

Why you?

Qualitative Survey on Sexual Service Providers (SSP)

in Five Provinces of Lao PDR:

Bokeo, Luang Namtha, Savannakhet, Sekong, Champasak

NCA in Lao PDR

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List of acronyms

ASEAN: Association of South East Asian Nations
ATP: Attapeu
BKO: Bokeo
BLK: Bolikhamxay
CHAS: Centre for HIV/AIDS/STI
CPS: Champassak
DCCA: District Committee for Control of AIDS
GoL: Government of Laos
HPH: Houaphanh
IEC: Information Education Communication
KHM: Khammouane
LNT: Luang Namtha
LPB: Luang Prabang
NCA: Norwegian Church Aid
PCCA: Provincial Committee for Control of AIDS
PKS: Pakse
PLS: Phongsali
PSI: Population Services International
RC: Red Cross
RTB: Risk-taking Behaviour
SKG: Sekong
SLV: Saravanh
SS: Sexual Service
SSP: Sexual Service Providers
STI: Sexually Transmitted infections
SVK: Savannakhet
UDX: Udomxai
VD: Vaginal Discharge
VTE: Vientiane
VTP: Vientiane Province
XBL: Xayabouli
XKH: Xieng Khouang

Kip in US\$: 9350 Kip 1 US\$
Kip in Thai Baht: 280 Kip 1 Baht
Thai Baht in US\$: 33.4 Baht 1 US\$

Executive Summary

"*Why you?*" "*Why this job?*" – these are the questions which sexual service providers (SSP) are most commonly asked by male clients; it is as though the man, after being sexually serviced, cannot quite believe that a young woman like *this* could be doing sex work. The questions suppose that there are other choices open to these women other than sex work, and arguably, they imply at the same time that only certain types of woman do this work as it must be degrading to do so. This study attempts to address these presumptions and allows the reader to hear as it were, the answers (for there are many) to these questions.

The temptation when considering the life of women who provide sexual services for money is to attempt to build a single profile, one which fits preconceptions about common root causes, identifiable patterns and potential underlying common character traits. This is like trying to understand multiple problems of physics by applying the same mathematical formula. In seeking to simplify the understanding of these women, the tendency is to look for what is known, what is expected, and in the process it is all too easy to overlook or choose to ignore the less obvious, the less predictable indicators which may challenge our preconceived ideas.

Some of the well-known factors which conduct young women to enter the life of providing sexual services to men (i.e. poverty and abuse) are certainly prevalent among respondents in this study. What also emerges, however, is not so much a clear picture of the profile of sexual services providers (SSP), but rather a complex mosaic. The respondents were poor and not so poor; highland Lao and lowland Lao, abused, and abuse-free; deceived into working in a beer-shop, and conscious and entirely free of will; illiterate, and university undergraduate; dutiful daughter accepting the financial burden of an entire family, and goods-hungry consumer; daughter of landless, indebted farmers, and daughter of tree-plantation owner; the naive, and the adventurer.

This study met 101 women from 12 different ethnicities, from 16 provinces in Laos and with 101 different experiences of life to relate.

It is usually a girl who is pulled out of school because the family cannot afford to educate all the siblings: (average 5) Maybe the secondary school is also too far away from the village and there is no transportation; perhaps the girl considers herself too *stupid* or *lazy* (by her own admission) to study – there is rarely any opposition from the parents to a daughter dropping out of school as it means an extra pair of hands around the home and after all, as one respondent observed, "*what use is an education if I will never use it?*" Leaving school early to contribute to the upkeep of the family, look after livestock and work in the fields is the first sacrifice that many of the respondents in this study made. With rare exception, none of the respondents completed their schooling. One respondent had studied accounting and was currently studying Information Technology at university, paying for her studies by working in a nightclub in the evening. A significant number of respondents (twenty) had never been to school and almost none of the respondents had any vocational training.

The majority of respondents came from farming families of low economic status, many

practising subsistence rice farming. Most parents and many siblings are farmers, although it was not uncommon for respondents to have brothers working as government employees, or in the police or the army. Some brothers were studying in university or undertaking vocational training; with some exceptions, the majority of respondents' sisters were either still in school or were married. The father of one respondent was a rubber tree plantation owner and another worked in a gold mine, employment indicative of the new economies which are reshaping, and relocating, the lives of many people in the Lao PDR today. Approximately half the respondents described their family as poor. Whilst it is not the objective of this paper to open a debate on the definition of poverty, for respondents themselves, poverty was variously defined as being unable to continue in school, experiencing food shortages, not owning land, being in debt, and not being able to pay essential health costs. Nevertheless, despite hardships, practically all respondents described a happy childhood existence.

The troubles began for most respondents with the onset of womanhood and the attention of males. (Often with the complicit intervention of older females it should be added). The majority of respondents had their first sex between the ages of 15-18. Over one third of the 101 respondents' first sex was paid. Often the transaction took place in the village before the respondent had entered the world of commercial sex. The consumer was nearly always a man between ten to forty years older than the respondent. The price paid ranged between 150,000 kip to 25,000 baht. For those who had their first sexual encounter in a beer-shop or in an urban guest house the act was generally better remunerated, with one respondent receiving up to 40,000 baht (and a motorbike) in Bokeo. (Average price 25,000 baht). It should be pointed out that the broker in most cases was another woman. In no cases was a condom used.

For close to half the respondents their first sex was with a boyfriend and in a few cases with a husband. The majority of respondents suffered at the hands of their polygamous-like promiscuous male partners, and were typically abandoned, or divorced, often whilst pregnant. Pregnancy for all respondents resulted in abortion, or the new social status of single mother. Being an unmarried mother carries a stigma; one respondent from Attapeu who became pregnant whilst single was forced to buy and sacrifice a buffalo in an act of apology to her family and, significantly, to the entire village as well. The fact that the family was forced to sell land in order to be able to purchase a buffalo underlines the importance of the respect of tradition for women within this community. For ten per cent of respondents their first experience of sex was rape; this was nearly always perpetrated by someone known to the respondent and alcohol was usually involved. For many respondents a mixture of shame, guilt, and a sense of failure lead them to leave the village. For single mothers there is the added harsh economic reality of having to provide for one or more children (without the support of the father) which persuades them to seek a new life and opportunity outside the village.

This is one side of the coin. On the other side, many respondents did not acknowledge any trauma. Yet, these respondents too felt compelled to leave the village, and their ultimate destination was the same as the women who had suffered trauma. For these young women the village represents boredom, and the encroaching outside world cannot arrive quickly enough. Put simply, they wanted to see the bright lights. Many respondents described how they were impressed by friends, working as SSP, returning to the village from a town wearing beautiful clothes, sporting fashionable hairstyles, and with cash; cash

enough to repair the family house or build an entirely new one, and buy consumer goods unavailable in the village. Seeing friends' new-found solvency, the fruit of working as sexual service providers, is a powerful stimulus for many young women with limited options. Entry into this world is often facilitated by these same friends. The end, it seems, justifies the means. New roads and easier access to larger towns, the arrival of electricity, television as a window on the world, and most importantly, the example of how easily an uneducated, single woman in her teens can earn money unimaginable within the confines of the village, all combine to provide the model, the motivation and the means for many young women to begin life with apparent ease as a sexual services providers. The alternatives for most respondents are rice farming or factory work; jobs which do not pay enough for them to meet their expectations in a developing country where a mobile phone, a television and a motorbike seem to be the minimum requirements of youth today. These impressionable women follow their friends to work in a beer-shop, and reap the desired financial rewards.

The village often appeared to be the revolving door of the beer-shop, as respondents either followed young women from their own village already working in bee-shops, or else were recruited by a *mother*. Others, like the proverbial lost sheep, arrived in the provincial capital, and penniless, gravitated towards a beer-shop. By whatever means they arrived, the pattern that followed was the same; after a short period of time serving beer for little financial reward, observing the apparent ease with which the other SSP, their friends, earned sums of money they had never seen before, the respondents decided to provide sexual services to the clients.

The ever-present risks that respondents face, that is to say STI and unwanted pregnancy (the results of bad luck or more commonly irresponsible male behaviour) seemed to be offset by the financial rewards; the end it seems, justifies the means. The money earned by SSP far exceeds that which a young, largely uneducated woman without vocational skills could ever earn on the farm or in a factory. The considerable money sent home supports the family in many important ways - from building a new house and keeping siblings in school to ensuring food security; little wonder that there is ambiguity in the village toward the new-found status of the SSP as primary hunter-gatherer. The influences exerted on the family by the SSP, combined with a material standard of living unthinkable in the village, goes a long way to boosting her self-esteem. Ironically perhaps, through sexually servicing men, the respondents found independence and in some ways an increased sense of worth - something which should be taken into consideration by prevention/rehabilitation programmes.

This increased sense of worth, of self-esteem, may explain why SSP find it difficult to leave this profession. Certainly, there would appear to be some compensation other than the financial reward, for despite their claims that life is "better than before" the SSP endure hardships on a daily basis. Most respondents stated that they did not enjoy sexually servicing their clients and many drank to take their mind off the task in hand. A lack of respect by clients who view the SSP as objects rather than as human beings is a source of great displeasure for respondents, who disliked being pawed and spoken to in a vulgar fashion at the table. Such a lack of respect was often compounded when clients chose to ignore the respondents' presence in the street, and the disparaging comments made by women working in the local market were also felt. The mental stress caused by verbal and physical abuse is often something the respondents had to deal with by themselves, as

adequate counselling was often either lacking or, the respondents were too insecure to approach organizations who may be able to provide such help.

In addition to describing and analysing the pressures and motives for becoming SSP, this report looks closely at the conditions of work in the beer-shops, from the SSPs' relationship with the client to the relationship with the *mother*. The aforementioned occupational risks are analysed in greater detail as well as the paradoxical role of alcohol in the SSPs' life. Finally, the expectations of the SSP are discussed, providing perhaps some surprising conclusions, and at the same time illuminating ways in which prevention programmes can direct their efforts.

The findings of this study put into focus the fact that regardless of the motivation for entering SS, these women face daily risks in their work at the hands of male clients. This male behaviour has important consequences for the health of the SSP and that of their own families. The findings reveal that the best efforts of the GoL and INGOs to prevent STI are being undermined to a degree by the selfishness and risk-taking behaviour of male clients.

