

by DAWN HERZOG JEWELL

RED-LIGHT RESCUE

The 'business' of helping the sexually exploited help themselves.

WHEN MOON WAS 12 WEEKS OLD, her birth mother sold her to a local Burmese woman, who raised her like a slave. When Moon (not her real name) was 3 years old, this second "mother" forced her to wash dishes in a restaurant eight hours a day. When Moon turned 13, the woman sold Moon's virginity to a Western businessman in Thailand. But she fought her way free.

A few months later, she wasn't so lucky. Her second mother blocked the hotel room door after an Indian man paid 30,000 baht (\$800) and then beat Moon with a belt until she submitted to sex. She had to be carried home. For 10 days, Moon couldn't walk.

"I felt like throwing up," she says. "I was repulsed by my 'mother' and afraid of men. I was sad and ashamed, because I wasn't clean."

A year later, across the border in northern Thailand, the same woman tricked Moon into working at a noodle stand that was in reality a brothel. When Moon refused to comply with her first customer, the brothel owner slapped her and taped her hands to the bed. She shouted, so they forced a ping-pong ball in her mouth and taped it shut. The second night, 15 men used her; the next night, 9; the next, 11. The johns included men from Thailand, Myanmar, Japan, Korea, India, and the West. The owner's brother, a policeman, drugged Moon and 10 other captive girls to keep them awake at night. They were threatened with cigarette burns.

Moon tried to escape, but the woman owner and her brothers locked her in her room and kept an armed vigil at the brothel. Several times, policemen visited in street clothes and

She's Got a Friend: Rachel Theisen, right, a volunteer with Just Food, Inc., with Apple, a prostitute and manager of a bar in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The bar girls look forward to the twice-weekly visits to speak to women who care about them.

IMB/GENESIS PHOTOS

'If business could get them into the sex industry, why can't business get them out—and help them find Jesus at the same time?' KERRY HILTON, FREESAT

used Moon for free, compliments of the owner. She begged them for help. But they told the owner, who beat Moon and threatened to throw acid on her face.

During her time in the brothel, Moon was raped about 100 times.

"I cursed every god. But in my heart, I believed someone would come and help me," Moon says. She was right. After nearly a month in the brothel, the police and International Justice Mission, an evangelical ministry, rescued her.

Each year, hundreds of thousands of women and children are prostituted around the globe. Moon was one of an estimated 1 million children who annually enter the multibillion-dollar industry of commercial sexual exploitation, according to UNICEF. In Thailand alone, where prostitution is technically illegal, some 200,000 girls and women are exploited.

Four years ago, missionaries Mark and Christa Crawford in Thailand learned of Moon's plight. Since then, they've introduced Moon to Jesus and tried to help her earn a decent living—a challenge for someone without marketable skills. Moon says that since the Crawfords entered her life, "I have realized that I have value and worth. And now that I know God, I can always pray for his help whenever I have a problem."

The Crawfords are among a growing number of Christians worldwide working to live out the love of Jesus by reaching out to sexually exploited people.

They offer counseling, discipleship, and prayer for the wounds of sexual trauma and lead many women to Christ. But after deserting the sex industry, these women also need help supporting themselves and often their families.

"The story's not over because someone

is rescued from a brothel or decides to leave a 'bar,'" says Christa. "It's only beginning." CHRISTIANITY TODAY found a few cutting-edge organizations around the world that include work opportunities in their model for personal and spiritual restoration. Whether it's through manufacturing handbags in India or producing soymilk in Cambodia, these organizations help once-broken women discover their full worth in the eyes of Jesus.



Second Life: Christa Crawford (above) of Just Food, Inc., with Moon, who was sold into prostitution at age 13 but is now married with two children.

ONLY ONE CHOICE

In 2001, the Crawfords relocated from Southern California to direct the Thailand office of International Justice Mission (IJM) in the lush, mountainous city of Chiang Mai.

They were drawn to move to Thailand after a short-term mission trip to Asia. Christa, a graduate of Harvard Law School, was dissatisfied with corporate law and had been providing legal aid at the Union Gospel Mission in Los Angeles. Mark had been pastoring a growing multi-ethnic church while completing a master's degree at Fuller Theological Seminary; he was preparing himself to fulfill a call to minister to prostituting women.

When the couple began advocating

through IJM for underage girls in forced prostitution, they noticed women over 18 who were "voluntarily" prostituting themselves. They lacked other viable options for supporting themselves and their families. Many women told Mark that they chose prostitution, but, he says, "When you ask them what their choices were, they had only one choice." This is why many refer to them as "prostituted women"—to highlight the forced nature of their work.

