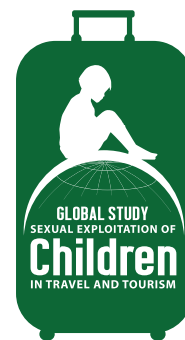


EXPERT PAPER

# INCOMES AND EDUCATION, KEYS TO COMBATING CHILD PROSTITUTION IN THAILAND



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## INTRODUCTION

A once beautiful young woman sits on her bed, pressed into a corner of her tiny room. She ponders her future while knitting, which is how she most often spends her time. Will she ever have an opportunity for a real life outside the confines of the psychiatric hospital in which she now resides? Her depression is sometimes greater than when she entered the hospital eight years earlier. She speaks of there being no reason for her existence. Diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenic and clinically-depressed, Lon's story is heartbreaking. Like so many young girls from Isaan, the poorest province in Thailand, whether sold, kidnapped, vanquished, or run-a-ways, their lives often play out tragically on the world stage. At 35, her 4'8" frame has now filled out to 154 pounds, 70 pounds more than the tiny, perfectly-proportioned body for which she was known so many years ago, and for which she earned top money as a dancer in Pattaya, in Thailand's prolific sex-tourist industry.

In 1992, at the age of 12, Lon was forced to quit school at the end of sixth grade. Thailand's GNP was less than \$1,929<sup>1</sup> and the school's national dropout rate was 58%. While desperately impoverished, her mother found the means to educate her brother, but there was never enough money for Lon, not even for a pair of shoes. Her mother's unwillingness to provide for her oldest daughter was typical of Thai culture, particularly within the culture of Isaan. Education is valued more for boys than for girls in the belief that girls will marry and have children. Yet, the oldest daughter is still expected to provide for her family. Boys are favored and given all that a poor family can afford at the expense of their sisters. In 2003, eleven years after Lon had left school, the GNP had risen to \$2,349 and the national dropout

rate for girls and boys between 6<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades had decreased to 52%. Yet, in the rural provinces, it remained high at over 80%. “Official statistics reflect that children who enrolled in Grade 1 in primary schools in 1990 and completed Grade 6 in 1995, 14.2 percent dropped out.”<sup>2</sup> There was little change in these dropout rates throughout the late 90s. This fact can be attributed to the unsteady, up and down growth

rates of the GNP.<sup>3</sup> Thailand's economic situation has always been a major factor poor families do not enroll their children in school; it also precipitates their dropping out. Parents often want their children to work to compensate for the family's poor wages. While these statements reflect the rural population of Isaan more than that of Bangkok, they are also true of economically disadvantaged families in major cities.

**A direct correlation between Thailand's GNP (Gross National Product) and School Enrollment is reflected below.**

Year	GDP <sup>4</sup>	% Enrollment		% Enrollment		% Enrollment	
		Secondary School <sup>5</sup>		Secondary School		Primary School	
		M	F	M	F	M	F
1990		28.54	27.98	29.13	98.92		
1991	\$1,716	30.32	30.91	29.71	99.83	100.99	98.62
1992	\$1,929	33.56	34.15	32.95	100.32	101.36	99.26
1993	\$2,213	37.73	38.20	37.25	99.53	100.64	98.38
1994	\$2,497	42.75			98.16		
1995	\$2,586	48.00			95.30		
1996	\$3,056	54.34			91.37		
1997	\$2,480	57.61			92.01		
1998	\$1,855	61.21			93.45	94.93	92.32
1999	\$2,043				97.29	98.77	95.75
2000	\$2,016				97.67	99.06	96.23
2001	\$1,897	62.66	63.50	61.80	97.17	98.21	96.09
2002	\$2,094	64.38	64.37	64.41	98.10	99.25	96.91
2003	\$2,349	64.00					
2004	\$2,643	66.7	64.39		98.89	99.84	97.89
2005	\$2,874	71.00	69.39	69.10	98.12	99.44	96.73
2006	\$3,351	71.58	69.12	73.42	96.61	97.33	95.85
2007	\$3,962	77.26	74.29	74.13	96.68	97.86	96.07
2008	\$4,384	78.04	75.32		97.41	98.36	96.42
2009	\$4,231	80.66		80.33	96.67	97.59	95.72
2010	\$5,111	83.48		86.01	94.92	96.02	93.78
2011	\$5,539	87.37		89.92	94.87	96.09	93.59
2012	\$5,917	86.98			95.39	96.67	94.05
2013	\$6,229	93.00			92.85	95.06	90.55
2014	\$5,977						

In 2009, The Ministry of Education granted 15-years of free education to its citizens. Underprivileged students could now attend school, tuition free, and the first nine years were mandatory. Nevertheless, while more children were able to attend school, and remain in school longer than they could two decades earlier, there were (are) still many children who cannot afford the cost of uniforms, notebooks, pencils, textbooks, and transportation; these are the financial responsibility of the family; a responsibility many cannot afford. This cost can be as much as 6% of a rural family's annual income. These fees can be a burden and high enough to keep children from attending school.<sup>6</sup>

