affected being women under the age of 24. Pregnant girls under the age of fifteen are five to seven times more likely to die during childbirth. The spread of sexually transmitted diseases is inevitable in these circumstances, especially when there is no support regarding treatment.

**Psychological and Physical Impacts**

The psychological impacts that these exploited children are left with are very detrimental. Sexually abused children have been seen to have mental symptoms including depression, sexual and personality orientation confusion, hatred towards adults, insomnia, and anger issues. As well as mental repercussions, there can be multiple physical ones. Children are presented with conditions such as the after effects of torture, unwanted pregnancy, vaginal tearing, and sexually transmitted infections. These symptoms are often never treated due to the lack of social support, poor medical treatment, and the stigma surrounding these problems.

**Social Outcomes**

Within most communities, there is a stigma attached to the sexual exploitation of children and those who are involved. Children who were unfortunate enough to join the industry are thus ostracized by family members, friends and their community. The children are under the control of pimps, who organize and take a percentage of their income. Often, these pimps are former child prostitutes, which feeds the self-perpetuating malaise. Due to these circumstances, sexually exploited children are not granted their freedom or independence because there is no foundational system to provide them security.
Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Singapore

Singapore is a country that has been instrumental in addressing the issue of sexually exploited children within the country. Certain legislative bills have been set to protect children from being exploited. These acts include “The Children and Young Persons Act” (2001), which provides security to children who require protection and rehabilitation from dire industries, such as sex trafficking.

Indonesia

Indonesia has a growing sex trafficking industry, yet the laws put in place to protect those affected, are often criticized for being lax and unimpactful. Laws such as the Penal Code, and The Child Protection Act (2014) fail to meet international standards and are therefore not effective in protecting sexually exploited children. According to 2019 Trafficking in Persons Report: Indonesia, the country’s 2007 anti-trafficking law was not effective with international law.

UNICEF

UNICEF has been a significant organization in taking the steps towards ending this exploitative and inhumane industry. Their efforts have included teaming up with UNFPA to create a Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage, and Trafficking in Persons Protocol. They also actively work with NGO’s and governments to instill policies to end child labor and exploitation.

Timeline of Events

1857
Medical Legal Studies of Sexual Assault (Etude Médico-Légale sur les Attentats aux Mœurs), by Augustus Ambroise Tardieu. The first study conducted on producing laws that prohibit child sex abuse.

1949

1992
Relevant UN Treaties and Events:

There have been resolutions made in attempt to hinder the effects of sexual crime around the world. As mentioned below, the ASEAN Convention Against in Persons, Especially Women and Children is a framework that aims to prevent the trafficking of persons in Southeast Asia. Although, there is yet to be a specific treaty that is directed towards preventing sexual crimes against children in Southeast Asia.

- Convention Rights of the Child, 2 September 1990
- Palermo Protocols
- ASEAN Convention Against in Persons, Especially Women and Children, 8 March 2017

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

The United Nations and individual countries have implemented several national plans of action (NPA) to contend with this issue. The Philippines is currently one of the only countries in Southeast Asia to have a national plan of action against the sexual exploitation of children. The “Framework for Action on Sexual Abuse and Commercial Exploitation of Children” is integrated into the country’s National Strategic Framework for Plan Development for Children covering 2000-2025. Although other countries have attempted to present NPA’S, there are many obstacles which prevent them from being impactful. These include lack of political will and financial ability, absence of technology and human resources. Due to a lack of evidence on its successes and failures, this national plan of action has not shown to be as impactful as it intends. There have been numerous instances of the perpetrators of child sex crimes being prosecuted, but it is difficult to link this proof back to the national plan of action. Local and international bodies are also involved and have taken responsibility in combating this heinous crime, this illustrates how complicated it is to decipher a consistent strategy.

The Palermo Protocol is an international protocol that is supplemental to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. It is meant to mitigate human trafficking in three divided sectors. These are the act of recruitment and transfer of persons, the means for the trafficking, this could be abduction and coercion, and the purpose, which can be prostitution, forced slavery and removal of organs. The protocol presents the steps that must be taken in order to achieve the protection of those trafficked which includes strengthening border
controls to detect traffickers, and enforcing legislation that prohibits commercial carriers
doubling as traffickers. The protocol has a productive plan of action, and has made a significant impact in protecting the rights of humans who have been trafficked, or are at risk of being so. However, in a Human Rights Brief released by American University Washington College of Law, it claims that the high price of this protocol has restricted the effectiveness of this framework. Particularly, in developing countries where funding is limited. There is also a lack of protection for victims of sex trafficking when it comes to actions they were forced to perform. This often results in victims not coming forward on crimes committed against them, because they are aware that they could be detained as law requires their testimonies to provide substantial evidence. Another fault in this plan is the inadequacy of support provided to the victims after court has been settled, this leaves them in a vulnerable position as they are not integrated into a new situation.

Possible Solutions

A major aspect of the continuous growth of sexual exploitation of children is the lack of research and resources put towards this issue. Not enough attention is being put by governments, Governments need to take stronger action when addressing the SEC. New laws and legislations should be implemented which makes the consequences of sexually exploiting children more dire and punishable. Various opportunities of funding for these agreements could be discussed between nations. An agreed allowance between countries could be negotiated to ensure the accountability and source of funds.

Online grooming services are very dangerous because certain systems on the internet can often be illegitimate provide false information. Websites and online businesses that offer jobs to young people in foreign countries must be heavily monitored in order to ensure that they are reliable and safe for users. Sexual exploiters often lure young people into the industry by disguising the opportunity as a job offer. These occurrences could be prevented if there was higher security regarding this area. Countries should place more emphasis on developing stronger codes and firewalls to prevent certain websites from being widespread to the population. Each country has their own specific security when it comes to technology, nevertheless, it is vital to create a system which protects those vulnerable to these types of circumstances.
More laws need to be ratified and signed by countries (list example). Governments must be held accountable by themselves and must uphold the laws and standards they set for themselves. There must be more of an emphasis on encouraging Annual summits to be held that connect the southeast asian countries to discuss solutions. These meetings between nations allows friendlier relationships to develop and create a more balanced union when it comes to solving this issue. With the support of fellow nations, agreements could be implemented on a much larger scale that can create a bigger impact. Larger Law enforcement and Human Resources should also be dedicated to this topic. These resources are vital to the development and productivity of agreements. It ensures that the goals will be followed through with and are done so with an equal and influential direction.

Bibliography


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