

Sompop Jantraka Thailand (1957-)

This story started in 1988, when Sompop found himself in Mae Sai in northern Thailand, interviewing girls and their families. He was trying to find out how and why so many girls from that area were ending up as prostitutes in the big cities.

Suppose you are the mother of a girl in a village where there is almost no work available, and the family barely has enough to eat.

A nice man or woman, maybe even someone you know, visits you and offers your young daughter work in a nearby or far off city as a maid or beauty salon worker - some work that seems even perhaps a little glamorous compared to the work available in the village. If you sign her "contract" you will receive more money than you yourself can earn in one or even several years of work. It seems to you like a better life for your daughter than she will have if she stays with you.

Your daughter is a little scared, but she knows she has a duty to help out her family; and the idea of going to the big city is exciting. She will go if you tell her to. What would you do?



Sompop Jantraka
(From *University of Michigan News Service*, 2008)

A Man of Action

Since he heard stories like these during those 1988 interviews, Sompop has been a man with a mission, organizing to rescue children before they start on the desperate path to being sex slaves. These jobs are almost never what was promised. The child ends up as a prostitute in a faraway city, and once they are there it is nearly impossible for them to get away. They become like slaves.

Before another year passed, Sompop had founded DEP (Daughters' Education Programme), an educational fund supported by the Asia Children's Fund. The next year nineteen girls, aged 12-14 years, became the first group of "daughters," as Sompop calls them, to start the DEP education and training program.

Education is The Key

The focus of DEP, which later became DEPDC (Development and Education Program for Daughters and Communities), is prevention. Its projects "aim to instill self-confidence and positive attitudes among the children as well as improve the material, social, and spiritual quality of life for these children and their communities." (DEPDC, 2004, p. 1)

"When I was going to finish primary school, my mom asked me whether or not I'd like to study more. I said I wish to become a teacher like my own teacher, because I love her. But mom denied, she said that she had no money to support me. She wanted me to do like the girl next door, who went to work for a few months and then had money to build a new house, having a TV and refrigerator. Mom didn't tell me what kind of work that girl was doing. And I've never seen her coming home."

--A former daughter of
DEPDC

--In: DEPDC, 2004

Basically this is done by working in villages with caring adults such as teachers and community leaders, who identify families in financial trouble who have young daughters (or sometimes sons). (Brothel agents, of course, also have an eye on these families.) DEPDC offers safe housing, if needed, and education and job training to these children. They educate them about the sex industry, and work with them to alleviate their financial problems. Often the decision of the child to continue schooling over-rides the parents' desire for monetary gain.

Experience has shown that education not only physically prevents a child from entering the sex trade (because they are kept otherwise occupied), but also that better-educated and more self-confident children are much less likely to believe the false promises made by sex-traffickers.

The Program Grows

The program has gradually expanded as more support became available. The number of villages served grew, and vocational programs expanded

A leader-training program was started. The Japanese government funded a Vocational Training building. Computer training was added. Then came

new sites, a day care center, a program to help street children, a follow-up program to track graduates, and much more. Current programs are too many to list here. You can find a good description, as well as their funding sources, in DEPDC 2004.

In 2006 a student from the United States named Joseph Quinnell visited DEPDC as part of a photojournalism project. He went back to the US determined to do something, and he overcame many obstacles to get the University of Wisconsin to offer free education to at least some students from Sompop's program. The first students in this program will start as freshmen there in September, 2008. (University of Wisconsin, 2007)

Between 1989 and 2008, DEPDC estimates they helped over 3,000 children, and that 98% of the graduates from their program have stayed out of the sex trade. (DEPDC, 2007).

In 2008 the Mekong Youth Net program welcomed its 4th class of 24 young women from all over the Mekong Basin. They will participate in a one-year leadership training where they will learn to become advocates in their home countries for human rights, education, and community development. (DEPDC, 2007)

United We Stand

The character of the sex trade has changed since 1989. In 1997, the Thai constitution was changed to guarantee citizens 12 years of free education. After that, the percentage

of Thai girls in the sex trade dropped to around 2%¹. Nowadays most victims are coming from other countries in the Mekong Basin (Burma, Laos, Southern China-- an area often called the Golden Triangle), and adjacent Vietnam and Cambodia. The Thai border has many crossing points and people come and go very easily.