The GNP has increased as has the enrollment of children in school, yet in two decades from 1994 through 2014, statistics in Thailand still often reflect 800,000 as the number of children involved in prostitution (defined as sex with children under the age of 16). Other figures estimate "... some 30,000 to 40,000 children, not including foreign children... exploited as prostitutes," while admittedly, it is impossible to know the true number of victims due to the insidious nature of this crime.<sup>7</sup> "The precise number of prostitutes is difficult to assess; estimates vary widely and are subject to national and international controversy. It has been suggested that the figures for women and minors were considered to be grossly inflated by most observers, and to have resulted from poor research methods."<sup>8</sup>

There is no question that prostitution is seen by impoverished families as an easy way to elevate a family's economic status. Greed on the part of many poor Isaan families is at the core of their daughters entering the trade. With this said, some teens look forward to traveling to Bangkok, Pattaya, and Koh Samui, yet with no understanding of what lies ahead. Their intention is to earn an income to provide their families with "the

finer things in life." This is not a choice they have made freely. Sadly, many of these very young women have been inculcated with the belief that their mothers gave them life and this is the only way they can repay them. They are forever obligated. Once girls begin sending money home, their parents buy gold and the latest in high-tech devices. If a girl wants to quit, she is told she cannot or she will no longer be welcome in the home her money built.

Fortunately, due to young women receiving more education, no longer are the tourist areas of Sukhumvit Road; Pat Pong; or Nana Plaza in Bangkok, or Beach Road or Walking Street, in Pattaya, or many other areas in Thailand, full of 13 - 16 year old girls looking for foreign customers. When Lon began, Bangkok and Pattaya were the international focal points of foreigners looking for young girls; this is no longer true. While Thailand tourism reached an all time high of 2,987,260 in December of 2015,<sup>9</sup> only a fraction of the number of sex tourists were seeking out child prostitutes as they did two decades earlier.

The number of Thai children in the sex industry is falling due to the greater earning power of Thai families, the greater educational opportunities for children, and an effort to crackdown on tourists seeking-out children. Unfortunately "...children (are) trafficked into Thailand from neighboring border countries, or from the northern ethnic hill tribes."<sup>10</sup>

At its core, to continue to combat child prostitution, Thailand as a nation must develop greater respect for its women. Young girls must be taught they are able and worthy of great accomplishments. They must remain in school and gain the education that will provide them with skills and tools to earn an income of which they can be proud. Thailand must continue to improve its economy so that families have

greater earning power and do not feel the need to send their daughters into the tragic world of the prostitute plagued with an unknowing future, danger, and pain. Thailand can demonstrate it is serious about its war on sex tourism by enforcing laws already in effect, and issuing serious penalties and prison time to those who violate these laws. These are but a few of the many means available to this country to turn around its reputation as the hub of child prostitution. A greater earning capacity and education have reduced the number of young Thai girls who would follow in Lon's footsteps, only to find themselves, 20 years later, confined to the grey walls of a psychiatric hospital, alone, defeated, and at a loss as to what their futures might bring while 6,000 miles from home.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### Derek Kent Sharron

Derek Kent Sharron is a native Californian and earned his B.A. from UCLA at age 20. Two years later, he traveled to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia for Litton Industries. In 1990, he earned his TESOL Certificate; and throughout the next 15 years, he served as an English-As-A-Foreign Language Instructor with Raytheon, Jeddah, and in Bangkok, Thailand. In 2003, he co-authored *Only 13, The True Story of Lon* which now appears in eight languages, and

is the best-selling book in English, French, German, and Finnish in Thailand. Lon's story was presented to His Holiness, Pope Francis, at the Vatican, in October of 2015. Mr. Sharron's articles have also appeared in the *UCLA Bruin*; *Saudi Commerce and Economic Review*, *Arab News*, *The Spotlight*, *Bangkok Post*, and *Asia Week*. He has been involved in providing and supporting educational opportunities, developing job/career training, and establishing a support center for disadvantaged and at-risk young girls in Thailand.

### Julia Manzanares

Julia Manzanares Sharron earned her M.A. in Psychology/Drama Therapy from California State University, Los Angeles, a B.A. in Psychology from Antioch University, Los Angeles, and Certificates in TESOL and Neurolinguistics. She has served as an English-As-A-Foreign Language/Intercultural Communications/Professional Communications Instructor and a Teacher-Trainer since 1988. She has spent 28 years teaching abroad in East Asia, South East Asia, the Middle East, and the Maldives. Ms. Sharron has made numerous presentations including the Bangkok International Book Faire; Catholic Archdiocese Bishops' Conference, Bangkok; and the Lower Mekong Initiative - ESP Symposium, Bangkok. She was also interviewed by *MARS Magazine*. She is co-author of *Only 13, The True Story of Lon* and deeply-committed to assisting children and 'teens via the Sainam Foundation in Surin. Sainam assists children, who are mostly abandoned or orphaned, by providing educational scholarships and medical care. Impoverished families also receive assistance with self-sustainment projects.

## ENDNOTES

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