

Seek Justice, Encourage the Oppressed

*Jerram Barrs Interviews Patricia Green
on Forced Prostitution and Human Trafficking,
A Worldwide Problem*

For the past fourteen years, Patricia Green, Director of Rahab Ministries, has worked in Bangkok, Thailand, with women and children who have been sold into sexual slavery. Ms. Green and the other Rahab Ministries workers seek to bring these oppressed people out of prostitution, by the grace of God. Ms. Green recently visited the campus of Covenant Seminary to help students become more aware of the need to seek justice on behalf of these women. The following is an interview with Ms. Green that Professor Jerram Barrs led during her visit.

Patricia, it is a wonderful privilege to have you here with us today. Before I ask some questions about Rahab Ministries we are anxious to hear how the Lord brought you to a point where you became involved in the lives of these women.

I am a social worker and community psychologist by training. For many years I worked with women who are social outcasts in New Zealand.* I came to a time in my life where I was feeling a bit restless and heard of an opportunity to go with a group to Thailand. On this trip, God opened my eyes to what was happening with prostitution in Thailand which in some ways is the hub of sex tourism and human trafficking. Our group was staying in a cheap guesthouse in a backpacking area of Bangkok, and the staff there were young Thai people brought down from the northeast by the hotel manager. One of our team spoke Thai well, so we talked with these people. Then the pimps came, and I saw money change hands over the desk, and I saw these people taken away with their little boxes of belongings. Even though I knew that they were going to be abused and used, maybe for years, there was absolutely nothing I could do. I could not even say anything, because I could not speak the language.

Can you give some idea of the number of women and people in Thailand who are involved in prostitution?

The Thai government says there is about eight hundred thousand women involved in prostitution, with thirty thousand of them child prostitutes. Folk statistics put the number at more than two and a half million. Male prostitution is also on the rise, primarily because of the demand of foreign tourists. Within the last year a spa has opened just yards away from my house, the sort of spa where foreign men come for sex with young Thai men. The number of boys who have been involved in this is increasing too.

The foreign tourists you speak of, are they tourists or are they sent to Thailand by their companies on business, or a mixture of both?

They represent a mixture of people. Last year ten million visitors came into the country. A high percentage are businessmen. Of the tourists who come 70 percent are male.

The tourist authority of Thailand, along with other people who are working in this field, estimate that 60 percent of male visitors engage in sexual activity while in Thailand. There are sex tours coming from the United States and other countries, including pedophile tours. Some people just visit, and think, this is what to do in Thailand. This does not include the numbers from the American Navy who do not pass through immigration because they live on their ships.

So the numbers are on the rise?

Yes, and the frightening thing is that some tourist agencies are looking for new ways to encourage sex tourism. One American tour company advertises: "Your ticket includes a lady for the duration of the cruise," and your companion is in the cabin, prepared for you.

Your experience has primarily been in Thailand, but is this a problem all over southeast Asia?

It is an increasing problem worldwide in underdeveloped countries, where men and an increasing number of middle-aged women from affluent countries are coming, looking for new experiences. They want something more exotic, and women in Asian and African countries are seen as exotic.

Will you tell us about Rahab Ministries' work?

We begin with evangelism, going into the bars and building friendships, which we feel gives us the right to share the Gospel. I do not think we have the right to go into a bar and bombard people. We started in 1988, and toward the end of that year we began a once-a-week support group where we share a meal and read from the Bible. During that first year three women came to Christ and left prostitution, and we began a sponsorship program. One of the women studied hairdressing, and the other two became seamstresses. Upon the advice of some of the women we opened our own beauty shop, to meet one of the felt needs of these women.

Three years later we relocated to the largest red light district in Bangkok, a tourist area. Our salon is open every day except Sunday, and an average of forty women who are prostitutes come in every day. They come in for hairdressing but also for counseling and friendship. Some come to sleep during the day. We do a lot of informal education on HIV. We talk to them about the trafficking of women including the dangers of going overseas with people you don't know, and other relevant issues. We also are generating income, and this is one of the keys to our success because when women say they want to leave prostitution but do not know what else to do, we tell them, "You can start work with us tomorrow on greeting cards and the other products we make."