Thailand's neighbor to the north, Myanmar (Burma), has been under a military dictatorship for years, and its people have endured human rights abuses and a breakdown in the national economy. Consequently, an estimated 350,000 people have fled to Thailand, where they are considered illegal immigrants. Some 40,000 of these are women and girls exploited in Thailand's sex industry, many in Chiang Mai.

Lisa Thompson, the Salvation Army's liaison for the abolition of sexual trafficking, says media attention on sex trafficking has "captured people's hearts and [their] desire to help those perceived as poor, 'innocent' victims—those trapped in brothels, held at gunpoint, or locked in somebody's basement.

"But Christians tend to split prostituting women into two categories: the good prostitutes and the bad prostitutes. The good ones are victims of forced prostitution; the bad women are voluntary prostitutes and whores."

The problem is that women on street corners appear to be acting freely, Thompson says. But passers-by are blind to the chains that bind woman to prostitution: poverty, a lack of education, early drug use, a parent in prostitution, childhood



Brittney Quinn (left) bakes cookies with Joy, a former prostitute who now cooks at a local restaurant.

‘We believe the gospel of the kingdom is to bring the wholeness of life into women.’ PIERRE TAMI, HAGAR INTERNATIONAL

sexual abuse, and the abusive tactics of traffickers and pimps.

In a survey of prostituted women in nine countries including Thailand, the United States, Mexico, South Africa, and Turkey, nearly nine out of ten said they longed to escape.

The women the Crawfords talk to in bars, massage parlors, and karaoke venues prostitute themselves to provide for parents and children. While it’s normal for sons or daughters in Thailand to offer a portion of their income to parents or grandparents, Mark says families of prostituting women often demand 50 to 100 percent of their daughter’s income.

“Filial piety is an admirable Asian cultural value that’s been perverted here by dysfunctional families and a

changing society,” he says. The need for money leads women into the sex industry. They stay in prostitution because other available unskilled jobs pay significantly less.

PLAYING TO STRENGTHS

Few Christian organizations were reach-

ing these women in Chiang Mai. So in 2003, the Crawfords decided to pioneer their own outreach, Just Food, Inc., representing “Justice and Food.”

Western-style cafes are popular among locals, the large expatriate and missionary community, and the city’s 3 million-plus

IMB/GENESIS PHOTOS

tourists each year. Christa designed a menu full of the California cuisine she craved, and they opened a modest café housed in a bookstore, featuring items like Southwest chicken wraps and tandoori chicken pizza. They trained women—former prostitutes and those at-risk of entering the trade—to make tortillas and gourmet coffee drinks, to serve customers, and to run a kitchen.

Despite the café’s enticing menu and décor, some Thai Christians refused to patronize a business tainted by the stigma of prostitution, and many churches have been hesitant to get involved in any way. “By associating with prostitutes, you’re lowering your status,” Mark says. “It’s like working with lepers. Are you going to infect yourself if you’re associating with these people?”

The Crawfords did help one Thai church to open a daycare facility for children of prostituted women.

In 2004, the Crawfords launched a new venture, a combined counseling and vocational training program called Garden of Hope. With Western food still in high demand, Mark and Christa are now raising capital to start a culinary arts academy at their rehabilitation center. The new ministry will reach out to at-risk women, children, and men. In addition to baking and cooking classes, the ministry will offer computer training.

The Crawfords anticipate that training

for legitimate jobs in restaurants and hotels will fit with the women’s gifts. “These women are [already] in the service industry,” says Christa. “We need to redeem their skills.”

