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## A PRELIMINARY SURVEY OF PROSTITUTION IN KUCHING

HEW CHENG SIM

*The increasing problem of prostitution in the State led to the formation of a Task Force by the Women's Bureau under the Ministry of Social Development in Sarawak. The Task Force was asked to study the problem of prostitution and make recommendations to the various Government agencies in order to better monitor and control the situation. This preliminary survey of prostitution in Kuching was conducted as result of the work of the Task Force. Due to the constraint of time and resources, only a limited number of prostitutes in Kuching were interviewed.*

### BACKGROUND OF RESPONDENTS

*Twenty respondents aged between twenty and thirty nine, were interviewed in Sarawak General Hospital during June 1990. Twelve of them were below thirty years of age. The respondents consisted of 12 Bidayuh, 7 Malays and 1 Chinese. They came from Kuching, Bau, Padawan, Serian, Tebedu, Simunjan, Asajaya, Lundu and as far away as Sri Aman. Most (14) of them were either divorced, widowed or deserted by their husbands. Only six were single women. Many (8) did not have any formal education. Of those who had some schooling, only eight had a few years of primary education. Most of the respondents (12) had done previous jobs such as waitress and home helper. In other words, prostitution was not their first occupational choice. The rest (8) entered the profession without any prior engagement in waged work. Half of the respondents were introduced into prostitution by their friends while another eight found the job themselves.*

*Most had children and aged parents to support. The ages of their children ranged from one to eighteen years with the majority being less than ten years old. Those who were single had school-going siblings and parents to support. A quarter of the respondents were sole bread-winners in their households while more than half (11) were assisted by others in their families.*

*Most of them (16) left home because of hardship in the "Kampung" and their need to earn cash; while only three came to Kuching when their families moved there many years ago. The majority (16) also cited financial reasons for joining the profession. Their inability to make ends meet any other way was also frequently mentioned. Hence the women interviewed were mainly young, rural based, abandoned by their husbands and with little formal education. The main thrust for the women's migration to Kuching was their need to earn a cash income for their families at home.*

## WORKING CONDITIONS

*All the respondents worked for owners of bars who levied a fixed rate of M\$10 per client from the women. Three quarters of the respondents (15) worked four to five hours a night while the rest worked two to three hours a night. They started work in the evening from between seven to eight and finished at eleven to twelve midnight. Some worked every night of the week while others only worked two to three nights in a week. They had off-days several days of each month.*

*The minimum rate of payment per client was M\$20 with one respondent mentioning a figure of M\$150 for a client. However, most (16) earned between M\$20 to M\$50 per client. Two respondents mentioned earning monthly salaries of M\$200 and M\$ 280 plus tips for drinks. Most respondents got an average of two to three customers a night. Business was slack on weekdays but brisk on weekends and pay days. Half of them earned between M\$600 and M\$900 a month, while a few (3) earned M\$1000 or more a month. The rest (7) earned between M\$200 and M\$500 a month. Only one respondent had another job in a day as a waitress in a coffee shop working from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. for a monthly salary of M\$150. Earning were difficult to assess as they varied from month to month.*

*When asked to comment on their job, half cited the good pay. Two of the respondents mentioned that the flexible working hours fitted in with the children. One added that she like not having to work in the heat of the day. The negative aspects of the job were the fear of contacting venereal diseases, verbal and physical abuse of drunken and rough customers. Others talked of unpleasantness of the job such as customers who did not pay and who had unusual sexual demands. One mentioned a moody employer while another did not like the competition from younger women. It therefore appears that the negative aspects of the job far outweigh the perks, with the exception of money.*

*It was also noted that more than half the respondents (13) mentioned that at least some members of their families knew of their present occupation in town. These were usually siblings. Children were kept in the dark, nor were their mothers told. Some did not tell their families but said that they were working as amahs, bus conductors and waitresses instead. It would seem that although most felt the stigma of their job, their families were not entirely ignorant of the way in which they earned their income.*

## EXPENDITURE

*The respondents spent between M\$30 and M\$180 a month on rent and electricity and water more than half (11) paying over M\$100 a month. Most (19) shared*

accommodations with others and the majority had a room to themselves. Almost all of them (18) paid for transportation to and from work while two respondents lived next door to their place of work. Less than half (7) paid more than M\$100 a month on taxi fares while others (7) paid M\$69 a month on bus and taxi fares. The rest (4) either took buses and paid less than M\$20 a month or were sent home by their employers without any charge. Thus transportation cost for going to and from work at night constituted a large part of their expenditure.

The majority (12) sent money home at least once a month while a few (5) sent more than once a month. The amount sent varied: two respondents sent more than M\$400 a month while some (8) sent between M\$200 and M\$300 a month. A few (3) sent between M\$100 and M\$150 a month and others (6) sent less than M\$100 a month. Thus many sent a sizeable proportion of their income home.

### **BIRTH CONTROL**

Most (12) used some form of birth control (the pill being the most popular) while the rest (8) did not use any birth control method. As a result, four had pregnancies because of the job. One respondent had three children this way. The other three respondents had abortions (one by doctor, another by a back-street abortionist and one by herself)

### **THE FUTURE**

Half said that they did not wish to continue with their job but had no choice because they were unable to get another job that paid sufficiently to support their families. They were also afraid of the stigma of being recognised as ex-prostitutes if they worked in shops. Thus many had to keep their jobs until their children finished school. Some mentioned that they would marry if they met the right man while others preferred to return to their "Kampung" to farm. Other possible occupations mentioned by them included jobs such as cleaners, sweepers and confinement helpers, the former two being unrealistic because of low pay.

Some (9) of the respondents wanted to remain in the job as they preferred to be economically independent. They also remarked that their future were still financially insecure. One said that it would be difficult to find a man who would marry her, while another said that marriage did not guarantee financial security as some of her married friends had returned to the job to make ends meet. It would therefore appear that they would prefer other occupation if they paid good wages.

## CONCLUSION

*Hence it can be concluded that for most of the women interviewed, prostitution was not an occupation of choice but one of the circumstances. Left with young children by their husbands, with little education and no marketable skills, many had to turn to prostitution to support not only themselves but also the very young and the very old in their families. Thus there is every indication that poverty is the prime cause of prostitution amongst local women.*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. In so far as prostitution by local women is indicative of a lack of cash earning opportunities in the rural areas, efforts should be made for the creation of greater employment opportunities in the rural areas. Sustainable light industries such as food processing and packaging should be developed to provide avenues for earning a cash income in the rural areas.*
- 2. The literacy of rural women should also be improved in order to increase their trainability in the various skills for employment.*
- 3. Women should be given training in marketable skills other than those which have been considered traditionally female.*
- 4. More research should be conducted to collect data not only on how widespread the problem of prostitution by local women is in the State, but also the consequences this has on the women involved and the community at large.*