

'Are you free for tar pau?'

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Saturday Special Report

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FROM the dark alleys of Desker Road to the bright lights of Orchard Towers, to the smoky dens of Geylang, all the players seem to know their roles.

The men are expected to make the first move in Singapore. And one of the most oft-used pick-up lines - 'Are you free for tar pau (takeaway in Mandarin) tonight?' - helps circumvent the fact that soliciting is illegal, whereas prostitution isn't.

For the estimated 2,000 mostly foreign sex workers plying the world's oldest profession here, it is very much a volume-driven, cash-only business. For anything from \$30 to \$500 per session, sex workers deliver the goods and look for the next score. The transaction is not unlike 'fast-food sex', as regulars put it.

According to police estimates, there are at least 1,700 sex workers who operate in the traditional red light areas such as Geylang, Desker Road and Keong Saik Road each night. But this number excludes an estimated 300 female foreigners on social visit passes at any one time.

Mr Gerrie Lim, author of *The Invisible Trade*, a book about the escort industry in Singapore, says that there are a few illegal operators that bring in Western girls, including one fronted by a Hungarian madam bringing in sex workers from Eastern Europe.

Industry watchers estimate the flesh trade here is worth up to 'several hundred millions' each year.

Rather than 'cultivate' a patron to take them out for supper and sex for about \$150 to \$200, most KTV lounge sex workers prefer to spread themselves thin, flitting from table to table to allow men to grope them for \$30 to \$50 each. The Straits Times gleaned that a young sex worker in a KTV lounge typically makes about \$500 in tips and for services rendered each night. This suggests that up to \$1 million changes hands every night.

With so much change floating around, little wonder then that the sex trade here attracts women from all over the world: from India and the region to even Ukraine and South America.

Unlike neighbouring countries that draw the bulk of its sex workers from the local population in the impoverished outskirts, the sex trade in Singapore is supplied by legions of 'foreign talent'. There is only a smattering of Singaporean prostitutes who mostly operate from KTV lounges or as freelancers, serving a small circle of regulars.

However, the latest trend there, as with the rest of the world economy, sees Chinese muscling onto the local scene. Many are here for a few weeks and maximise their stay by slashing prices.

Mr Lim notes the China girls are generally not suitable for escort agencies. 'People complain that they are not classy enough and don't know how to dress,' he says.

However, where they do operate, their competitive streak has led to fights between the different foreign legions. In Geylang, following numerous complaints by residents and raids by the police in the area, closed-circuit security cameras were installed in March to monitor the situation.

According to the police's director of public affairs, Senior Assistant Commissioner Tan Puay Kern, Singapore's strategic but pragmatic approach to combat vice is to confine it within the traditional red-light areas. This is to avoid it 'going underground and under the control of crime syndicates'. 'Instead of attempting to eradicate vice, police focus on ensuring that no person is forced into prostitution and that no person is exploited,' he says.

The police takes pride in the fact that there is no evidence of child prostitution or women being forced into the sex trade here.

Ms Saleemah Ismail of Unifem Singapore, a United Nations initiative for women's empowerment, says while there have been cases of child prostitution in Singapore, they are extremely rare. So far, there have been none here this year.

Right now though, the police says it has its hands full grappling with the estimated 300 female foreigners on social visit passes, plying their trade out of KTV lounges or on the streets.

A rising number of these 'freelancers' have been arrested for soliciting here. In 2002, the police hauled in 3,400 women for 'vice-related arrests'. The number fell to 2,300 a year later because of the Sars epidemic. But it almost doubled to 5,200 last year.

Of these arrests, nearly 40 per cent of the women were from China. Indonesians, Thais and Vietnamese made up the remainder.

To Mr Daniel Tung, a volunteer with non-profit organisation Action For Aids (AFA) and a project coordinator at the DSC (Department of STI Control), these unlicensed prostitutes pose a grave and unknown danger as they are not screened for diseases.

Unlike sex workers in brothels in the traditional red-light districts, they do not have to undergo compulsory health checks every month, including for HIV.

Mr Tung was behind the Streetwalker Project launched under the auspices of AFA last September to educate illegal sex workers on the dangers of unprotected sex. While some 500 condoms were snapped up, only eight took up the offer of free health screening.

Reverend Edward Job, who runs One Hope Centre, a drop-in centre in Geylang Lorong 23 for prostitutes and foreign workers, often scours the area's coffeeshops with his group of volunteers, looking for sex workers to counsel.

Most of these foreign women, he says, are desperate for money because they came to Singapore expecting jobs as waitresses or hairdressers, only to end up in prostitution to pay off debts between \$2,000 and \$5,000 to their agents back home. Others have overstayed their social visit passes and fear getting into trouble with the authorities.

Meanwhile, Ms Ismail is more worried about the droves of Singaporean men flocking to nearby Batam. 'There are about 100,000 entries to Batam each month, and about 80 to 90 per cent are Singaporeans. These men travel there because it is cheaper than Singapore and the sex workers are younger,' she says.

A recent Johns Hopkins University study reported that Singaporeans form the largest group of sex tourists in the Riau islands, including Batam, and where most of those exploited are under 18.

In May, the issue of sexual predators was raised in Parliament. Senior Minister of State (Law and Home Affairs) Ho Peng Kee pointed out that Singapore has strict laws against sex with minors, but highlighted the legal problems and practical difficulties in extending jurisdiction overseas.

While Unifem is concentrating its efforts on outreach and counselling of females who have fallen victim to exploitation in the Batam sex trade, Ms Ismail says the demand side of the issue needs to be stemmed first.

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Additional reporting by Jessica Cheam

NO MORAL POLICING

'Instead of attempting to eradicate vice, police focus on ensuring that no person is forced into prostitution and that no person is exploited.' SENIOR ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER TAN

PUAY KERN

IT'S BETTER NEXT DOOR

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