This study also casts light on much wider social issues and attitudes with regard to women which pervade Lao society, and which have important implications for prevention programs.

Suggestions for the Lao Authorities/ For INGOs/ For Donors

- Women should be protected by an effective legal framework and enforcement of the law should be regularly assessed particularly with regard to male responsibilities
- The education system should give the same opportunities to girls and strive to equip them vocationally
- Reproductive health and sexual education should begin in the villages at an early age
- Contraception should be made available to young, unmarried women at the age of the first sexual encounter
- Dual protection (STI/contraception) should be offered as a norm to all SSP
- SSP protection should address issues beyond sexual behaviour (money management/vocational skills)
- Opening of hair/beauty salons or any vocational centre in urban areas where SSP could learn the craft from professionals during their free time
- Literacy classes to widen the arc of job opportunities available to SSP
- Educators and organisations should invite SSP to evaluate the efficacy of their programmes
- Employment of SSP as peer educators should be the norm

- *Khatoeys* could also be employed as educators for SSP
- Counselling should be offered by trained educators/counsellors to all SSP on a regular basis
- Women's centres or safe-houses for young runaways should operate in targeted urban centres
- Condom use should be widely promoted for all non-reproductive sex regardless of whether money is exchange or not
- A study on condom size should be undertaken to lessen the likelihood of slippage
- All SSP/beer-shops should be supplied with sufficient quantities of various-sized condoms
- IEC materials should be designed with the input of SSP, reflecting the reality of prevention issues and meeting the needs of both women *and* partners
- Regular support studies on male sexual behaviour, attitudes towards SSP and condom use - key to the future success of prevention programmes.

1. Background

1.1 Lao PDR

The Lao People's Democratic Republic, or Laos, is a small, tropical, landlocked country situated in the heart of old Indochina. Laos has high rates of illiteracy, a poor education system, high rates of infant mortality and an average life expectancy of 59 years.

With a population of six and a half million and a land mass the size of Great Britain, this mountainous, Buddhist country is surrounded by larger, more powerful neighbours, namely Thailand, Vietnam and China, as well as Myanmar and Cambodia.

With a per capita income of US\$2020 (2005 figures) Laos is poorer than all of its neighbours with the possible exception of Myanmar for which no figures were available. (World Health Organisation, 2007) Total expenditure per capita on health is US\$74 (2004 figures) representing 3.9% of GDP (2004 figures) and about 21% of the total spent on health nationally, the rest coming from other (largely patient) sources.

Infant mortality is high; 7.9% of infants die by their fifth birthday. There were nine hospital beds per 10,000 population (2002 figures). Life expectancy for men and women is 59 and 61 respectively (2002 figures). However, healthy life expectancy is 47 for both genders (2002 figures).

Laos has maintained its independence thanks chiefly to its position as a buffer state between the larger powers, although decades of embroilment in Indochina's wars left Laos heavily scarred and depopulated, with as many as one tenth of the population leaving the country at the end of the second Indochinese conflict in 1975. Between 1975 and 1981 275,000 Lao refugees arrived in Thai refugee camps. In the wake of the Communist take-over many sex workers were rounded up and imprisoned on specially built island-prisons in Nam Ngum Lake, 90 kilometres from Vientiane capital.

Since the end of the Cold War in the mid eighties, however, Laos has, slowly at first, opened its doors to foreign investment, and membership of ASEAN and impending membership of the World Trade organisation is propelling the rapid transition from an agrarian, self-sufficient, controlled economic state to a market economy.

Huge hydropower projects, mining concessions and commercial tree plantations are changing the landscape and improving the national GDP. Road construction projects and bridges, the economic corridors uniting the south-east Asian countries are a prerequisite for economic growth and these massive infrastructural changes are bringing about important social changes in their wake.

1.2 Sexual Service Providers (SSP)

After careful consideration and debate, the survey team opted for the term Sexual Services Provider instead of Commercial Sex Worker. It was felt that the latter term is more appropriate in the context of Thailand, with its mass sex industry. In addition, the term 'service provider' is closer to the Lao name for female sex workers, 'sao bolikan,' and

reflects the fact that these young women provide a range of services not limited to sex; serving beer at tables, providing drinking company for clients, and quite commonly talking through the night with clients too inebriated to perform sex or those who merely wish to chat and enjoy the proximity of young female company as a kind of catharsis.

The well-documented, rapid economic changes which are enveloping Laos have resulted in an expansion of the sex industry; migrant sex work, male sex work, and most significantly, female sex work who are referred to in this survey as SSP, are all on the increase. This implies important changes, both positive and negative, in the lives and living conditions of thousands of young Lao women working in prostitution, either as SSP or running beer-shops with young SSP. The increase in the sex industry results in an increased risk of exposure for SSP to HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections.

The government Centre for HIV/AIDS/STI (CHAS) calculates the rate of HIV/AIDS infection among the general population at 0.1%. However, the rate among SSP rose from 0.9% in 2001 to 2.02% in 2004. Incidence rates of bacterial STIs are also on the rise in SSP: in 2005 20-50% of SSP surveyed in seven provinces were infected with Chlamydia and/or gonorrhoea and 50% or more reported potential HIV/AIDS/STI symptoms in the last 12 months. These worrying trends underline the risks facing women involved in SS.

The situation of women working as sexual service providers (SSP) in Laos has been the subject of a number of studies by international organisations, such as Family Health International, International Regional Information Network, Burnett Institute, NCA survey, and Population Services International. Most concur that there are an estimated 8,000 SSP in Laos. This is possibly a conservative estimate given that prostitution is illegal in Laos and many SSP work in a wide variety of locales, from beer shops and massage parlours to karaoke venues, from restaurants to guest houses and hotels, as well as on the streets and by mobile phone, making a census difficult. The survey team adopted the term *sexual service providers* as it was felt that this was an appropriate descriptor, given that these women don't sell any product but instead provide a range of services. The term also serves to distinguish them from other people involved in sex work, such as the *mothers*, who do not provide sex for the clients themselves.

1.3 NCA

Norwegian Church (NCA) is a humanitarian organization founded in 1947 by the church communities of Norway, to promote global justice through humanitarian work.

In Lao PDR, NCA is one of the largest and oldest NGOs and has implemented many projects in the country since 1989. NCA has an operational and semi-operational role, and implements its programs in partnership with government agencies and mass organisations at the province, district and village level. NCA has been able to strike an important balance between working closely with partners, and on the other hand maintaining independence as an INGO.

During these years NCA has also provided opportunities for the professional development of project staff. NCA employees and partners have gained knowledge on thematic areas related to education, primary health care, sustainable highland development, food security, drug eradication, HIV/AIDS and, more recently, human

trafficking.

In close collaboration with its partners, NCA has implemented integrated rural development projects in the ethnic minority areas of Bokeo and Luang Namtha provinces, HIV and AIDS programs in several provinces in the north and south of the country and addressed gender-based violence since the early 1990s. HIV and AIDS and Gender-Based Violence are two amongst the five focus areas in NCA Global Strategic Plan 2005 to 2009.

NCA's HIV and AIDS program has encompassed prevention of HIV among SSP, youth and ethnic minorities as well as community-based care and support for PLWHA. NCA takes a holistic approach to its work on HIV and AIDS both in Laos and around the world. The proposed approach responds to an identified need for an improved understanding of the backgrounds and needs of Commercial Sex Workers. The proposal is also inspired by the study of Vietnamese migrant women in Lao PDR conducted by Serge Dousantousse and team in 2006.

2. Objectives of the survey

This report attempts to address a comprehensive understanding of the *life* of the SSP, to better understand the background of SSP and their needs. This information will help NGOs and policy makers identify what type of intervention projects would be most beneficial to ensure safer working conditions and better health for the thousands of young women who are employed, and who will be employed in SS.

This study endeavours to develop a fuller understanding of SSP by conducting an in-depth study which has as its focus the following areas.

1 The path to SS

2 Actual environment: including RTB (Risk Taking Behaviour)

3 Expectations

Within these broad categories the survey team sought to establish detailed biographical information leading to social profiles of SSP before engaging in SS. Understanding the initiation into SS and the migration patterns of SSP provides a deeper understanding of the processes at work, and the systems in place which manipulate/stimulate young Lao women, and less young, to enter SS.

Survey on present activities attempts to build a picture of the *life* of SSP, and not only the details of their work. An understanding of the economic conditions and motivating factors is paramount to understanding the life of SSP, as is knowledge of their social relationships and behavioural patterns. Risk taking behaviour (RTB) is analysed in detail, including the often overlooked question of drinking habits and drug taking. The various types of relationships and bonds that SSP develop with their clients/ acquaintances are also studied; the nature of these relationships is significant in influencing sexual behaviour, and consequently HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention.

In addition, the survey attempts to gauge the effectiveness of HIV/AIDS prevention

programs and SSP understanding of the intentions of such programs.

Finally, the survey addresses the question of the hopes and expectations of SSP. This information contributes to the overall profile of SSP, lending insight into their possible motivations for entering SS and their route out of SS. Such understanding will enable more effective implementation of outreach programs.

3. Methodology

Qualitative data collection was carried out using a comprehensive guideline questionnaire, reviewed by both NCA and Population Services International (PSI.) Areas of study include personal biography; working habits; sexual economics; health; relationships within the community and expectations.

Three experienced female interviewers, trained in using the guideline questionnaire each interviewed one to three women a day. After each interview a debriefing was held, a summary of findings made, and consideration given as to how this information would include itself in the English report. Two foreign members of the survey team carried out extensive observations in the field.

The beer-shops where the respondents worked came under the umbrella of the PCCA, and as such many of the SSP could be expected to have reasonable knowledge of prevention issues. To offset this bias and refine the study, the interviewers focused more on single mothers and the youngest woman in the beer-shop, following the rationale that these groups are the most vulnerable. If two SSP were of the same age, interviewers took the newcomer as they are likely to have inferior negotiating skills/prevention knowledge. If there were two single mothers the interviewers selected the older one, to check whether the lessons of prevention programs have had an impact. Mobile SSP were also targeted latterly in the study as many of these SSP may not be known to PCCA and vice-versa, and at a disadvantage when it comes to prevention education and advice on sexual health. Focus Group Discussions were held in each province to encourage debate among small groups of SSP on targeted issues related to prevention.