Non-citizen children living in Thailand's northern hills cannot attend school. Often they cannot even get legal papers to work, since their citizenship papers have been lost. They are children without a country.

This is why Sompop established the Mekong Study Center (MSC). The MSC has been hosting conferences which bring together government and law enforcement officials, NGOs², interested citizens, and others interested in ending sex slavery of children and related abuses.

Recently (2007) he passed the leadership of DEPDC to Alinda Wettas, so he can focus his attention on the huge problems in the Mekong Basin. Alinda Wettas was like a big sister to the first group of 19 girls that came to DEP in 1989.

Threats and Recognition

As you might expect, the sex industry hasn't been happy about Jantraka's work. He has received many threats, but Sompop refuses to give up.

Sompop has been nominated twice for the Nobel Peace Prize, and in 2002 he was

" 'You can read about it and watch documentaries all you want, but until you're actually there and you're offered children, you can't grasp how horrendous it is,' said Quinnell, explaining that his being male, white, solo, and in Thailand often added up to the assumption that he was a so-called 'sex tourist' ."

--Joseph Quinnell

--In: LaRoi, 2006

featured in *Time Asia* as one of Asia's 25 heroes. He was also featured in a TV series called *The New Heroes*, in 2005.

A 25 minute documentary was produced on DEPDC's work, entitled *Daughters and Sons - Preventing Child Trafficking in the Golden Triangle*. It was shown at the Boston International Film Festival in 2006 (selected from over 1800 entries).

Other Factors That Need to Be Addressed

Education is certainly an important aspect of the solution to child prostitution. But some other factors must be addressed. As long as villagers in Mekong countries are so desperately poor, the price for a girl

"...whenever the struggles - and threats - he faces seem overwhelming, Sompop walks into his office and talks to Pensri Nubang. Now the program's business manager, she was one of the first 19 girls Sompop saved. 'He gave me a dream of a better life,' Pensri says, 'and the chance to achieve it.' Above all, what Sompop imparts is the empowering conviction that a future full of hope and dignity is not beyond anyone's reach. "

--In: *Sompop Jantraka - Thailand, World People's Blog*

¹ Before this, when only 6 years of school were required, the girls were most likely to enter the sex trade around the age of 12-14 when they finished school.

² NGO - non-governmental organization

can be hard to ignore. In 2002, the price varied from \$144 US to \$913 — the latter being equal to about six years' wages for a village worker. (Perrin, 2002)

The driving force, as in the drug trade, is demand. Sompop says that the sex trade will continue as long as foreigners continue to come looking for a vacation including cheap sex. The high price that foreigners pay is what puts money into the pockets of everyone in the chain, from the village broker to the bus drivers, brothel owners, hotel employees, tour guides, and all the people along the way who are paid to look the other way. And seeking out prostitutes is an honored tradition for native Thai men, as well. (Yujira Jirapinyo, date unknown).

Sompop's Background

Sompop has worked since he was 7 years old, because his family was poor. He sometimes lived with his grandmother and sometimes on the streets.

He says that his life was transformed when a teacher (a US Peace Corps volunteer) at his school took an interest in him. She saw that he had ability and she encouraged him; and as a result he began to believe he could make something of himself.

He got his BA in International Studies and Political Science in 1984 from Chaing Mai University. While a student he supported himself by working full time. He played in a band, worked as a tour guide, music teacher and flute maker. He became interested during this period in social issues, including child prostitution.

In 1989 he received funding to research the economic situation in the north of Thailand. It was during the last part of that research that he ended up in Mae Sai, which is located in the far north of Thailand. In his research this village had been mentioned repeatedly as an important "supplier" of girls for the sex trade.

References and Further Reading

The information in the article above came from the following sources. There is a lot of overlap in many of these articles, but they are slightly different in detail. I took some idea or fact cited or quote from each of these.

Ashoka International 1994. *Sompop Jantraka*. https://invest-ashoka.org/01/invest_in_ashoka Accessed 5/30/2008.

DEPDC 2004. *DEPDC in Detail*. On DEPDC web site at: http://www.depdc.org/assets/eng/reference/DEPDC_in_Detail.pdf Accessed 6/2/2008.

DEPDC 2006. *Newsletter*, January 2006. On DEPDC Web Site at: http://www.depdc.org/assets/eng/newsletter/20060101_January_2006.pdf Accessed 6/3/2008..

