

Curbing Batam sex: Stop, she's too young

STIMES0020040615e06g0003m

Singapore

Theresa Tan

607 Words

16 June 2004

Straits Times

English

(c) 2004 Singapore Press Holdings Limited

From next month, activists to put up posters at places like ferry terminals to target S'porean sex seekers

A GROUP of activists has declared war on the Batam sex trade and one of the first salvos it's firing next month will be to ask men who frequent young prostitutes: How would you feel if someone did this to your daughter?

The Singapore chapter of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (Unifem) feels it is not enough to promote safe sex, which it will do, by placing condoms in hotels. It also wants to make men think about their role in fuelling the flesh trade.

From July, it will put up 'hard-hitting' posters at places like ferry terminals serving the Riau island, to ask such thought-provoking questions, as well as debunk common myths among those seeking illicit sex.

Said Ms Saleemah Ismail, manager of Unifem Singapore's End Trafficking Of Women And Children For Sexual Exploitation project: 'Some men think they are doing a good deed by paying for sex in Batam, that the girls will starve in their villages.

'Others think younger girls are cleaner and thus they will be safer from Aids if they have sex with them.'

Neither is true, she said.

Most of the fee goes to the prostitute's pimp or 'mummy', and to pay for accommodation, food and laundry. The girl will get, at most, 10 to 15 per cent.

And a young sex worker can 'easily' have slept with a few hundred men by the time she's 15, making her no safer than the others, said Ms Saleemah.

Unifem's appeal to conscience and good sense is an attempt to curb the demand side of an equation which has an estimated 600 Singaporean men going to Batam every Saturday for sex.

Its main concern is the trafficking of minors for prostitution.

Up to 40 per cent of the estimated 19,000 sex workers in Batam are under 18, said Ms Saleemah. Some are as young as 12.

Many are tricked into leaving rural villages with job offers, but arrive to find themselves sold to brothels.

Unifem began working with a Batam non-governmental organisation, Partnership for Health and Humanitarian Foundation (YMKK), last year. It supports YMKK's outreach activities and the counselling and rehabilitation of prostitutes.

Interviews with men at the World Trade Centre Ferry Terminal who admitted going to Batam for sex found that most preferred their prostitutes young.

Said a 52-year-old factory worker who declined to be named: 'It's obvious. Every man wants young girls. Better still if they are virgins.'

But what if the girls are not there by choice?

Said Mr Cher Yong Ngiap, 58, a retired manager who says he has friends who frequent Batam prostitutes: 'Most of my friends just want to have fun and they only think about

themselves.

'They don't even care about their wives. Why would they bother whether the girls are tricked into the trade?'

Knowing this, Unifem Singapore is also working to promote the use of condoms.

Initially, three hotels agreed to have one placed in every room but two have pulled out for undisclosed reasons, said Ms Saleemah. It could be because of a police raid on brothels last week might, she added.

The remaining hotel declined to be interviewed but its rooms will all have a condom wrapped in an enticing packet showing a girl saying, 'Don't forget me.'

Inside, the condom will come with a line that goes: 'Have you asked how old she is?'