All interviewees were volunteers.

Limitation

The survey team is conscious that the short time of the study, the one-time meeting with respondents and the convenience of the sampling method may have distorted the picture in favour of respondents who have chosen to be SSP; women who were using drugs or had been forced into SS may have been reluctant to come forward and explain their situation.

4. Analysis

4.1 Age

Respondents' ages ranged from 15 ~ 35+. It was often a challenge for the interviewers to know the real age of the respondents for two reasons. Firstly, because some of the women did not know their real date of birth and secondly, some of them who were obviously under the legal age of 18, pretended to be older, perhaps to avoid possible problems with the police. The survey team believe the greater number of respondents were below the age of 20. The prevalence of SSP between the ages of 18-20 reflects both the consumer's preference for younger women and the availability of this age group to undertake SS. The price offered to women over thirty was significantly below the average amount paid for sexual services by the sample group as a whole. *One respondent working in Pakse said that she felt old, and believed that clients did not want to go with her. Consequently, she was prepared to service clients for 70,000 kip; she was 26 years old.*

4.2 Family background

Respondents' mainly come from families with five siblings or more. The survey team did not see any trend showing that the rank within the siblings leads to doing SS; being the first or the last child carries the same potential risk of becoming involved in sexual service.

4.3 Economic background

Most of the respondents' parents are farmers and siblings too. It was not rare that respondents had family members who belong to the police, the army, or who work in local government. One respondent has a family member in the US sending remittance regularly in support of her family. Others have a shop at home. One respondent's father owns a thousand hectares of rubber tree. Another family, in conjunction with three others, produces around 12 tons of coffee beans per year. The father of one respondent works in a gold mine as a driver.

For many respondents, the economic hardship of the family was a factor in entering SS. A significant number of respondents left school prematurely out of a sense of responsibility to their family; usually the motivation was to find a job to support the economic needs of the family, i.e. paying a male sibling's tuition fees or repaying a family debt or covering a relative's health expenses. (One respondent related how her mother had died because of lack of means to pay for medical treatment). For other respondents, however, the reasons for entering SS cannot be attributed exclusively to economic difficulties; it was not rare among respondents to say that their family was not poor and some respondents simply desired to leave the boredom of the village and see a bit of life. The need for money as a means to support and provide for family is certainly a major contributing factor to young women entering SS. It is reasonable to conclude that for some young women in Laos today, the desire for money, fuelled by an ever-more ubiquitous consumer culture is one of the main pull factors in their choosing the life of a SSP.

4.4 Parents

It was rare among respondents to have parents who live separately, unless one or both had passed away. Divorced parents and abandoned children are present in our findings but not in significant numbers. One respondent was living permanently with an aunt because the latter was not able to have a child. A lack of family stability cannot be posited in this study as a contributing factor to respondents abandoning the village and entering SS.

4.5 Own Family

Respondents' answers about their own family show a sharp contrast when it comes to stability as all the women who were married or had a child were subsequently divorced or abandoned and now live alone or perhaps have one or more boyfriends. For convenience sake we have referred to these women as "*single mothers*," which means that at a moment in their life they had a child with a man with whom they may or may not have been married. In nearly every case the couple separated because of the man's behaviour. Usually, the child/ren stay/s with the family of the respondent in the care of her own mother or sister, or with her family-in-law. After separation from the father the respondent has to provide for her child/ren, in nearly every case without his support. Many respondents felt constrained to start sex service in order to feed herself and her family.

4.6 Education

Respondents' education is generally low; most respondents left school after grade three, at approximately 15-16. Exceptions to this norm were found among the respondents: one *mother* related that she once had a SSP who was also a medical student; one respondent had studied accounting and was learning IT at university, paying her tuition fees by working in a night club in the evening. There are however, many examples of respondents leaving school at an even earlier age than 15, and a not insignificant number who did not attend school at all. Respondents reported having to leave school mainly because of the lack of means in the family. Another common reason was due to the need for help with farming activities, and to help parents in the daily work. A number of respondents said that the remoteness of the school from their village prevented them from attending school. It was not rare for respondents to justify leaving education because of their *laziness*. The education and vocational skills which almost all respondents lack, is significant in their beginning work as SSP, as the options for work for a poorly educated young woman outside the village are extremely limited; factory work does not pay sufficiently well to provide for a mother of one or more children.

4.7 Ethnicity

Table 1: Ethnicity of SSP by province of the study

Ethnicity / Province							Total
		BOK	CPS	LNT	SVK	SEK	
1	Lao Lum	9	16	8	18	14	65
2	Khamou	6	4	9	1	1	21
3	Phounoi	1	0	1	0	1	3
4	Kha	0	2	0	0	0	2
5	Leu	1	0	1	0	0	2
6	Thaidam	1	0	0	0	1	2
7	Hmong	0	0	0	1	0	1
8	Kalieng	0	0	0	0	1	1
9	Kalom	0	0	1	0	0	1
10	Phouthai	0	0	0	1	0	1
11	Yao	1	0	0	0	0	1
12	Nhouan	1	0	0	0	0	1
Total		20	22	20	21	18	101

		11	6	12	3	4	36
	% Non-Lao Lum/ province	55%	27%	60%	14%	22%	36%

Table1: Bokeo and Luang Namtha have the highest number of SSP belonging to a non Lao Lum group:

The majority of respondents were from ethnic group Lao Lum. The survey team came across 11 different ethnic groups besides Lao Lum, numbering thirty six respondents in the sample as a whole. This spread shown in the table above is fairly representative of the make-up of the greater population, according to the GoL's classification of the various ethnic groups in the Lao PDR. To cite one example, the Khamou are the second largest ethnic group in Laos, numbering approximately 500,000, and this fact is reflected in this sample. However, from such a small sample it is difficult to draw conclusions about the relationship between the various ethnicities and SS. A confounding factor to ethnicity could be the economic situation of the same ethnic group. GOL policies to end swidden agriculture (also known as slash-and-burn agriculture) and eradicate poppy cultivation have led to the relocation to lower altitudes and roadsides of many highland Lao, including the Hmong, Yao and Khamou. Facing a new economic environment, and uprooted from their ancestral and spiritual homes, many ethnic groups are struggling to adapt, and for some young women SS provides one way to cope with the challenges brought about relocation and dislocation.

A number of non-Lao Lum respondents in this study exhibited a poor grasp of the Lao language. In terms of prevention, young women with poor language ability in Lao are at a disadvantage with clients when it comes to negotiating, not only prices, but also the ability to control any situation which may arise.

4.8 Province of origin/ destination:

Table 2: Province of origin/ destination

Province		BOK	CPS	LNT	SVK	SEK	Total	
Province / Origin	LPB	3	2	9	3	3	20	20%
	UDX	5	0	5	1	1	12	12%
	VTE	0	3	0	3	2	8	8%
	VTP	0	3	0	3	1	7	7%
	BLK	0	2	0	3	3	8	8%
	XBL	5	0	0	0	1	6	6%
	LNT	1	0	4	0	0	5	5%
	HPH	0	2	0	2	1	5	5%
	SVK	1	1	0	2	1	5	5%
	ATP	0	1	0	0	3	4	4%
	BOK	4	0	0	0	0	4	4%
	CPS	0	3	0	1	0	4	4%
	KHM	0	2	0	2	0	4	4%
	PSL	1	0	3	0	0	4	4%
	SLV	0	2	0	0	0	2	2%
	XKH	0	1	0	0	1	2	2%
	SEK	0	0	0	0	1	1	1%
Total		20	22	21	20	18	101	

Only 14 (14%) of the respondents say they come from the same province they are working in.

The majority of respondents were working in a different province to that of their home village, most commonly the nearest one i.e. LNT to BKO, LPB to LNT. Many others had moved to work in a completely different part of the country: LPB to XKG or PKS; PXL to SVK. Many respondents came from northern or central Laos to work in the south. The main reason for such movement is the desire to avoid meeting relatives or acquaintances of their family. Additionally, many respondents were gravitating towards provinces providing a better economic opportunity. If there were respondents from the north moving to the south of Laos the opposite trend was practically non-existent, with only one SSP from Savannakhet working in the northern provinces of Bokeo and Luang Namtha combined. These findings seem to reflect the economic strength of the southern towns of Laos; PKS and SVK were two magnets for respondents among the five provinces of the survey.

4.9 First sex

Paid first-time sex, aka Virginty price: There was a discussion among the survey team about the term *virginty* and we came to the conclusion that *paid first sex* was a more appropriate term as *virginty* is more a social construct which has a high value among many men in Laos, and perhaps also in the region at large as some Chinese or Thai men were also interested clients.

Table 3: Age 1st sex/1st paid sex/present age

	Age 1st sex		Age at 1st paid sex		Age at date of the survey	
	n=101	%	n=101	%	n=101	%
<16	30	30%	8	8%	1	1%
16 - 18	55	54%	50	50%	35	35%
19 - 21	15	15%	21	21%	32	32%
> 21	1	1%	20	20%	33	33%
Range	[14-25]		[14-32]		[15-35]	
Mode	[18]		[17]		[18]	
Average	16.8		19.1		20.7	

A high proportion of respondents had their first sexual penetration in return for money *before* working in any entertainment venue. Prices ranged from 300.000 kip up to 40.000 baht (plus one Chinese motorbike). Most of the respondents sold their *virginity* to men between ten to 30 years older than them, with some exceptions either side of this age range. The go-between or broker was mainly an older woman who was a friend or an acquaintance of the respondent. The go-between found the client and organized the transaction. On average, the amount paid was from 15.000 to 20.000 baht. The broker's fee amounted to a few thousand baht, paid by the *virgin* or the client, or both, but money was exchanged.