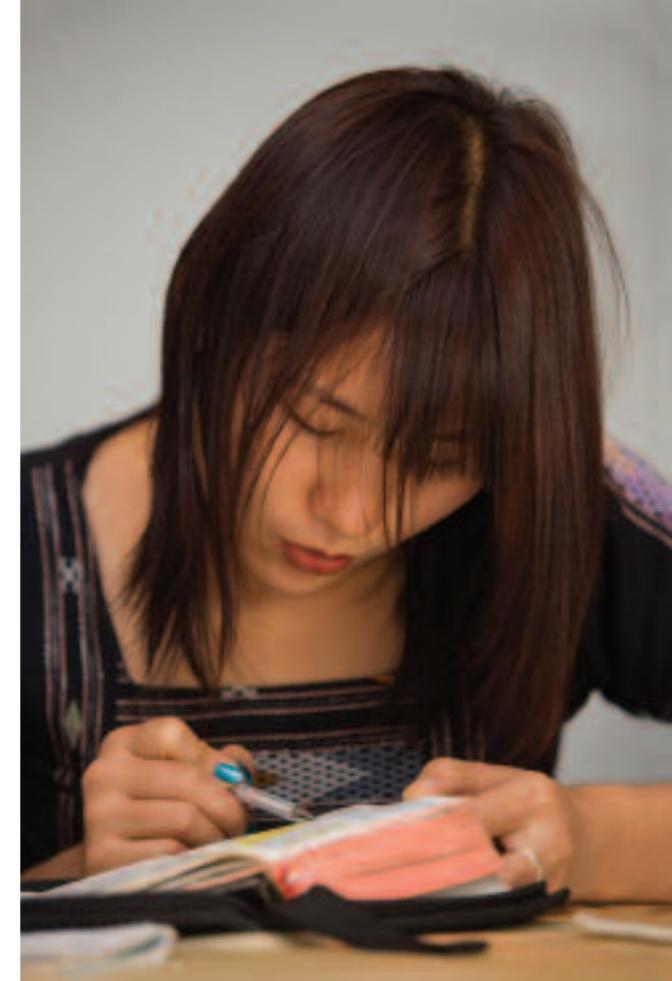
The Crawfords’ views on vocational training were shaped by Mark’s years as a training manager for Ritz-Carlton Hotels. “The emphasis was not correcting people’s weaknesses, but playing to their strengths,” he says.

With prostitution, “you’re pretending you want to be with someone you don’t want to be with. You have to present a false image of yourself,” Mark says. The couple believe offering multiple training options will help the women and girls discover how God has gifted them and regain a sense of self.

In addition, the women employed at the ministry’s garden café will gain customer service and basic marketing skills. The Crawfords aim to link graduates with jobs and apprenticeships at restaurants and four- or five-star hotels, such as the Four Seasons. Christa hopes to

someday supply the four local Starbucks with cinnamon rolls, brownies, and muffins.

The Crawfords also want to turn Just



Everlasting Aid: To help former prostitutes deepen their spiritual lives, volunteers, like the woman above, teach them how to study the Bible and pray.



Weaving Hope: Women at a Hagar Cambodia shelter in Phnom Penh make small handicrafts together as they settle into their new environment.

COURTESY HAGAR INTERNATIONAL

Child Sex Tours

The average victim is 14, and Americans make up 25 percent of the customers.

With the ease of international air travel, arranging sex tourism—including sex with under-age girls—is almost as simple as clicking on a website. By taking trips to areas tolerant of prostitution, American tourists or business travelers can easily take advantage of the estimated 2 million prostituted children in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Economically depressed or politically unstable regions are especially vulnerable to commercialized sex.

According to World Vision, some predators travel specifically for “sex tours,” expecting anonymity, low-cost prostitution, ready access to children, and immunity from prosecution. Americans account for 25 percent of child sex tourists, according to reliable global estimates. The average victim is 14 years old, although some prostituted children are pre-adolescent. Besides the emotional and physical wounds of

sexual abuse, the children are also at great risk of HIV infection.

To combat child sex tourism, World Vision has teamed up with national governments and U.S. immigration and law enforcement agencies. U.S. citizens and residents can face up to 30 years imprisonment for engaging in sexual activity with children under 18, even if they do so outside the U.S.

Internationally, prosecutions are rare. In a recent case, Australian police arrested a pilot, charging him under an anti-sex tourism law. He is accused of abducting a Papua New Guinea girl and forcing her to have sex with him.

Sadly, corrupt law enforcement

Life as Usual: Prostitutes waiting for customers outside a bar in Bangkok’s red-light district show little enthusiasm for their lifestyle, which is often forced on them by circumstances and pimps.

STEPHEN SHAVER / AFP



feeds the problem in countries such as Thailand, says Graham Tardif, who until recently oversaw World Vision’s anti-trafficking program in Thailand. Since trafficking profits are huge and local wages are low, accepting bribes to look the other way is a huge temptation for police and immigration officers, despite government attempts to end such corruption.

In addition to encouraging proper law enforcement, World Vision is sponsoring a media campaign to dissuade potential child sex tourists. It includes airport billboards and posters, ads in tourist magazines, in-flight video announcements, and brochures in taxis and hotels in the United States, Thailand, Cambodia, Mexico, and Costa Rica.

But the problem remains massive. In Thailand alone, the government-sponsored Baan Kredtakarn center in Bangkok has been providing shelter and assistance for women and girls for more than 40 years. World Vision’s Tardif estimates that more than 90 percent of the girls treated there are victims of child sex tourism and trafficking. That is not likely an exaggeration, considering that the Thai government admits there are 20,000 to 30,000 children involved in its commercial sex industry.

