

Viet women here to make a quick buck

Many who come know what they are getting into, but some are coerced into prostitution

BY TEH JOO LIN

SHE flew in from Ho Chi Minh City to Singapore as a tourist earlier this month, but for Kong (not her real name), her only places of interest are the pubs in Joo Chiat and nearby budget hotels.

The single mother, 26, was a hairdresser back home. But she decided to come here to work illegally as a pub hostess to make fast cash to bring up her eight-year-old son, she said.

Gaudily attractive in a black miniskirt, pumps and fake eyelashes, she sidles up to patrons in the pubs, drinking with them and letting them cop a feel.

Her aim is to provide the "girlfriend effect" before collecting \$10 or \$20 from the patron, who may eventually ask her for sex. She "sometimes" agrees, charging \$150 for an overnight stay. She told The Straits Times: "I hope I can make more than \$1,000 before I go back later this month."

Kong is one of many Vietnamese women who have come here to make a quick buck as pub hostesses or prostitutes in recent years.

They came under the spotlight recently after a Vietnamese court jailed four members of a trafficking ring last week for selling 10 women to a brothel here run by a Vietnamese woman. The four included a pair of 19-year-old Vietnamese twin sisters, who started luring others into vice after they were reportedly tricked into becoming prostitutes in Singapore.

Vietnamese in the vice trade here gained notoriety about six or seven years ago, when many of them started thronging the Joo Chiat pubs, aggressively soliciting patrons for paid sex. This drew strict police enforcement, beating back much of the sleaze.

As business in Joo Chiat declined, some of the women moved on to pubs in Geylang. With frequent raids, some pimps also resorted to hawking the prostitutes online. Customers would send an SMS to the pimp, who would arrange for them to visit the prostitute in a hotel.

Singapore is a popular destination because of its stronger currency, proximity to Vietnam and word-of-mouth from those who returned after making quick money here. But it is difficult to keep track of their numbers because many arrive on social visit passes and work illegally.

Last year, the police made 7,614 arrests of foreign women suspected of involvement in vice-related activities – up from 5,047 arrests in 2008. The police did not give a breakdown by nationality.

Unlike the twin sisters and the other women in the recent court case, it seems many Vietnamese women knew what they were getting into. They



Vietnamese women outside a pub in Joo Chiat. These women gained notoriety a few years ago by thronging pubs there, soliciting for paid sex. Strict police enforcement has since reduced much of the sleaze. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

were also not forced to have sex with customers.

"To be honest, I would say the majority of them know what they are doing. They know they are here to work as hostesses, and not in a restaurant," said a Vietnamese woman who helped many of these women. The woman, who is now a permanent resident here, declined to be named.

Many of these women are from rural areas in the southern parts of Vietnam, she said.

The issue of "forced" prostitution arises when the women struggle to earn enough from tips to pay off their agents during their one or two months here. The debt may run up to \$2,000 in some cases.

This is when the agents would issue veiled threats indicating they should sleep with the customers.

Said the woman: "Some of them are okay. Some of them don't want. When they refuse, the agent will tell them you cannot go back to Vietnam if you don't pay me."

"Actually, the agents are wrong in the sense that when the girl cannot pay them back, they suggest they work as prostitutes. In such cases, when they refuse to work, they threaten them to scare them."

Some of the women turn to the police.

Kong claimed she flew in on her own, but many other Vietnamese women increasingly rely on agents who belong to organised rackets with links in both countries.

Another Vietnamese pub hostess, known as Tao, said she paid \$1,400 to an agent to fly here after hearing about the opportunity from her sister, who also worked here.

"The first time, you will need an agent to help. After that, you don't need," said the divorcee in her 20s who has a five-year-old son back home.

She reckons she can fly back with about \$1,000 after deducting agent fees and money spent on food, clothes and accommodation. She pays \$10 a day to stay in a rented Joo Chiat apartment she shares with other women.

For Tao, the pub hostess job is lucrative enough so she does not need to sleep with clients. She claims to earn \$100 to \$200 in tips from pub patrons a night. "Unless you are old and ugly, and they don't want you at the table," she said.

When contacted, Unifem Singapore – the United Nations Development Fund for Women – said the organisation was "aware of cases of women being sex-trafficked to Singapore not just from Vietnam but from other countries around the region as well".

It added: "We hope the Singapore government authorities will work closely with their counterparts in the region to take enforcement action against traffickers, and provide adequate training for victim identification as well as the necessary protection and support for victims so identified."

NOT IN THE DARK

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A Vietnamese woman who has helped many female compatriots who come here to work

In response to queries from The Straits Times, the Ministry of Home Affairs said last week that when sex trafficking cases are reported or prostitutes arrested, the police will interview the women to see if they were brought here against their will or tricked into coming.

The police received 32 reports of human trafficking last year, but only two were confirmed as trafficking cases and prosecuted. In some cases, investigations were hampered by a lack of substantiating evidence.

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