In nearly every case of paid first-time sex no condom was used. One of the male members of the survey team pretended to be a potential buyer and was offered a young girl whose age was not certain. In the one hour of negotiation three different ages were given. The girl herself was not sure of her age but thought she was about 15 or 16; the girl's friend thought she was as old as 18 and the *mother* said that the girl was 18 or 19. The *mother* increased the tariff for the girl from 500 US\$ to 600 US\$ and confirmed that there was no need to use a condom with a virgin girl *because there was no risk for the client*. A study of the apparent male cult of virgin partners was not an objective of this survey but it was interesting to note that one respondent in Savannakhet considered servicing virgin *clients* (schoolboys aged 13+) to be lucky. As approximately one third of respondents' first-time sex was paid it would be reasonable to carry out further study to assess the extent of the issue throughout Laos; the fact that a condom is never used in these cases re-confirms that males must be targeted with regards to prevention. As far as first time sex, paid or not, is concerned the health of the young woman especially in terms of risk of STI or pregnancy is an issue.

Incidentally, one of the Lao survey team members overheard a serious discussion about female *virginity* between a group of twelve men including two village' chiefs and a number of businessmen, at a coffee shop in a provincial capital. They were talking extensively about the difficulty for them to find virgin girls, because of changes in tradition which means girls are having sex younger than before. One of the men told the group that in his village there were still virgin girls, adding that the cost would be 10,000,000 kip. Another man said he wanted a girl with her first menstruation. It was suggested by another of the group that a white towel be placed under the girl to check whether or not she was indeed a virgin.

4.10 Rape

Another type of event which initiates the sexual life of respondents was forced sex or rape. On average in each province two to three respondents' first sexual experience was rape, usually by a man they knew before. Typically, the man took the opportunity of public events like a village *boune* (festival) to drink extensively with the respondent and as it was getting late; the couple ended up in a guest house where the man forced himself upon the girl. One respondent described how, as she was walking home late one night in her village, a soldier, whose barrack was in the village, raped her. Most respondents felt some degree of guilt and/or shame and were afraid to discuss these events which can stigmatize not only the respondent, but the respondent's family too. None of the respondents who were victims of rape acknowledged a supportive family in the aftermath of the rape. Indeed, social mechanisms exist whereby the rapist can buy his forgiveness, and on occasion the victim is forced to marry her rapist to save the face of the family. The survey team would hesitate to draw the conclusion or imply that rape was the cause of respondents' entry into SS but certainly it is a major factor in the respondent's leaving the village.

4.11 Reasons to enter sexual service

a) Alleviate economic hardship.

Respondents are in the main, and by their own definition *poor*, especially single mothers with one or two children. These women have the double burden of having to support their parents and their own children. After being abandoned by the father of their child/ren they usually followed the advice of a friend or acquaintance already involved *in SS*, and after a period of reflection decided to try their luck and leave the village.

There seem to be two main reasons why respondents entered sexual service once they had arrived at the beer-shop. The primary motivation is seeing the money the other girls were getting from servicing male clients, while the money they were getting from a normal (serving beer and talking with clients only) job was far from meeting their economic expectations. In addition, colleagues of the respondents were doing SS with apparent ease. Most of the respondents were earning in a day or week of sexual service, far more than they may have expected in a normal job outside of the beer-shop.

Respondents earn 1000 to 2000 kip per bottle of beer drunk and receive 10,000 kip for sitting at the table, or a comparable amount in tips from clients. Even if paid on a daily basis (and many are paid weekly or monthly) the respondent does not earn much more than 20,000 to 30,000 kip per day. In comparison, their colleagues providing SS to clients can earn a minimum of 500 baht up to 2000 baht per sexual service provided. If their colleagues are servicing three to four clients a week, or 15 to 20 clients a month the potential earnings are many times greater than that afforded by serving beer. Most respondents independently come to this conclusion within a period of one week to one month and begin SS of clients.

Table 4: Estimated monthly income of respondents by province

USD	BOK (n=20)	CPS (n=22)	SEK (n=18)	SVK (n=21)	LNT n=20)	Total (n=101)	%
<50	2	3	0	1	6	12	12%
50-100	4	2	2	2	6	16	16%
101-150	0	3	5	7	1	16	16%
>150	7	14	9	8	7	45	45%
Missing	6	0	2	3	1	12	12%
Range	[43-898]	[21-898]	[64-428]	[53-479]	[11-299]		
Average	281	270	199	193	111		

The second major motivation is an attraction to a consumer life style. Besides those respondents providing money in support of the family another category of respondent entered into sexual service because of a desire for consumer goods such as mobile phones, motorbikes, clothes and cosmetics. A common pattern saw friends of the respondent involved in SS in the nearby province returning to the village. The clothes and accessories they wore caused tremendous interest on the part of the respondent who decided to follow their example. For a young woman of low education and with little prospect of getting a decent job the attraction of SS in these terms is understandable. It was not rare for the survey team to encounter a young respondent from an ethnic minority with minimal schooling, and even in some cases illiterate, getting 2000-3000 baht per week and able to sustain a standard of living far above that of the one at home.

It has to be said that these two categories sometimes overlap. After meeting the basic needs of the family, the consumer desires of young women occupy much of their thoughts; one finding of the survey is the difficulty for respondents to completely stop working as SSP. Once respondents are used to relatively large quantities of money which permit them an extravagant lifestyle unimaginable in their village, the temptation to return to SS after a short period without working, even on a more casual basis is strong. However, as the survey did not reach women who had definitely stopped working as SSP, a discussion of their reintegration into normal life is not possible here.

b) A Matter of Money

"I used to have thirty girls working for me five years ago, but now I have five. There are a lot more beer-shops now, more competition." (A *mother* in Luang Namtha.) It is hardly surprising that beer-shops are increasing in number and with them the number of women involved in SS, either as SSP or as *mothers*; the question of whether the demand by males for SS is fuelling the supply or whether the increasing flow of SSP is feeding the demand is difficult to ascertain, but either way, there is fast money to be made. The ease with which a beer-shop can be set up was explained by a *mother* in Bokeo who told the survey team how she started her beer-shop two years ago. She had been selling CDs around the town when four SSP approached her and offered to work for her. With just 80,000 kip, she bought some beer and then borrowed a table from a nearby school: de facto she was running a beer-shop.

As can be seen from the tables in annex 3, on average a male client will disburse a

minimum of 268,000 kip to 470,000 kip each time he has paid sex with an SSP. These figures are not negligible when we consider that the estimated per capita income of the vast majority of Lao does not exceed US\$500 per year.

The money spent has four immediate beneficiaries: the SSP who earns between 168,000 kip to 308,000 kip each client; the *mother*, who takes between 48,000 kip to 58,000 kip (per SSP) per client; the guesthouse which makes between 30,000 kip to 80,000 kip and finally, the beer company which makes on average 24,000 kip for each client who visits an SSP.

Once we start extrapolating it can be seen that the more SSP in a beer-shop the more clients that come, the greater the money disbursed and the larger the profit margins. If respondents had on average 2.3 clients in the week preceding the interview (see table in annex) then a beer-shop with five SSP will bring the *mother* between 520,000 kip to 667,000 kip per week. Based on the same number of clients, an SSP could potentially pocket between 386,000 kip to 708,400 per week. Monthly earning for an SSP (multiplying 2.3 clients by four weeks) could be between 1,565,000 kip to 2,833,600 kip. Table above shows monthly earnings ranging from a low of US\$11 (eleven) to US\$ 898. All these figures are indicative of potential earnings, and obviously an SSP who services 25 clients a month is going to earn considerably more than an SSP who only serves beer for the initial month in the beer-shop. It is important to remember that income of SSP is highly variable.

Considering that a factory worker in Laos earns approximately 400,000 to 800,000 kip for a six-day week, eight to ten hours a day, or that a state medical practitioner commands just 860,000 a month, the money generated by SSP is significantly greater and involves a lot less labour in terms of working hours.

When a young woman looks outside of her village and considers the options for employment which will permit an independent existence, it is not entirely surprising that many women opt for SS in a beer-shop. The stated desire of many respondents to leave SS once they have enough money to open a shop or start a business is a reflection of the economic possibilities that SS offers them. It is also a sign of the social empowerment that the money earned in this profession bestows on them. SSP are not only dragged into the market economy; they are also a cog in the machine.

c) Support parents/siblings for health and study

Respondents wanted money to meet their immediate needs; the burden of sick parents, a shortage of food, and supporting siblings' education are among the chief reasons why respondents became SSP. Ultimately, many respondents feel compelled to do something to help their family. The immediate option for a young woman without a meaningful education is to leave her village and follow the example of those who have already found a solution to their/their families' problems by engaging in SS. It is important to emphasize that the number of girls involved in SSP in many villages makes the option almost routine. One respondent from LPB observed that while her family and neighbours were aware of her activities nobody was critical because, as she put it, their daughters, sisters, and may be their mothers were already involved or had been involved at some point of time in SS. While the current inequalities in wealth, education, and ability to access health care and decent employment exist, the choices for young women who have financial responsibilities

are strictly limited.

d) Independence/Escaping family and Village Boredom

Another reason for leaving the village and entering SS was a desire for a new life; a life independent from family constraints and free from the hardships of village life. A significant number of respondents talked of their wish to escape from overbearing parents, an authoritarian brother, or the rigors of farming life. Respondents find another home in the beer-shops and a different lifestyle. Here, they are able to sustain themselves and enjoy a new-found sense of autonomy. The beer-shop provides both a kind of stability, with its family-like atmosphere and a seemingly protective *mother* figure, and at the same time a lack of restrictions never before experienced, as the SSP are able to leave whenever they like.