I am becoming increasingly involved in advocacy and travel a great deal, thanks to the eighteen Thai workers who keep the home fires going. We also have a discipleship house where women leaving prostitution can come to live and grow in the Christian life. Four of our women just opened their own salon. A dozen have been through short Bible school courses, and many have married.

What are some of the pressures that force women to become involved in prostitution?

Poverty, lack of education and therefore limited alternatives are major contributing factors. According to Thai tradition, the oldest daughter often goes to the city to find work to support the family. Many of these women are abandoned wives who leave their children with grandparents and come to the city to make money. Other contributing factors are visiting military forces, materialism, and simple gullibility. Pimps will go to the poor villages in the north and offer education and a good job, but the women who come with them are put straight into brothels. They are raped until they are willing to comply with whatever is required of them.

I read that growing numbers of women are being brought from Thailand and other countries to work as prostitutes in America. What lies are these women told about what is going to happen when they are brought to the United States?

An estimated fifty thousand women and children are being brought to the United States every year from Asia, South America, and Eastern Europe. Some are trafficked into sweatshops and other work, called "Domestic Servitude," where they are exploited and possibly raped. But the majority are brought into forced prostitution, which is slavery. They do not walk the streets, they are kept out of sight. Sometimes they are brought into California and then go on a sort of circuit tour through other states. They may be sold to motels or kept in the basements of houses. Police have found Asian women in basements on drug busts, kept there to service men. This happens in neighborhoods where most people would never expect it. In Berkeley a man was recently arrested and admitted to having brought one hundred Indian women or people to the area. He said he kept some of them as his personal prostitutes, and sold the others to his friends.

Speak a bit more about the slavery of these women?

They do not hold passports, are not given any kind of real pay, and are unable to speak the language. They are often in extreme debt bondage because their travel to America was paid for, and they are told that they have to work off many thousands of dollars. Sometimes they come on legal papers, but sometimes they are smuggled in shipping containers. Human trafficking is a seven billion-dollar business for the Mafia; last year the U.S. State Department called it the fastest-growing business of organized crime.

What do you see as the responsibility of American churches on this issue?

One of the major issues is to help people change their attitudes toward prostitutes. Prostitutes are seen first as evil sinners, who must repent. But Jesus loved the prostitute, and I often say that if Jesus came to Thailand he would be ministering in the bars of Bangkok. Jesus showed love and compassion. Are we with Jesus, or are we with those who would only point a finger? I can say this because we New Zealanders are very much like this, sitting on the fence. Those of you in local churches, you have the power to speak out against slavery and trafficking. New laws are being written to provide options for trafficking victims, regardless of their immigration status. It is illegal to use force or threats to make someone pay off debt, or to hold people against their will in any kind of labor situation. Open your eyes, look around your neighborhoods, and if something does not look right, call the authorities. As Christians I believe we are responsible to fight against the things in our world which are destroying people. These women and children are being murdered, beaten to death, raped. But they are also being destroyed emotionally and spiritually. God came to give us life, to set us free.

In addition to educating their congregations about these realities, are there places where some of our seminary graduates, either women or men, could be involved in the kind of ministry you are doing?

We need administrators who will help to run the ministry and free those of us, whose calling is not administration, to go out and work in the streets. But I really encourage people to start in their own countries. There are many organizations, both Christian and secular, which are working with women, and many of these organizations are desperate for help. Work with groups which already exist. It is not always necessary to start something. There is also work to be done in prevention and on the policy level. There is a need to educate young boys about respecting women, because if you respect a woman as a person of value then you do not abuse her sexually, or physically, or emotionally, or spiritually.

Patricia, thank you very much for speaking to us. We appreciate enormously what you've had to say and it's been a tremendous challenge to us. We praise God for the ministry that you are involved in. Please join me in thanking Patricia, and then we will pray together as we close.

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