• Dawn Herzog Jewell

Hilton says he's not simply rescuing women; the women are also transforming the community.

Food, Inc., into a franchise, operating restaurants, bed and breakfasts, and spas where recovering women can gain work skills in supportive environments.

This year, they plan to offer loans to 30 women to start microenterprise businesses. They're seeking an experienced businessperson to oversee such business development. "We need most the people who think they are least qualified to be a missionary," Christa says, "because often missionaries are the least qualified to start and run successful businesses." While their hopes are high, Christa and Mark are not naïve to the challenges of their ministry, especially working with women who often lack formal education and are recovering from sexual exploitation.

The miracle, Mark says, occurs when exploited women realize their inherent dignity and need for God. He estimates a

transition time of three to five years from life in prostitution to stable work elsewhere, while women grow in Christ and serve in a local church.

To encourage similar ministries around the world, the Crawfords and other ministry leaders are forming the International Christian Alliance on Prostitution (ICAP). Begun last spring, ICAP will offer training and resources to dozens of existing projects, encourage the growth of new ministries, and develop regional networks.

JUTE FOR FREEDOM

When Kerry Hilton moved to India, he was stunned by the sight of 6,000 women and girls prostituting themselves on the streets of Kolkata (Calcutta). It was 2000, and Kerry had relocated from New Zealand with his wife and three children. The women lined the streets of Sonagachi,

one of Asia's largest red-light districts, enticing customers.

More than 2.3 million girls and women are believed to make up India's sex industry—and prostitution transactions totaled \$4.1 million a day in 2004.

Although Hilton had moved to India to minister to such women, he didn't know where to begin. But he thought, "If business could get them into the sex industry, why can't business get them out—and help them find Jesus at the same time?" A friend helped Hilton draw up a business plan.

They experimented with manufacturing leather bags, buffalo horn products, and finally jute, an environmentally friendly fiber. Locally produced cotton bags couldn't compete with China's low prices, but since India grows a majority of the world's jute, they determined that jute

bags could compete. Hilton rented a building surrounded by brothels and hired 20 women who wanted to escape prostitution. Hilton's wife, Annie, trained the women in a couple months to sew 30 jute bags a day.

Today, 70 former prostitutes work from 10 A.M. to 7 P.M. at Freeset, sewing 100,000 tote and gift bags a year. The bags are sold internationally, largely by word of mouth, and many are custom-designed for the Christian conference market. The women earn about \$52 a month including benefits, more than they'd get paid sewing nearly anywhere else in Kolkata.

Hilton says he's not simply rescuing women; the women are also transforming the community. They pray daily at Freeset and meet in prayer cells each Wednesday. Local pastors frequently lead devotions. The women return home to the same place they used to serve customers.

"We're seeking a business takeover—a freedom business takeover of the sex business," Hilton says. "We want markets, not donations."

NOT JUST FEELING SORRY

A similar "freedom business" is booming in Cambodia, thanks to social entrepreneur Pierre Tami. The Swiss Christian businessman left the airline industry in 1994 to establish Hagar Cambodia, a shelter and rehabilitation center for women and children in Phnom Penh.

With the aid of professional staff and the World Bank's private sector arm, the International Finance Corporation, Tami developed three flourishing businesses—producing soy milk, sewing silk products, and cooking/catering—to provide employment for women and to help them support their families. Last year, Hagar Catering donated almost half its profits to ministry.

But two years ago, it was on the verge of closing. Frank Woods, a volunteer with 30 years of experience in the catering industry, turned the business around. Woods is now financially supported by a local church in Australia; he shows the women in Hagar Catering how God can help them in their daily lives as they cook and serve meals to hotel staff and garment factory workers.

Recently, Hagar Catering won a contract for the American embassy's staff

cafeteria, beating out other well-established businesses. "They chose us not because they felt sorry for us [and the women], but because of our quality service," Tami says. While Hagar's businesses aren't meant to fully finance its services, he expects them to become full-fledged commercial ventures generating a profit margin of 5 to 15 percent.

Rather than a missions or church-

planting organization, Tami says Hagar International is a Christian agency that witnesses via acts of Christlike compassion and justice. "We don't use these tragedies [in women's lives] to be Bible-bashers. We journey together with them, with love and compassion, to find the injustices and speak up on their behalf in very practical terms." The agency works with local churches, which are responsible

for discipling women and girls who want to grow in their faith.

“That’s not just feeling sorry for ‘these poor women.’ We want to see them fully empowered, with dignity and self esteem, and productive in society,” Tami explains. “We believe the gospel of the kingdom is to bring the wholeness of life into women.”