Respondents appreciate a standard of living far above the one they had in their village and respondents cited tap water, electricity and television amongst the major improvements in their life. New friends whom they can relate to, and easy money adds to the attraction of the beer-shop. It should be noted that these same criticisms of the village life-style seem temporary among respondents as most of them see the village as the place they want to return to and build a life after finishing with SS.

e) Travelling and flexibility

Many respondents found in working in a beer-shop a lifestyle which allows them to visit places far from home. Working as SSP is for some a ticket to discover Laos as they are able to move from one location to another whenever they want. Many beer-shop owners commented on the difficulty of keeping SSP for more than a couple of months. SSP leave one beer-shop to go another, and leave one town to go to another. They often go home for a period before returning to a beer-shop. Many respondents go home for greater or lesser periods of time because they miss their parents or because they wish to bring money home. Compared to other girls working in factories with long working hours, tedious routine and a significantly lower salary, respondents acknowledged the fluidity and spontaneity of their movements.

f) Healing a trauma/ nothing to lose

Many of the respondents who suffered a trauma, especially being abandoned/deceived/abused by a boyfriend/husband, see in leaving the village a way to put distance between themselves and the trauma. In the village there was always a female friend who gave advice and encouragement to go and work as SSP in another province. A common remark by respondents is that having suffered so much already they felt they had nothing to lose by working as SSP:

4.12 Risks with clients/boyfriend

It was interesting to note that the risks SSP face come from three different category of sexual partner. The survey team observed that the SSP give sexual partners different labels. The *kek* is the client who pays for each act and most of the time does so only once with the same SSP. The *kapacham* is mainly a client who comes back at least once or twice

to the same SSP and after the second or third time is called *a regular partner*. He may come on a weekly or monthly basis or less frequently. The regular partner may live in the same district or may come from another province for work or business occasionally.

Needless to say these categories can overlap and a man may be a client with one SSP and a boyfriend with another, or the same man may be upgraded from client to regular customer, ultimately being promoted to the status of *boy-friend* in a very short time period:

It seems there is no special affection between the regular client and the SSP. The fee for SS is the same as for the first-time client, with perhaps more flexibility in the payment as both know they will meet again in the near future. The third category overlaps the previous one when a regular client receives the name of *fen*, or *boyfriend*, as both partners express a desire to have a special relationship which goes beyond sexual acts.

The status of *boyfriend* is mainly given by respondents and denotes a need for intimacy, privacy, love and affection. The needs of the *boyfriend* are not specifically analyzed in this survey. The next chapter will address the vocational hazards facing SSP. Clients it seems, do not represent the main danger to SSP

a) Removal of condom during intercourse by clients

One of the main risks that respondents face is from clients who would remove the condom during sexual intercourse. The respondents often have little power to prevent this practice. This has happened at least once to most of the respondents. A significant number of respondents have suffered this form of abuse up to five times. Some of the respondents have resisted this practice but the result has been that some of them were forced to comply with the desire of the man or were raped.

It is well known that prevention programs target females working as SSP, but little or not enough is done to understand why so many clients desire to have sex with SSP without condoms and why so many males flatly refuse to use condoms. Is it possible that large numbers of males, many of whom are in the age-range from 30 to 50+ and many of whom are state employees, are prepared to indulge in such risk-taking behaviour because they are unaware of STI? A detailed analysis of the clients of SSP and their behaviour was beyond the scope of this study, but there seem to be important gaps in knowledge among both clients and prevention programs regarding male behaviour and transmission of STI. A detailed study on male clients, their habits, knowledge, or lack of knowledge regarding HIV//AIDS/STI and their risk-taking behaviour would no doubt contribute significantly to the effectiveness of prevention programs.

A gender-aware prevention program should help clients to have a responsible attitude toward the SSP. A responsible attitude by men would directly benefit their regular partners too; that is to say their wives and girlfriends, not to mention occasional partners. Many respondents blamed the removal of condoms by clients as the cause of STI.

b) STI

A quarter of the respondents acknowledge having been subjected to symptoms of STI or vaginal discharge (VD), a figure which may seem low given the number of condom

breakages with clients and the risks presented by boyfriends who refuse to use condoms. It should be noted however, that STI was an issue among respondents; most respondents do not discuss their STI with colleagues as they are afraid of losing clients. In addition, some respondents, particularly newcomers, may not be aware of having an STI.

Most of those with symptoms of STI or VD were not sure of the kind of infection they had. All respondents acknowledge a habitual use of condoms during sexual encounters but those who have many encounters per day or per week may suffer a lack of lubrication or a lack of lubricant when they use condoms, contributing to condom breakage. Many respondents are unaware of the function of lubricant and most respondents do not use lubricant with clients. Some clients it seems are no more aware of lubricant use, judging by the several who, in seeking better lubrication, put lubricant *inside* the condom.

Respondents are aware of STI as a vocational hazard and some were able to name a few. However, for the most part respondents were unable to name the one they were suffering from. Does this mean that medical practitioners were not giving out the name of the pathology, or were not able to differentiate between STI such as Gonorrhoea or Chlamydia? It may also be the case that respondents simply forgot the name.

In PKS and SVK, there is a campaign by PSI and FHI which tends to treat all VD presumptively by giving a one-time treatment of Azithromycin. Many respondents acknowledge the continuation of service to clients despite suffering from, or being under treatment for STI. They continue to work as they are afraid of loss of income. One respondent told her client about her STI; he decided to go ahead, taking the extra precaution of wearing two condoms at the same time. Understanding of STI, both in terms of recognising symptoms and prescribing treatment on the part of medical practitioners is fundamental in terms of prevention. Equally, SSP should understand the risks in continuing SS while infected.

The boyfriend plays an important role in the transmission of STI. The vast majority of respondents do not use condoms with a boyfriend; this is because the condom is associated with paid sex or a lack of trust, and for the woman, not using a condom is a show of love and trust, although often it is simply the refusal of the boyfriend to compromise (). After listening to many respondents' testimony it would appear this trust is misplaced and the cause of many infections. Examples of lengthy duration of vaginal discharge among respondents may be due to misdiagnosis or to re-infection. Other potential causes or reproductive health issues were beyond the scope of this survey.

c) Unwanted pregnancy

Besides STI another risk facing SSP is unwanted pregnancy. Among respondents pregnancies were not as common as STI but still prevalent. One respondent in Pakse described how a colleague had become pregnant four times by the same boyfriend, each pregnancy ending in abortion. Most respondents who became pregnant knew that this was after sexual intercourse with a boyfriend as they almost never use condoms, though one respondent thought she got pregnant on two occasions after sexual intercourse with clients.

In all cases the pregnancy was terminated in an abortion. Some respondents went to

the nearby pharmacist to get a "*Chinese*" treatment which they drink with beer. In SVK two respondents went to the nearby private clinic to have an ultrasound confirming the termination of the pregnancy.

Another common method among respondents to terminate a pregnancy is the mixing of Pepsi Cola and M150 (an energy drink). Respondents described how they drank this mixture morning and night on an empty stomach. In this way they were able to expel the foetus within 3 days. The survey team was not able to verify the solidity of this information

Pregnancy and abortion among respondents are not rare, in part because most of the projects focus on condoms during sexual encounter with clients but overlook the danger of the many boyfriends who do not use condoms. Dual protection is a must, and the anti-contraceptive pill would appear to be the best solution. In SVK, where there are active prevention programs, female condoms are known by many respondents but so far used by few; the practicality of it is still a limitation. A respondent told the interviewer that only men have any feeling when women wear female condom, not the women.

d) Violence/ abuse

Other serious occupational hazards facing SSP are violence and rape, and many respondents have been victims of such abuse. The abuse begins at the table when clients and SSP meet. Respondents described how many men start to touch them in an appropriate manner at the table and talk lewdly or impolitely to them. One of the respondents' criteria for a good client is a man who is polite and does not manhandle them in public.

In the bedroom, the main violence concerns the non-use of condoms or its removal during the sexual act. Some men are ready to use force to have their way. If the SSP does not comply with desires of the client, whatever they may be, (oral sex, anal sex, slapping etc.) her refusal may at times unleash a violent response in the client.

The comments of one client related by a respondent may go some way to explaining the abuse of SSP: "If I can't touch you then why are you a prostitute?" It seems that some men who pay for sex believe that they have the right to use and abuse the body and spirit of the woman as they see fit. It has to be said that such violence is perpetrated by a minority of clients. Nevertheless, it happens frequently enough for the SSP to be anxious when they go with clients they do not know. More than one respondent explained that she drank in order to get to know the client, to judge his character.

The violence and abuse most often take place in a guesthouse some distance from the beer-shop.

A partial solution to this problem would be to encourage SSP to refuse clients they have a doubt about, and for SSP to take clients to a guesthouse in the vicinity of the beer-shop. This latter suggestion may also address another incivility encountered by SSP, when clients do not accompany them back to their home after SS in a guesthouse, particularly at night, when SSP walking alone feel especially vulnerable.

e) Cheating on money

After diseases, unwanted pregnancies, and physical abuse SSP face an additional distress, which is the dishonesty of some clients. A minority of clients did not pay the agreed rate and a few refused to pay at all. This form of abuse happens mostly to newly arrived SSP who do not have the experience to negotiate the price and get the money prior to the sexual encounter.

Any peer education activity should help SSP to learn to exert control over the client, both in terms of negotiating money and also in terms of establishing the rules of acceptable behaviour. This would contribute to some degree to lessening the likelihood of violence against the SSP.

f) Drugs/ alcohol

Drugs were conspicuously absent from the SSPs' accounts of life in a beer-shop. This should not be taken to mean that, despite their denials, drugs do not feature in the working lives of these women. Not one respondent acknowledged the use of amphetamines (taken primarily to slim and for stamina), however several respondents spoke in rather abstract terms about *ya baa*, saying that they knew a SSP in another shop who used *ya baa*, or they used to know a SSP in a previous beer-shop who took *ya baa*. There may be three reasons for the lack of admission of drug use by respondents: firstly, the respondents may have guarded silence on this issue believing the female interviewers to be associated with the authorities; secondly, the *mothers* would appear to be against the use of *ya baa* by their SSP, possibly because of its negative effects if consumed habitually, and possibly because of a fear of police intervention; thirdly, many of the interviews with respondents took place in the beer-shops and as with the issues of STI/pregnancy which seem to be surrounded by a wall of silence, it may be that SSP do not wish other colleagues, clients, or the *mother*, to discover their drug use; discovery may result in expulsion from the beer-shop by the *mother*, or trouble with the police. One *mother* told the survey that she strictly forbade the use of *yaa baa* by her SSP as her husband was a policeman (prominent local figure) and it could compromise his position.

