

KEEPING GIRLS SAFE

Educating for Peace Through Social Justice

BY JOY BUTLER

Joy Butler's courageous work rescuing defenseless girls from a life of shame and degradation offers the Christian teacher yet another opportunity to raise awareness in his or her students of their responsibilities beyond the acquisition of religious, literary, and scientific knowledge. The work of defending the rights of the weak and marginalized is peace work. Far from being a passive attitude, peace is active in breaking through the silence that perpetuates the violation of human rights on a daily basis. Christians must speak with the loudest voice and take the most daring steps to denounce any violation of the human being, made in the image of God. This article challenges Christian educators to look around their communities and get their students involved in helping those who cannot help themselves.



Nineteen-year-old Nasee with her mother and the baby. She was working as a prostitute and sex slave in Bangkok for six years before coming home to the village.

On a recent trip to Thailand, I took the arduous trek to Nasee's mountainous village, far from any city. Nasee was now home after six or seven years of working as a

bar girl, a prostitute, a sex slave, and a prisoner in Bangkok. She had returned to her opium-addicted mother, who had depended on the money coming from Nasee, and had married a young man with whom she had borne a scrawny sick baby. The sad face and blank eyes of this 19-year-old girl are unforgettably engraved in my mind and heart. In the same village, the two 11-year-old girls I had met three years previously now had babies on their backs. This kept them safe from being taken away to the city.

A group of teenage girls laughed and giggled as they cooked noodles

on their small tin stoves on the steps outside the door of Rahab Ministries in Patpong, Bangkok. The scene seemed almost delightful until I looked more closely at the girls with their thick make-up, red lips, and thin gowns over skimpy clothing. They felt uncertain about going inside where they could learn about God's love, but they felt safe staying close by. In a short time, they would be off to work. Dressed in bikinis and high heels, they served drinks in the nearby bars and danced for ogling middle-aged men. Every night, they would be taken off to the back rooms where they performed their duty—to the men, their employers, and their parents. If they didn't do it well, they could be beaten, fined, and locked up for days. Some would repeat the process six or seven times in one night. I felt sick and deeply saddened, but the girls were eager to talk, and we laughed together.

On the crowded sunny beach at Pattaya, I saw an old, pale, fat white man, towel draped over his thighs, lounging on a beach chair. A pretty smiling young Thai girl was washing his swimsuit in the sea. They would spend the night together in a nearby hotel. The sight sickened and angered me. This girl might die, like many other HIV/AIDs victims, before she turned 25. I determined to speak up for these young girls and boys, some as young as 8 years old, who are used and abused every day and night throughout Southeast Asia.



ADRA's interaction with Nowarat (shown above), the only girl in her Thai village not sold into sex slavery, led to the KGS program.

Facts About Sex Slavery/ Prostitution/Trafficking

Sex slavery, prostitution, and trafficking of women and children are among the three-fastest growing industries in the world. Sex tourism is a multi-billion-dollar industry. Illicit drugs, production of weapons, and sex slavery are global concerns that affect

millions of desperate people. Millions of children are sold as chattel into the worldwide sex trade. Sex tour companies proliferate in affluent nations, with the most favored destinations being the Philippines, Thailand, and Latin America. Sex slaves are cheaper today than ever before. During the dark slave trade days of the 1800s in Africa, about 11.5 million people survived the long treks to the coast and were shipped off to other countries. The figures quoted for the current sex slave trade range from 27 to 200 million.



Vulnerable hill tribe children at the local primary school in northern Thailand.

blame for allowing this degradation of their own people to continue. Parents, family, and friends in the same nations sometimes trick their children into slavery and betray those who trust them.

plight of the poor. God calls us to love our neighbors. Sexuality is a pleasurable gift from God, not an instrument of torture and shame. We are called to speak against injustice and to be peacemakers. God calls on people everywhere to “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Proverbs 31:8, 9, NIV).

KGS Project in Thailand

When the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) directors traveled to a village in northern Thailand in the mid 1990s to install a water system, they discovered one lone 12-year-old girl at the village tap. Nowarat was left to care for her mother and younger sister after the other girls from the village had been sold to Mr. Na, a sex slave trader, and taken to work in the cities. They were shocked to discover the extent and pervasiveness of the whole sordid sex industry and spoke up for prevention. My son, Marlon, and I began a campaign to raise funds in Australia that would be used to put Nowarat and other girls into school to keep them safe from exploitation. The project has grown and been renamed “Keep Girls Safe.” The ADRA project now has a fine house in Chiang Rai, northern Thailand, in an area where sex trafficking is rampant. Up to 50 girls can stay with house parents and skilled staff in a comfortably furnished house where they attend school and learn social and industrial skills. The girls are delighted to be in a safe place with compassionate, caring people. At the time of writing, there are 100 girls in ADRA’s girls clubs in mountain villages. They are made aware of the dangerous environment they could encounter as they learn practical skills and support one another. This project is one of several that are helping to curb the growing industry, but it is never enough.

Theological Reflection—God’s Call

Every human being is created in the image of God and therefore deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. God placed humankind on Earth to be responsible stewards; therefore, we cannot be silent spectators to cruelty and the

The statistics are horrendous and alarming. There seems to be no end in sight, and the poor are caught up in a cycle of poverty and hopelessness. The victims—women and children—have few rights and cannot speak up for themselves. Children are dutiful and respectful and will do anything to “pay” for their parents’

opium, drug, or gambling habits.

There are a variety of reasons for this despicable industry: war, poverty, discrimination, tourism, media glorification of sex, inadequate social and economic safety nets, and silence from civil society and faith communities. The sex industry has been growing rapidly for the past 30 years. Sex tourism was launched soon after the Vietnam War, patterned on the military who took their Rest and Recreation (R&R) in Bangkok and found women available and needing money. The rich nations of the world bear the major responsibility for this travesty of humanity. The wealthy barons in those same Asian countries are also to

What You Can Do....

- Become aware. Read, listen, share, wait, vision, pray.
- Lobby travel agents, governments, officials. Speak up.
- Go on the streets to assess the needs and get to know women and children—give a flower, a tract, a word of hope. Minister as Jesus did.
- Apply your vision to the needs; and make a plan for your area—a refuge house, a hairdressing salon where prostitutes can come and hear a message of hope. Enlist help from others. Make an information film.
- Buy products made by local women—jewelry, cards and other items through ADRA and various Websites.
- Give of your time, talents, and money to a project that helps sex slaves and prostitutes.

To learn more about this sad issue, look at the Websites under “Peace Resources” on page 46, and ask about projects where volunteers are needed in Asia. ADRA Keep Girls Safe, Rahab Ministries, and Nightlife are three projects in Thailand where money and volunteers are needed to help teach English and practical skills, train leaders, go out on the streets and into bars to meet the girls, manage finances, and love the people. Find ways to become a peacemaker. ✍



At the time this article was written, **Joy Butler** was Director of Women’s Ministries for the South Pacific Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Wahroonga, New South Wales, Australia. She helps to raise funds for the

ADRA Thailand Keep Girls Safe Project that she and her son, Marlon, started. This provides a home and skills to keep young girls from prostitution, sex slavery, and abuse.



The KGS house in Chiang Rai has offices, kitchen, worship room, and accommodation for 50 girls. ADRA headquarters and a board room are on the top floor, and out back are fields for growing rice and vegetables.