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## A Sustainable World Through Prostitution

By Anita Pleumarom

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Equipped with the concept of sustainable development and Agenda 21 - the central document of the Rio Earth Summit - it has become possible to turn virtually every development activity into an environmentally friendly venture. With the arrival of sustainable industrial and agricultural production, sustainable logging, and sustainably managed wood plantations, hydro-power dams and golf courses, we seem to have made a big leap forward to save the Earth.

A few weeks ago, I attended an Eco-tourism Conference - one of the many held over recent years in an attempt to develop a tourism industry which is in harmony with the environment and beneficial to local people. It was another affirmation that tourism is the world's most significant industry, and it's growing bigger every year. No doubt, it has its problems, but it can't be stopped - it is an inevitability. Sustainable or eco-tourism, however, can play a positive role in both development and environmental protection.

Indeed, the discussions on these issues stimulate creative thinking, also concerning other inevitable activities. Just think of prostitution which is the oldest profession in the world. Like tourism, it is a truly global activity and a multi-million dollar business. It is also a considerable foreign exchange earner in developing countries which have experienced a sex tourism boom; Thailand is one of the most illustrative examples.

And who would believe that tourism can be eradicated? With neo-liberal policies put in place by the General Agreement of Trade and Tariffs (GATT) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), globalization is in full swing - another inevitability. So one can expect that the international sex trade will further experience unprecedented growth, prompted by ever larger flows of people and money across borders.

Of course, the burgeoning sex industry has its dark sides. But as sex is a human need and prostitution is here to stay, we should think about a pro-active and realistic approach to deal with the situation.

Therefore, I suggest that more attention be paid to sustainable prostitution (SP) in order to transform inevitable prostitution into a more responsible and beneficial industry. As with the term sustainability in general, it is a bit difficult to concretely define SP. But clearly, SP can be a miracle agent for sustained economic growth in the Third World. It needs to be admitted that there will be some constraints. However,

under properly planned and managed conditions, SP has the potential to make positive contributions to community development and environmental protection. Most importantly, it can also empower poor and underprivileged women.

In its ideal form, SP can create jobs and income, boost foreign exchange, disperse benefits to rural areas, and generate funds for public purposes such as education, health care, preservation of culture and nature.

More and more people in industrialized countries travel to Third World countries to enjoy and study exotic people and nature. As tourists are said to become more conscious, discerning and professional, there will be a new breed of enlightened sex tourists, willing to pay a good price for authentic sexual experiences during their specialty tours. It is important to emphasize the tremendous potential of high-yielding quality sex tourism. Unfortunately, no country has so far discovered this very profitable niche market!

In addition, countries like Thailand can rehabilitate their image as sleazy and polluted sex tourism destinations, and this will be for the benefit of the whole tourism industry. The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) would be well advised to call for the legalization of prostitution because the country would gain enormously. SP offers the prospect of capitalizing on Thailand's comparative advantage in terms of friendly and beautiful people, plentiful and diverse prostitution facilities and related infrastructure. Tourist spots like Patpong, Pattaya or Patong, all of which have been degraded by irresponsible and unsustainable prostitution businesses, can be revamped into matured sex resorts with sophisticated services and facilities.

SP can also help to reduce the currency deficit - presently a very serious economic problem for Thailand - since it will bring additional foreign exchange earnings from SP tourists. And if appropriately integrated into TAT's domestic tourism campaign "Thiew Muang Thai", many Thai customers will be pleased to throw their money into SP attractions at home, rather than spending too much on outbound travel.

Prostitution has often been objected as it tends to overexploit women. To ensure that women get a fair price for their services, it is crucial that professional SP consultants determine the actual visitor attraction worth of women and sex workers. Guidelines can be adopted from eco-tourism experts who have developed weighing score methods to calculate the tourist attraction value of all sorts of natural resources, including wildlife. In Kenya, for example, a lion is worth US\$27,000 per year, and an elephant herd US\$610,000.

As the bulk of urban sex workers is constituted of rural women who transfer part of their earnings to their home communities, SP can considerably contribute to disperse wealth and prosperity to the provinces. With the expansion of the industry all over the country, more money will be available for health care, education and other development projects. These improvements can help to alleviate poverty and population growth because with better education, for example, women are likely to have less babies and start birthing at an older age.

Of course, SP would require a participatory approach. One of the biggest challenges would be to educate local communities on the advantages of SP and to empower them to develop their own local sex industry so that they will receive a higher share of the benefits. A whole range of employment and income opportunities can be created. SP programmes should provide training to ensure quality jobs, including ownership and management jobs. It is to make sure that consumers - both local and

foreign - will be served by knowledgeable and sensible sex workers, love hotel, brothel and massage parlour operators, restaurant and bar employees, erotic shop owners and sex tour guides. Locally produced condoms, erotic accessories and souvenirs would also make lucrative business.