Only outside the beer-shops in neutral environments were the male observers of the team privy to anecdotal, yet more persuasive accounts from SSP of *ya baa* use among their colleagues, one SSP in Pakse describing how "many of the girls" use *ya baa*. Several respondents described the use of *ya baa* by young clients as commonplace, so the proximity of amphetamines to the beer-shop and the SSP is a given. A more specialised study without constraints on amphetamine use among SSP might well draw a very different picture. Such a study would be timely as the habitual combination of amphetamines and alcohol can only be detrimental for the health, both physical and mental of the SSP and may also contribute to risk-taking behaviour.

Drinking is an important part of the respondents' working habits. Most respondents get income from the beer their clients consume. A client who is a heavy drinker is not considered badly if he behaves himself; he is after all, contributing to the income of the SSP. Many, though by no means all respondents, said that they enjoyed drinking. It is encouraged by the *mother* as a large part of her income derives from beer consumed. The survey team feels that alcohol may help SSP to endure the hardship of servicing many

different men, a hardship which they would otherwise be unable to bear.

Many respondents said that if they are drunk they refuse to go with a client, but the fine line between drinking for fun or to accompany the client, and drunkenness, may cloud the judgment of the SSP and her ability to control the situation. Any prevention program should address the issue of alcohol intake with SSP, with *mothers*, and eventually with the client. A more detailed analysis of alcohol is to be found in the chapter Working Conditions.

g) Garlanded penis

Almost all respondents refused clients with garlanded penises, penis enlargements (as the result of operations or injection of oil,) and penises with stone or ball-bearing implants. Some respondents told of colleagues who had experienced vaginal pain and bleeding as a result of servicing such clients. Respondents feared not only pain but condom breakage. Such concerns of SSP should be addressed as part of any prevention program. SSP, particularly newcomers, should be taught the common strategies experienced SSP use to recognize such clients and should be trained how to deal with them.

4.13 Working Conditions

a) *Mother.*

Most of the small venues are run by women, sometimes with a male partner; these women are called *mother* by the SSP. The *mother* is well-named, acting as she does as a surrogate mother. The vast majority of SSP talk of loving the *mother*. She often recruits the SSP from her village or location where she is known, and besides providing work, food and shelter she also provides the protective environment which the SSP left behind in her village. Mothers do not approve of drug use in the beer-shop and at least two SSP described how the mother had kicked an SSP out of the beer-shop for *ya baa* use. The health of the SSP (beer consumption apart) is an issue for the success of the beer-shop. Several respondents said that they would not have come to their beer-shop if they had not known the *mother* beforehand.

Women have the lead in terms of running the beer-shops where SS takes place. The atmosphere in most beer-shops seems family-like and most of the respondents rely on these *mothers* in a number of ways. The *mother* often keeps the income of the SSP safe and lends money on occasion. Additionally, the *mother* provides information to the SSP about good and bad clients, and often steers inexperienced SSP away from clients who may be potentially problematic. The *mother* also educates and advises the SSP about treatment for STI as well as on contraception. The survey team met one mother who had been appointed peer educator by the Provincial Committee of Control of AIDS. In terms of prevention this may at first glance seem like a logical choice, but there is a arguably a conflict of interests for a person whose main source of income is derived from the SSP selling (and consuming) beer, which undeniably at times leads to risk-taking behaviour on the part of SSP and client alike.

b) Behaviour of the client /boyfriend

The great majority of the clients are Lao Lum, aged 30 to 50, although younger men are

not rare. Most SSP prefer older clients to younger ones; according to respondents younger clients are more sexually demanding and generally have a lower income, therefore the prospect of making money with younger clients is reduced. Many SSP choose not to go with younger clients.

In addition to Lao clients, Vietnamese, Chinese and Thai clients are common and anecdotally *farang* (westerners) who are either tourists or long term residents. An assessment of the clients was not an objective of this survey; the survey team noted the respondents' observations about their clients, with regard to their social class, marital status, etc. but it has to be acknowledged that the clients themselves may not tell the truth, as many are married and may wish to conceal their personal details.

Many clients come from other provinces and visit SSP when they are travelling on business. We may assume that clients have an income which lets them divert a part of it to meet their desire to have sex with a SSP. Clients spend a minimum of 500 baht for short-time, or more for overnight, plus the beer, plus the price of the room from 25.000 to 60.000 Kips; plus 100 to 200 baht for the *mother* who provides the SSP.

Respondents overwhelmingly have a preference for clients who show politeness and respect towards them. Clients who fail to show restraint before entering the bedroom and who grab the respondents' body are not appreciated. These remarks of respondents show that they object to being viewed by men as objects to be consumed and discarded, they are women with feelings and choice.

The vast majority of respondents can choose the client they want to have sex with, and are free to refuse others. This ability does not prevent many of the SSP from suffering bad experiences in the privacy of the bedroom, especially when the client refuses to use a condom. Many respondents have experienced on at least one occasion a client who refused to use a condom, or a client who removed condom during the sexual act. When the SSP refuses, they may face the risk of being physically forced to comply, which is tantamount to rape. In such situations the respondent is often powerless, especially so if the sexual act takes place in an unfamiliar location, in a guest house far from the beer-shop.

Another disturbing occurrence which several respondents described is when a client imposes one or two other male partners on his SSP. The survey team came across an example where a Chinese client tried to impose two of his friends on the respondent. The respondent fled the room and the frustrated and infuriated clients gave chase and tried to hit the respondent with their car.

In addition to providing SS, the SSP is also seen as a companion during the drinking of the client and it is not rare that the relationship between SSP and client finishes after the drinking with the man going home satisfied with the few hours spent with the SSP, without any sexual service being performed, maybe only sensual touching during the drinking. Many respondents said that older clients who are sometimes unable to perform the sexual act end up their session by talking and caressing.

c) Income: sex; sitting with clients; beer

Income can vary greatly from one SSP to another. Factors in earning potential include

age (older SSP of 30+ commands less money), seasonal surges in the number of clients, the age/social rank of clients (older clients tend to have more money than younger clients), negotiation skills of the SSP and the number of clients SSP choose to service.

For SS, SSP earn on average 500 baht for short-time and 1000-2000 baht for overnight, although these figure can be as low as 50,000 kip for short-time and the highest overnight price 2,500 baht. It seems that SSP who are chatty with clients and have fun with clients are most popular. SSP can also supplement their earnings by selling beer; each bottle brings the SSP 1000-2000 kip. This is not true of all beer-shops, and some beer-shops do not pay the SSP per bottle of beer sold. Similarly, SSP often receive money for sitting with the clients, 10,000 to 20,000 kip, which is paid by the client. In some beer-shops (particularly in the south) there is no table money and tipping the SSP is at the discretion of the client.

d) Alcohol intake

Selling beer is the main source of the *mother's* income and to this end the SSP is encouraged to sell beer to the client; the SSP is also motivated as she earns money for each beer sold. Some SSP said they don't like to drink but do so to accompany the clients. Other SSP say they enjoy drinking, whether they decide to go with clients or not. A small beer-shop with two SSP sells on average one crate (12 bottles) on a normal day and may sell up to 7 crates on a busy, weekend day. Most SSP are aware of the need to stay in control and a common trick of SSP is to throw beer to the floor when the client is not looking. Although many say they do not go for sex with clients when they are drunk, their ability to make clear judgments after a certain amount of beer is questionable.

Our survey team saw no evidence of *ya baa amongst* respondents, alcohol intake on the other hand, is daily. It was common to hear SSP saying that they drank three to four bottles a day, sometimes more. Several respondents said they needed to drink in order to get to know the customer, to feel relaxed with the customer and to have fun so as not to think about what they are doing too much. SSP seem to have an ambiguous relationship with alcohol; it is at the same time a tool of their trade and seemingly a crutch which they lean on to a greater or lesser degree. It would be interesting to study the long-term effects of beer consumption on the physical and mental condition of the SSP as the amount of beer an SSP typically consumes could be considered as addictive behaviour.

e) Relationship colleagues / friends

Most respondents work with two to four co-workers in the smaller beer-shops, and up to 30 co-workers in the large clubs. As previously mentioned, most of the respondents were brought to the trade by somebody they knew, almost always from the same village. In general, the vast majority of respondents talked positively about their colleagues, and when they talk of their *friends* they nearly always mean the other SSP in the beer-shop. Very few respondents have *friends* outside the beer-shop. Commonly they have friends working in other beer-shops but rarely do they have friends in other occupations. When talking of the advantages of their job, 'friends' is near the top of the list, perhaps coming after money. SSP live communally with each other, usually sleeping in the same room and sharing cooking and cleaning duties together.

Commonly, SSP go from one province to another with a friend as travelling companions, or go to another beer-shop (often in another province) because of a friend. Respondents described degrees of suspicion and jealousy between the SSP especially where competition for clients is concerned. Therefore, confidentiality, even secrecy may surround issues such as STI and pregnancy; most respondents do not want to talk openly about these issues, fearing that they will lose clients if they discover or believe that the SSP has a STI. This environment is not positive and may lead to SSP with STI having sex with clients against the reasonable advice of medical practitioners who urge SSP to refrain from sexual relationships during treatment.

Sharing clients (*kek*) appears not to be a problem between SSP according to respondents, but regular clients (*kapacham*) and boyfriends (*fen*) are not shared, and at times may be the cause of conflict between SSP.

f) Mental / moral situation

Many respondents have suffered trauma before entering the world of SS and seem to reach beer-shops and SS in the hope of starting afresh, and leaving behind the village and bad memories associated with it. These SSP start a new life in a new environment with co-workers of the same age doing the same job. Nobody passes judgment about their behaviour because all are doing the same thing. With the help of alcohol they offset the hardship, if any, of having, sex with un-wanted, un-loved partners. The money they get makes the task bearable, and their mobility makes the job seem like a choice.

In the community where they practice their craft they feel the sting of gossip and the stare of women at the market who blame the SSP for leading their husbands astray. Respondents commented that often women in the market make unpleasant comments in their presence. Many respondents mentioned that clients they meet occasionally in the street pretend not to recognize them, which causes the respondent to experience feelings of hurt, offence and shame.

The survey team did not come across SSP using medical drugs to alleviate stress, bad sleep or depression. Most respondents acknowledged little attraction to sex with clients, though some did claim to have pleasure sometimes or most times with clients. Many acknowledge pleasure with boyfriend or casual partners: The majority of respondents remain in this occupation because of the money it provides.

