

Lured by work but forced into sex trade in Batam

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Theresa Tan

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They make up 43% of those surveyed; many trafficked when in mid-teens

BATAM - A SORDID picture of the sex trade in Batam - fuelled mainly by Singaporeans - has emerged from a recent survey of prostitutes working there.

Some 43 per cent of 733 women interviewed by a Batam-based non-governmental organisation said they were forced into the trade or made to work under false pretences, many when they were in their mid-teens.

More than nine in 10 came from other parts of Indonesia, mainly villages in East, Central and West Java.

Many came to Batam on promises of well-paying jobs. Instead, they ended up with unwanted pregnancies and disease, exploited but afraid to leave.

Ms Lola Wagner, director of Yayasan Mitra Kesehatan dan Kemanusiaan (YMKK), which did the survey, told The Straits Times: 'Many of the girls are promised high-paying jobs as maids, waitresses or factory workers. But when they arrive in Batam, they are forced into prostitution.'

The study was commissioned by Unifem Singapore, the local branch of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (Unifem), to find the true extent of the prostitution problem in Batam.

Reliable data on the estimated 10,000 prostitutes in Batam was previously not available, said Ms Wagner.

About 60 per cent of the prostitutes surveyed were 19 to 24 years old, but the majority said they were between 14 and 16 years old when they were trafficked.

More than four in 10 were also exploited.

This included not being allowed to turn down clients, being locked up when not working, and even forced to take Ecstasy pills by their pimps or clients to relax them.

Some said they had not been paid because of debts owed to those who paid for their passage to Batam.

One 17-year-old, who became a prostitute at 14, told The Straits Times she owed her 'mummy' 2 million rupiah (S\$337) for her airfare from Medan to Batam.

A friend had promised her a job as a waitress, but disappeared after leaving her in a Batam brothel.

Many of the women are also educated.

Half had secondary school education but were driven by the dearth of jobs to Batam to seek employment which promised to pay them up to 10 times what they could get at home.

At the Komisi Migran dan Perantau, a shelter for abused maids and prostitutes, a social worker, Ms Martje-Rogi, told The Straits Times it sometimes took sex workers as young as 12.

Since January, it has provided refuge and counselling to 14 prostitutes. Two had babies, one of whom was the offspring of a Singaporean, she said. All had been tricked into the trade, she added.

Singaporeans, who can get to Batam in an hour by ferry, make up such a high number of clients that prices in some brothels are quoted in both rupiah and Singapore dollars.

A survey conducted by YMKK two years ago showed that Singaporeans make up 70 to 80 per cent of the sex clients in Batam. About 600 arrive every Saturday for a \$50 overnight sex romp.

This may change if Singapore decides to prosecute citizens who have sex with minors overseas. The Home Affairs Ministry is now studying the feasibility of such a proposal. Besides the spectre of sexually transmitted disease such as HIV/Aids, another problem is unwanted pregnancies, which almost all the sex workers surveyed have faced, said Ms Wagner.

YMKK has heard of babies sold by pimps for as little as 400,000 rupiah.

If the women cannot afford to have an abortion in hospital, they turn to midwives and traditional methods.

The predicament is so common, the locals now joke that Batam stands for Banyak Anak Tapi Ayah Mana.

It means: 'So many children, but where are the fathers?'