

Business as Transformation

Introduction

Thailand is a great country. Tens of thousands of Swedes have also discovered that. It is the “Land of Smiles” with beautiful beaches, pleasant temperature, good food and friendly people. It is not difficult to fall in love with Thailand and its people. But like every other country there is a flipside. Prostitution is illegal, but nevertheless it is a billion dollar industry which operates openly. Seven out of ten men who come to Thailand buy sex. About the same proportions apply for Thai men. There are factors in Thai culture and religion which contribute to feed this destructive industry. But there are also Christian business people who offer a way out from the sex industry by providing jobs with dignity.

Are we indifferent?

On our first evening in Pattaya, a major tourist town on the East coast, people could witness something horrific on the street. It happened openly: slaves were being brought to work. Nobody reacted but my wife. Three young beautiful Russian women with two guards were taken to the brothel for slave work. They were victims of trafficking. With a trained eye, based on years of experience of work among prostitutes and victims of trafficking, she understood what was taking place. Young women from former Soviet Union, many from Uzbekistan, are sold as sex slaves in Thailand.

Sometimes we ask ourselves why Germans didn't react when Jews were brutally and by force taken from their homes, marched down the streets to trucks which brought them to concentration camps. We ask: why were people so indifferent? But the same question applies today, and it should even be asked to the thousands of Swedes who cannot avoid seeing what is going on in Thailand. Behind the friendly Thai smiles you may find slavery and human misery. Are we indifferent?

Dedicated to prostitution

But the bulk of the prostitutes in Thailand are Thai girls from the northeast provinces. Most have no more than a sixth grade education. The vast majority have two things in common. Many have been dedicated - even as babies - to gods and spirits, through a religious rite based on a mix of Buddhism and animism. Secondly, daughters are expected to support their parents, to be their pension scheme as it were. The sons, on the other hand, spend a few months as Buddhist monks and through that they invest in the parents' next life. Thus they are not responsible for the welfare of the parents in this life. So parents and relatives send and sell their daughters to work as prostitutes in cities like Bangkok, Phuket and Pattaya.

- We work with these girls and it is a lot more complex than just dealing with psychological traumas and difficult socioeconomic issues, says Susan who is a well educated therapist from USA. We are dealing with spiritual realities; some may call it demons, but regardless of labels, one cannot assist these girls to full restoration unless you recognize and deal also with these spiritual issues.

Transformational business

Susan volunteers with a team which has worked in Bangkok for the last four years. Their mission is to restore people – socially, spiritually, economically, emotionally and physically. To that end they have started a business: Nightlight. Today 80 women are employed, former prostitutes or those at risk. The company is based on Christian values and prayer is an integral part of in the business.

- We don't require anyone to convert, but we are not hiding who we are and what we believe, says Katie who is a designer of the jewelry that the women manufacture. But we have seen an increasing number of women be totally transformed as they become followers of Jesus.

About half the women have started a church, quite a unique one. The leaders and the members are mostly former slaves of the sex industry. To them the Christian faith is a life transforming power, not just some theoretical biblical statements they adhere to.

When you work with prostitutes and trafficking victims, you must be able to answer the question: out of prostitution, rescued from the sex slave trade, but into what? You need to be able to offer a job with dignity as a sustainable alternative. Here Christian business people hold keys in combating today's slavery. There is a definite need for more Christian entrepreneurs with a vision for this.

Need for cultural change

Here also lie important issues of culture and a need for changes of culture. Many in Sweden and in Europe naively believe that all cultures are equally good, albeit different, and that all should be neutrally accommodated without any cultural custom being challenged.

Sometimes, and sometimes rightly so, Christian mission has been accused of cultural imperialism and imposition. Mistakes will always be made in a cultural encounter, but there are numerous examples all over the world of how the Christian message has transformed cultural norms and customs which have been destructive, also in Sweden. The religious practices which undergird oppression of women and cultural norms which reinforce the sex industry cannot be accepted. There is a definite need in Thailand for a constructive critique of religion and culture in this respect. But there is also a need for life transforming alternatives based on human dignity and rights. Nightlight provides just that through its business.

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