Tami hopes to spread his ministry model to “Hagars” who are fleeing vio-

lence, joblessness, abuse, and rape in Afghanistan, Nepal, Vietnam, and beyond. “We believe we’re part of God’s response to Hagar,” he says. “Don’t be afraid. God has heard your cry and the child’s.”

BEYOND CHARITY

Just Food, Inc., Freeset, and Hagar International are capitalizing on a new trend in mission—helping the poor and oppressed

escape their plight through business. Microenterprise ministries like Opportunity International are another expression of this emphasis.

For the last four years, Mats Tunehag has been linking churches, agencies, and Christians with business skills to ministries fighting trafficking and prostitution. As the World Evangelical Alliance’s and Lausanne’s senior associate for Business as Mission (BAM), Tunehag is calling on churches worldwide to deploy gifted businesspeople to work where they can create lasting change.

A business approach to ministry requires market analysis—examining the local market and beyond, identifying competitors, and allocating capital—which requires involving people with business experience.

Tunehag defines BAM as business with a kingdom perspective, where God transforms people and their communities spiritually, socially, and economically. “Business

is not just about getting people a job and income,” he says. “It’s a vital instrument in the transformation process.”

Tunehag wants to supplement the charity model. “We’re thinking that if we’re going to do something, we must raise money and give it away, by providing medical help or working in a shelter or something.” But preventing trafficking and prostitution depends on sustainable jobs and income, so business opportunities are key.

“If God has called you to business, where should you do it?” Tunehag says. “Ask [yourself]: ‘Where could I have the most impact for the kingdom, especially for the least, the lost, and the lowliest?’”

FROM NUTS TO TAXI RIDES

After Moon’s rescue from the brothel, the Crawfords helped her start a business selling assorted nuts, which didn’t pan out. A second effort, selling souvenirs to Thai tourists, proved more profitable. Then, a few months after her rescue, Moon married a Thai man and soon had two babies.

Two years ago, Just Food, Inc., loaned the family \$200 for Moon’s husband to launch a motorcycle taxi business. The family now earns \$5 a day in Myanmar, double the amount they require for food and basic needs.

After years of pouring Jesus’ love into the lives of Moon and her young family, the Crawfords’ team is witnessing a transformation of her entire family system. Moon’s husband, who became a Christian four months ago, now reads the Bible to her daily, and local women on the Garden of Hope’s staff are teaching Moon to read and write while they disciple her.

Moon, with her knowledge of human trafficking, helps Mark train staff to work with victims of trafficking and exploited street kids. “I cannot teach reading or writing or help in a lot of ways, but I can use my experience to help other girls like me,” she says. “I don’t want the same thing to happen to them.”

Recently, Moon helped rescue Wan, a 16-year-old girl. Wan was dirty, hungry, and wearing a very short skirt while walking the streets near the Thai border. Moon bought her lunch and a soft drink, then heard God telling her to help the girl more.

Wan said her parents had encouraged

her to prostitute herself. Minutes before a trafficker arrived to ship Wan to Bangkok, Moon led her to safety at a staff person’s house. Moon counseled her during many late nights, and the staff prayed and encouraged Wan until she realized she had other options besides prostitution.

Moon’s identity has changed from rescued to rescuer, from victim to counselor, thanks to the Crawfords’ ministry and

God’s redemptive love. But hundreds of thousands of women and girls around the globe are still waiting to escape. 

Dawn Herzog Jewell works with Media Associates International, a ministry that trains publishers, editors, and writers around the world. Her forthcoming book, *Escaping the Devil’s Bedroom*, will be released in 2008. She and her husband, Matt, live in Wheaton, Illinois.

RESOURCES

The International Christian Alliance on Prostitution
(email: contactICAP@gmail.com)

Child Sex Tourism Prevention Project
(www.stopchildtourism.org) This organization aims to engage citizens against child sex tourism, and includes links to law enforcement agencies for reporting abuse of children overseas.

Break the Traffic (www.breakthetraffic.org) This website sponsors an online petition to express solidarity with trafficking victims and to make a statement against human trafficking.

The Salvation Army The Salvation Army offers a prayer guide on sex trafficking and prostitution (email: penny_matheson@usn.salvationarmy.org), and also spearheads the Initiative Against Sexual Trafficking (www.iast.net/resources).

Business as Mission
(www.businessasmission.com)

Just Food, Inc. (www.justfoodinc.org)

Hagar International
(www.hagarproject.org)

Freeset (www.freesetbags.com)

The Well (servantworks.org/well)