Gossip in the community where they work, and rumours about them as "bad woman" is often alleviated by the sense of empowerment of sending money home, and the new position and esteem they have acquired through supporting their family. It seems villagers express mixed feelings about SSP; some are critical of such a choice, but others approve of a daughter who supports her family as she can. For other girls in pre-condition of leaving their village, these mixed messages probably help the would-be SSP to take a decision with regards to leaving her village. Going to the *wat* regularly and giving alms to the monks, which many respondents do, may provide a sense of normalcy to the SSP. All respondents who said they frequented the *wat* said that they felt good afterwards.

Respondents almost without exception maintain regular contact with home and the family. With one exception, (see case study 5, annex) bad memories were not associated

with the parents or siblings for any of the respondents. Therefore contact with parents is regular and money spent on mobile phone cards is one example of the need for the respondents to maintain a bridge between themselves and the family. Sending money by post or via friends going back to the village is also a way to maintain the relationship with the family. Some of the respondents visit their family regularly, and the frequency is related to the distance from the village. Single mothers working as SSP have the tendency to go back home to see their child/ren and parents more frequently.

Many respondents choose to hide the truth of their occupation from parents and some choose to send little money home so as not to arouse suspicion. The majority of respondents work as SSP in another province to avoid the likelihood of detection by those who know them.

Some respondents tell their parents what they are doing which provokes different reactions; some parents ask their daughter to stop whilst others tell them to take care of their health and save money so that they can stop sooner rather than later. In no case amongst the respondents was the daughter shunned by the family. Money sent home can make the difference between siblings attending school or not; the family having sufficient food; the family being able to repair or improve the house; the respondent herself being able to open a shop/business of some kind in the future. Most respondents know how their families spend the money. It seems that the daughter's position in the family is increased by her ability to help the family and this sense of duty fulfilled, to a large degree may boost the self-esteem of the SSP. With the income of 'normal' job it would be impossible to send home such significant sums of money. The money sent home is used variously to buy school uniforms and books for the siblings and help the parents in many different ways. One respondent in Luang Namtha said that if one of her brothers wished to buy a motorbike with the money she sent home she would not allow him. The level of influence within the family that this money bestows upon the SSP was summed up by her phrase: "I am the one who decides."

g) Boyfriend

The boyfriend, nearly always an ex-client, fulfils a basic need of the SSP for a normal, loving and more intimate relationship. Although we heard of a few SSP who married or who intended to marry a boyfriend and leave SS this is not the norm, and most SSP have expectations of their boyfriend beyond what he can provide or else have no expectations of their boyfriend after their time as SSP and the return to their village. The survey team questions the sincerity of most of these boyfriends, particularly as they met the SSP in a beer-shop as clients, and suspects that they take advantage of the emotional needs of these women to trade their 'love' for free sex. The survey team did not come across or hear of examples of boyfriends exploiting the SSP financially, like 'pimps' or 'protectors' in other parts of the world.

h) Expenses: Standard of Living

Most respondents say that their life is better now than before, meaning when they were still living at home. This improvement is measured by respondents primarily in terms of money and all the things it can buy, but also in terms of access to electricity, a hot shower, television and the modern conveniences associated with living in a provincial capital as

opposed to a small village. Many respondents enjoy going to discos, nightclubs and drinking; expenditure on make-up, hair and clothes is high. Those respondents who live independently often have their own motorcycle, television and other items which in all probability would be unobtainable by any income they could get in the village.

The majority of respondents are able to meet their personal needs as well as send money back to their family. Most respondents enter SS for the money it provides and most stay in SS, or return periodically to SS for the same reason. Unless, a SSP has managed to save enough money to open her own business and live independently, there is little motivation to stop SS.

4.14 Future and expectations

The willingness of respondents to go home in the future and marry (not specifically with their boyfriend, but as an ideal) and open their own shop/business may reflect what they wish the interviewer to hear or equally it may be what they themselves wish to believe. However, the period of time these women spend as SSP may have changed their outlook on life sufficiently to make such a transition difficult. During their short-lifespan as SSP these women get cash but they acquire no vocational skills. Therefore, the choices for an SSP to choose another way of life are limited. The SSP who has saved money has the possibility to open a shop or small business. Although the majority of respondents expressed the desire to return to the village, very few acknowledged a desire to return to farming. Intervention programs should perhaps bear in mind that simply helping return SSP to their village does not satisfy their expectations, and this may be why so many SSP return periodically to SS.

4.15 Prevention activities

Knowledge of prevention among SSP has many variables; it is related to age and origin, length of time in SS, size of beer-shop and number of SSP, and location of beer-shop. Many young women come from villages without electricity and with little access to information. Some respondents saw a condom for the first time when the client put it on. In small beer-shops with only a couple of SSP there is not the same exchange of information and experience found in larger beer-shops where the SSP educate each other as to safe practises and the tricks of the trade, from how to persuade a reluctant client to use a condom and how to pacify an angry client, and also on how to negotiate and how to fane beer consumption. SSP who have been working for some months are much more less likely to be the victims of, or catalyst for risk taking behaviour, than a newly-arrived young woman who may be completely inexperienced in matters of sex.

a) Knowledge of prevention

If knowledge of AIDS is commonplace and use of condoms too, then this is due in large part to the work of PCCA, FHI and PSI, whose programs reach SSP on a regular basis; how regular depends on the location of the beer-shop. SSP working in the north generally speaking are not as well-informed about STI as their counterparts in the south. In SVK and Pakse the outreach programs of PCCA and FHI are known by nearly all respondents and part of their success lies in the fact that the volunteers are often ex-SSP and of a similar age to the respondents. Those who lack knowledge and who are therefore most at risk are

newcomers, particularly illiterate women who cannot read the educational material supplied by PCCA and FHI. Awareness of the existence of AIDS and its danger is widespread among respondents but knowledge of STI, particularly in the north, was not nearly as prevalent.

Number One is the best-known brand of condoms in Laos and is used by nearly all respondents. They invariably put Number One first as the way of preventing STI. It is the preferred condom of most, though they complained about the smell. There was a lack of knowledge about lubricant even when available in the package. Chinese condoms are considered to be of bad quality and Thai condoms are known by those who have Thai clients.

Whilst there is a serious gap in knowledge among many respondents with regard to STI, gaps in knowledge are also to be found with the clients themselves, who for reasons difficult to fathom, seem prepared to indulge in risk-taking behaviour, putting the SSP, themselves and their wives/girlfriends at risk.

b) Attitude toward work

Some respondents acknowledge enjoying sex with their clients but these women are in the minority. In most cases the clients are no more than a means to an end. Many see SS as providing them with a unique opportunity to maintain an independence from the family/village at the same time as enabling them to support their families. Among respondents dislike of their clients was commonly expressed, as was acknowledgment of the need to drink in order to do their job. A number of respondents said when they looked at the penis of their client they imagined it was their boyfriend they were with. If it wasn't for the money it is difficult to imagine these women doing this job.

5. Conclusion

Unfortunate accidents of life are contributing factors to the entry of young women into the world of commercial sex. The negative impact of such events is exacerbated by the lack of a supportive environment in the family and the village, and this in turn is a contributing factor; a woman who has failed in the eyes of the community has to pay a hard price to recover her place in the community and regain its respect.

Young women who are stigmatised feel they have no option other than to leave their village and travel to a new environment where ironically perhaps, they find a new freedom through sexually serving men. The supportive, family-like environment of the beer-shop is a world of women which caters for the lust of men; men who more often than not have a wife and family and who put them at risk of disease. Young women who are materially ambitious come to a similar conclusion as the stigmatised women though for different reasons; they too become dependent on satisfying the sexual needs of men to meet the requirements of the cash economy which is booming in Laos, and entering slowly but steadily into remote villages.

SSP are vectors of the new economy by bringing support to their family in the form of cash; this act goes some way to restoring the self esteem of the SSP, for in helping the family her importance and worth is put into perspective; none of the families of the 101

respondents rejected this money on any grounds, and for the families too it appears that the end justifies the means. None of the parents or sibling made any attempt to bring their daughter/sister back home.

If money is the primary attraction for these young women they are often confounded by men who don the glamorous costume of "boyfriend." From that moment on SSP have tremendous difficulty to maintain their health and safety, because their need for love, affection and compassion weakens their defences with regard to prevention.

Prevention Programmes in Laos have already done a lot to ensure that the low level of HIV prevalence in the country remains so. However, more needs to be done in order to relieve SSP of the entire burden of combating the epidemic. At the moment it seems that SSP are alone on the frontline of disease prevention and contraception. These women are also fighting male selfishness. If lack of information seems to offer an easy explanation for risk taking behaviour among male clients, it should be recognised that the traditions and culture which put male pleasure first in many aspects of Lao society are detrimental to their sharing responsibility in the matter of prevention.

6. Suggestions

● **Suggestions for the Lao Authorities / For INGOs / For Donors**

Women should be protected by an effective legal framework which supports women (and their children) in the event of pregnancy, divorce and abandonment by recognising and enforcing the financial obligations of the father/husband towards their offspring.

The Lao government recognises the importance of the education system in the development of the country and to this end the education system should equip girls vocationally to provide them with alternative options to sexual service.

Prevention of HIV/STI/unwanted pregnancy should be a responsibility shared between women and men; that is to say, SSP and her sexual partners. Men/ clients or boy-friends should be targeted with the same energy that the SSP are. They should be informed about the risks of their sexual and male behaviours in terms of infection; in terms of contraception and in terms of respect for SSP and their own wives and families. IEC prevention material should address more thoroughly the issue of gender representation.

Prevention and counselling and reproductive health education should begin in the villages before young women find themselves selling their 'virginity' to men in the village. Prevention and counselling should start at the village level before young girls/women have decided to migrate and look for the best opportunity to meet their needs and that of their family. A number of respondents said that there was no knowledge of condoms in their village and not surprisingly in these same villages there is negligible understanding of HIV/AIDS/STI. Prevention and counselling should begin in the villages *before* young women face the risk of pregnancy (and usually abortion or single motherhood as a result) with their first boyfriend. Talking openly about SSP should be the rule at the village level as many girls are already talking among themselves about the only opportunity they think they have to find a solution to the hardship of their family, or to realise their ambitions, or to redeem themselves in the eyes of their family by bringing money home, through SS.

