

It's Saturday - 600 S'pore men hit Batam... for sex.

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They account for three-quarters of men seeking callgirls there

'The Chinese men have very strong sexual desires. And the girls will do whatever it takes to get tips.' - Mr Husaini Tarmizi, an outreach officer from the Partnership for Health and Humanitarian Foundation in Batam (YMKK)

SINGAPOREANS are fuelling the sex trade in Batam.

They account for seven or eight out of every 10 men who go to the Riau island - an hour's ride away by ferry - for a sex romp, according to a non-governmental organisation that helps sex workers there.

Most of these Singaporeans are Chinese men - ranging from teenagers to grandfathers clutching walking aids - looking for \$50-a-night sex partners.

A survey by YMKK, or Partnership for Health and Humanitarian Foundation, in Batam last May found that about 600 Singaporean men arrive on Batam's shores every Saturday for sex.

The thriving sex trade, coupled with the rise in the number of cases of HIV/Aids and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), prompted YMKK to ask the United Nations Development Fund for Women, Singapore (Unifem Singapore) and the Singapore International Foundation (SIF) for help.

Unifem and SIF are now supporting YMKK to 'empower migrant, sex and industrial workers in Batam and to combat the trafficking of women and children'.

Since September last year, a group of 28 volunteers with the SIF Youth Expedition Project have visited the island almost every weekend.

They train YMKK's local staff to use research software and teach them conversational English, among other skills, so YMKK staff are able to reach out to sex workers and persuade foreign donors to support their cause.

Said SIF volunteer Lim Kai Yang, 26: 'The sex trade in Batam is brought on by Singaporeans.

'And as a Singaporean Chinese man not involved in the sex trade, I feel a need to do my bit to help sex workers here.'

Problems highlighted by Mr Lim include girls as young as 15 being tricked into prostitution, unwanted pregnancies, STDs, HIV/Aids and drug addiction.

Said Ms Lola Wagner, YMKK's director: 'Girls from across Indonesia are promised good jobs in restaurants or karaoke lounges here, but when they arrive they find themselves locked up like prisoners and made to work as prostitutes.

'If they don't perform, they are not given food or beaten up.'

Ms Wagner estimates about half the sex workers in Batam are tricked into prostitution, and almost all who use YMKK medical services have STDs.

According to media reports, the island has about 7,000 registered prostitutes who work in government-regulated establishments, but the actual number could be nearer 20,000, said social workers.

Batam has among the highest incidences of HIV/Aids in Indonesia.

About 150 people there have HIV/Aids now, compared to just 72 in 2000. They are mostly sex workers, and the number could be just the tip of the iceberg, said Ms Wagner.

She added: 'Many more cases could be going unreported, as sex workers are very afraid of going to the doctors. They're afraid of being tested positive.'

Said Mr Husaini Tarmizi, an outreach officer at YMKK, in Malay: 'Singaporean Chinese men like to look for girls under 18 years old, as they're pretty and considered to be still clean.

'The Chinese men have very strong sexual desires. And the girls will do whatever it takes to get tips.'

From schoolboys to grandpas

CLIENTS are usually Chinese Singaporean men, from those still in school to grandfathers who need help walking, said prostitutes interviewed.

The men usually arrive in groups of two to five during the weekend to shop, eat and have sex. An overnight romp costs about 250,000 rupiah (S\$50).

A smaller group of men take the one-hour ferry ride to Batam on weekdays for 'short time' or quickies for between 120,000 and 150,000 rupiah.