SP can significantly contribute to sustained peace in the world because sex workers and their customers are concerned with making "Love not War". And, of course, other role players who benefit from SP will also be eager to promote a peaceful and stable business climate. After all, who would want to kill the goose that lays golden eggs?

SP can be an effective vehicle to mitigate prejudices and misconceptions between the sexes and foster and support cross-cultural understanding. The behaviour of rude and disrespectful sex tourists can be substantially improved by providing adequate information on cultural values, customs and lifestyles of the host country.

To make SP a successful venture, it is required to move away from superficial experiences often found in conventional prostitution and to develop strategies towards more personal and culturally sensitive services in order to maximize customer satisfaction. As sex workers play a crucial role in social mediation and cultural brokerage, funds should be provided for educational programmes to improve their language skills and help them understand the needs and motives of their customers. Facilities, which are especially catering to foreigners, should train their employees as culture interpreters. Valuable experiences can be drawn from eco-tourism, for example, which has begun to train local tour guides as nature interpreters.

There is the common notion that local communities have practiced primitive farming, cut down trees in the forests and poached wildlife because they are poor. In addition to eco-tourism, there is now a real opportunity to help wipe out such environmentally destructive practises through SP. By allowing more rural women to participate in SP, poverty can be substantially reduced, and there will no longer be the immediate need for local people to plunder nature. Feminists will welcome the idea of SP because women are given a special responsibility in environmental protection and community development. This means women can achieve more prestige and equality in society.

Since sex tourists and local customers are likely to stay in a few red-light districts and sex resorts, they will not carelessly roam around and contribute to pollution and depletion of natural resources.

As prostitution places are usually perceived as shady and shabby, it is critically important to properly plan and manage such facilities to provide a clean, healthy and pleasant atmosphere. Massage parlours and turkish baths consume high amounts of water, and an action plan for sound water management is an urgent need. Other establishments will also have to implement greening programmes to save water and energy, and to recycle and better manage waste to avoid pollution problems. They should also be recommended to switch to solar energy and other renewable technologies.

New love hotels, brothels and entertainment complexes are to be built with locally available materials and designed in a way that they fit well into the natural and cultural landscape. Assistance for the construction and management of such facilities can perhaps be requested from the US-based Ecotourism Society which

has established guidelines for low-impact eco-lodges.

There is no denial that SP development implies several risks and constraints: crimes like forced prostitution and trafficking of women and children; spread of AIDS and other diseases; social and cultural erosion; etc.

Appropriate policies, legislation and management tools must be in place to avoid such pitfalls of prostitution, and decisive action needs to be taken against related criminal activities. The sex trade should quickly adopt guidelines and codes of ethics to regulate their activities; otherwise they may be increasingly policed by governments.

Another thinkable possibility is to introduce rating systems and SP labels - comparable with eco-labels - which will help consumers to differentiate between "good" and "bad" prostitution businesses. Brochures, videos and other materials should be produced with warnings on the risks of prostitution so that local consumers and sex tourists can take preventive measures.

If the potential of SP is to be fully realized, there must be close cooperation among all actors involved: concerned government agencies, NGOs, love hotel and brothel owners, traffickers, pimps, mamasans, prostitutes, tourism entrepreneurs and local communities. Political will is crucial to resolve probable conflicts among the various parties. It would be naïve to believe that consensus on all SP issues can be achieved easily. To arrive at the most sustainable outcome, trade-offs, compromises and compensation of disadvantaged role players will be necessary. But once the message is spread that future money can be made from SP, there will be an enhanced interest to produce feasible and practical results.

As this proposal for SP is designed on the principles of sustainable development and appears to be in line with the decisions of the Rio Earth Summit 1992, and the Social Summit in Copenhagen, 1995, there is a real possibility that private industry, international organizations and financial institutions like the World Bank will be supportive and generous regarding funding for research, professional services, conferences, education and training programmes and pilot projects; just as it is the case in sustainable and eco-tourism.

So let us not fret over definitions and values! We should also no longer worry about the commercialization and commodification of all aspects of life - human bodies, culture and nature - since unfettered capitalism and consumerism are also part of the inevitable reality. Any other views must be considered as ideology and are likely to frustrate pro-active approaches to change the world for the better. The time has come to realize the positive links between prostitution, development and the environment and to promote sustainable prostitution.

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