DEPDC, 2007. *Newsletter*, July 2007 (English version). On DEPDC web site at: http://www.depdc.org/assets/eng/newsletter/20070701_July_2007.pdf Accessed 6/2/2008.

Horn, R. 2006. *Setting Free the Slaves*. From the Time Asia website: <http://www.time.com/time/asia/features/heroes/sompop.html> Accessed 5/30/2008.

- LaRoi, H. 2006. *Student on Mission to Expose Thailand Sex Trade*. On Asia4u website: News at: <http://www.asia4u.info/news/536.html> Accessed 5/30/2008
- Perrin, A. 2002. *Thai Families Partners in Child Sex Trade*. February 6, 2002. On San Francisco Chronicle web site, SFGate.com at: <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2002/02/06/MN11926.DTL>
- Style.loops web site (I was unable to find out who runs it), October 1997 *DEP-DC Newsletter*. <http://style.loops.to/dep-dc/main.html> Accessed 5/31/ 2008
- PBS,2005 *The New Heroes* aired in 2005. More info at: <http://www.pbs.org/opb/thenewheroes/>
- University of Michigan News Service, 2008. *Activist Dedicates Life to Combating Sex Trade*. Feb 11, 2008. University of Michigan web site at: <http://www.ns.umich.edu/htdocs/releases/story.php?id=6333> Accessed June 3, 2008
- University of Wisconsin - Stevens Point 2007. *UWSPs Thailand Project working to bring stateless SE Asian students to campus*. News Release, September 28, 2008. <http://www.uwsp.edu/news/pr/tmThailandProject07.htm>
- Wallenberg Endowment web site, University of Michigan. <http://wallenberg.umich.edu/jantraka.html> Accessed 5/31/ 2008
- World People's Blog, Sompop Jantraka - Thailand. April 12, 2006. Accessed May 31, 2008. <http://word.world-citizenship.org/wp-archive/449>
- Yujira J. *Prostitution: Where is the Solution?* On the Siamweb site at: http://www.siamweb.org/content/News-Culture/155/index_eng.php Accessed 6/ 2/ 2008. A perspective by a Thai citizen, who has researched the question thoroughly..

Discussion or Essay Questions

When you talk or write, please try to use some of the new words you have learned in this reading. If you have noticed new grammatical structures, try to use them, too.

1. Sompop Jantraka was featured in 2005 on a TV program in the US called *The New Heroes*. Do you think Sompop Jantraka is a hero? Explain.
2. Describe someone you know or have heard about who you think is a hero, and say why you think she or he is a hero.
3. Can anything be done to stop sex tourism? Explain your answer.
4. Who owns children? Do the parents own them? Explain your answer.
5. Write out a question that doesn't appear above related to the story you just read. Follow the format of the questions provided after the readings, so the question cannot be answered simply by "yes" or "no." Write an answer to your own question.

Trade questions with someone, but don't give your answer to your partner. Write an answer to your partner's question. Now each should simply tell the other your answer for each question. Read out the questions, but please do not read your answers! That

will not improve your English-speaking. Instead, try to tell your partner your thoughts without looking at your paper. For subjects like these, this can be very difficult, but it is the best way to improve your speaking. (If you need a word or two that you can't remember, you may refer briefly to your paper. But when you begin to speak, look at your partner, not the paper.)

When it is your turn to speak, focus on explaining your reasons for your answer. When it is your turn to listen, just listen unless you actually don't understand what your partner is trying to say. Otherwise, whether you agree or disagree, please just listen. You may disagree strongly but your task is to simply listen and understand. If you don't understand, you can help your partner by asking clarification questions.

If you have time to continue discussing, you can choose one of your two questions together to discuss. You may not feel comfortable discussing your partner's question. Just say "If you don't mind, I would rather not discuss that question." You don't have to give a reason. And if your partner says this to you, please respect her or his wishes.

Notice to Reader

This is one out of fifteen stories written especially for English-learners featured in [*Extraordinary People From Around the World*](#), by Patricia F. Neyman, © Patricia F. Neyman, 2008, except for any pictures therein included. You may make copies for yourself, your class, or your school, but may not reproduce it for profit.

I welcome feedback about this story. Compliments and helpful suggestions are especially appreciated. You can find the email address at the page linked to above.