The establishment of women's centres, or safe-houses for runaway women in the larger towns could provide protection for the more vulnerable by providing dorm accommodation and counselling. Such a centre could also serve as a job agency and in doing so provide an alternative to the beer-shop.

In addition to preventing STI during paid sex, emphasis should be placed on sexual behaviour between SSP and boyfriends, or whatever name SSP give to a man from whom they expect more than money: STI and contraception are two faces of the same problem and should be solved at the same time: Dual protection against STI and contraception should be offered to all SSP,(indeed all young, unmarried women) and as a right, not merely a remedy for society. SSP need to be associated with prevention not as a risk for society, but as a force which has an impact on the life of their family and villages. Therefore males, whether as clients or boyfriends, should be educated to respect and protect SSP because of their important contribution in support of others. They are not merely sex toys in the fantasy of males.

SSP protection should address issues beyond sexual behaviour such as dealing with money, and the learning of skills to prepare the SSP for life after SS. Vocational training, for example, tailoring and hair dressing should be offered to those SSP who have time during the day to learn a new craft.

In addition, money management should be taught to women who are experiencing a sudden influx of cash and who have no previous experience of it. Such measures could reduce the time women spend working in SS and help them to best utilize large sums of money which is often spent in a carefree way. One suggestion would be to open a hair dressing/beauty salon or any other vocational venue where SSP could spend a few hours a day/ a week and learn from a professional the craft which many respondents said they wished to practice upon leaving the world of SS.

Literacy in Lao language should be offered for those who were unable to benefit from a full education, and as a result cannot read any IEC material, nor write.

Foreign language training in English, Chinese and Vietnamese, for specific purposes, could help SSP to prevent and avoid threatening behaviour by clients during their service and provide them with options for alternative occupation outside SSP.

The employment of SSP as peer educators is applauded by the respondents we met in SVK and PKS. Their sympathetic approach and understanding of the situation has helped in the positive response to HIV/STI prevention. In the other three provinces the use of SSP experience would help PCCA and other organizations to improve access to SSP and their adherence to basic prevention practices. Although the high and rapid turn over among SSP poses challenges for prevention programs, using *mothers* as educators should be considered carefully as the *mothers* may have conflicting interests between the safety of the SSP and her desire to sell more beer and service more clients. For mobile SSP, who maybe fall outside the reach of PCCA or FHI, one solution which may help these women with STI awareness would be to employ Khatoeys in hair/beauty salons as educators.

The employment of SSP as educators could solve a second issue raised by SSP: Most of the respondents feel the need to speak to someone. Confidentiality and anonymity should be the rule of the relationship between SSP and her listener. SSP are confronted with considerable pressures cited elsewhere at length in this study; in addition, the isolation from the *normal*/world; and the taboo of confiding in colleagues about STI/ pregnancy and family matters means that the SSP has almost nobody to unburden her problems to. They also have the added pressure of having to present a happy face to clients, including the abusive and bullying ones, and pretending to be happy with the situation. Partly through choice, and partly it could be argued through occupational hazard, SSP face an almost permanent alcohol impregnation. When consideration is given to these issues it is little wonder that when asked how prevention programs could help them better so many respondents said they wanted somebody able to listen to and understand their problems. Training HVI/STI educators to recognize the deeper needs of SSP may help SSP to escape their working environment without too many bruises, and without too many scars.

INGOs should promote condom use for any kind of non-reproductive sex and not focus primarily on SSP.

During the survey, the team came across a study made in India, which showed that HIV/AIDS rates in India are in part due to condoms being too large for many men, and as a result slipping off during sex with SSP. It was felt by the survey team that a similar study into condom size would be valid in Laos given that many respondents remarked upon condom slippage among their clients.

This work with SSP has raised many questions about the attitude of Lao society, men, women and the younger generation toward the first sexual relationship (virginity). A study may help to understand and protect vulnerable people. In addition, studying SSP, while ignoring their male partners such as clients or boyfriends, could prove to be meaningless in the effort to prevent HIV/AIDS in the general population. The support of donors for a study on male attitudes would help to protect women including SSP, wives or other sexual partners. The important questions regarding male attitudes and their responsibility in the transmission/prevention of STI raised in this survey cannot be ignored if prevention programmes are to gain the upper hand in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Annex 1: Findings by province

1. BOKEO

Bokeo is the smallest province in Laos and came into existence in 1983 when it separated from Luang Namtha. Bokeo means 'gem mine,' and the province is rich in deposits of precious and semi-precious stones. Panning for gold is a common occupation. North of the provincial capital, Houei Xay, Laos, Thailand and Myanmar intersect at the infamous area known as the Golden Triangle.

Bokeo also lies at the intersection of the much trumpeted Economic Quadrangle where, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar and China meet. There are 34 ethnic groups in the province. The provincial capital, Houei Xay, lies opposite Thailand's Chiang Khong and is a landing point for merchant and passenger boats.

There are an estimated 200 SSP working in the two districts, and 180 in Houei Xay district in 25 beer-shops. These beer-shops differ greatly in terms of size, facilities and number of women working there. A beer-shop may be a simple rattan hut in a rice-field by the side of a country road, with one or two tables and two girls working; or it may denote a club or resort with live music, a dance-floor and a restaurant, capable of entertaining a hundred customers where between ten to 30 SSP work.

The SSP's accommodation is usually close to the beer-shop. Their bedrooms are rudimentary, sometimes consisting of little more than a mattress on the floor and a mosquito net. Clients are not entertained in the women's private bedrooms but in rooms adjoining or behind the beer-shop. The conditions of these rooms vary from a bare mattress on a concrete floor to small, more comfortable stilt-house bungalows in the bigger resorts.

Profile of Respondents

1.1 Age/Beliefs

Our survey team interviewed a total of 20 SSP (who shall hereafter be referred to as 'respondents') working in 11 different beer-shops. Two additional respondents did not complete the questionnaire; one did not fully cooperate and the second was a deaf and retarded Khamou woman of 17 who was unable to comprehend. Informal discussions were held with many other girls, as well as the owners of beer-shops, called '*may*' (*mother*). The given age of respondents ranged from 17-30 with the vast majority under 20. A number of respondents seemed to be younger than their stated age.

All respondents declared a belief in either Buddhism or spirit worship (ancestor worship) and said that praying or giving alms made them feel better.

1.2 Ethnicity/Origin

Most of the respondents were of the majority Lao Lum ethnicity, while the remaining respondents came from a variety of ethnic groups including Leu, Khamou, Phunoi, Yao,

Taidam and Youan. The respondents' home village was located in the following provinces; Bokeo (four); Udomxai (five); Luang Prabang (three); Xayabouli (five); Savannakhet (one); Phongsali (one); Luang Namtha (one)

1.3 Family/Economic Background

Respondents came from families of low economic status; typically the respondents' families are farmers practising subsistence agriculture. Respondents had up to seven siblings. (Average five) Most considered their family to be poor. One respondent said that the family's rice yield was enough to feed the family but there was no surplus to sell; some years they lacked rice and in these times her mother rented her labour for 20,000 kip a day, three days a week. One respondent said her family had no income besides collecting river and forest products. One respondent said her family rented land. Others were forced to borrow money to buy cattle in times of economic hardship, (for example after the failure of a rice crop) thereby accruing debt. Virtually no respondents reported having experienced an unhappy childhood. None acknowledged a sibling involved in SS.

1.4 Education

Most respondents have basic, primary level education although some respondents have never been to school as the family required labour on the farm. One respondent said that there was no school in the village of her birth and that she and her five siblings worked collecting food from the forest; when the family did move to another village which had a school the respondent said she felt too old to enrol. Some were forced to leave school at an early age (in one case as young as eleven) because with no means of transport access to the nearest school was difficult. Other respondents described leaving school early in order to seek work. It was observed that a large number of respondents have difficulty reading and almost none had any vocational training.

1.5 First Sexual Experience

Respondents' first sexual experience came between the ages of 14 to 18. Of the twenty respondents, 14 respondents' first experience of sex was either selling their virginity to a much older man, or rape. Nine respondents said that they had either sold their virginity for between 2000 baht to 40,000 baht plus a Chinese motorcycle; one respondent was given gold worth five million kip and a mobile phone. Five out of 20 respondents first experience of sex was rape; in no cases were these rapes perpetrated by a family member.

1.6 The Path to Sex Work/Accidents of Life

In the majority of cases, respondents said they felt obliged to leave their village as a result of a single, traumatic experience. 12 out of 20 respondents had experienced some type of trauma. In five cases this was a rape. In one case a man raped a girl of 16 and then bought her a buffalo to ask forgiveness. This act announced to the community what had happened, and the girl, unable to live with the stigma, left home, shortly thereafter entering SS.

Four respondents said they left home as a result of deception in love. Three respondents became pregnant by their boyfriends and had abortions, to then be abandoned by the

boyfriend. Three respondents reported being beaten by their father. Respondents' stories showed a repeated pattern, whereby trauma, accompanied by feelings of failure, shame and guilt was followed shortly after by leaving the village for a larger town, usually the capital of another province.

1.7 Recruitment into Sex Work

Respondents' descriptions revealed that there are four principal ways for a young woman to be recruited into SS. Firstly, the respondent comes to a provincial capital with a friend from her village who already works in a beer-shop (ten out of 20 respondents); secondly, the respondent comes to a provincial capital, and once stranded without money, looks for a job and finds it in a beer-shop (five out of 20) - initially the respondents serve beer to customers but soon enter SS; thirdly, a village 'broker' who could be a family member, friend or neighbour, supplies a girl on demand (two out of 20); fourthly, a *mother* goes directly to a village to recruit girls (three out of 20).

1.8 Conditions of Work

Respondents work every day. Hours are not fixed and respondents have to work when clients arrive at the beer-shop. Some clients arrive as early as ten o'clock in the morning. Work consists of serving customers beer, and on demand, having sex, either short-time (half an hour to two hours) or overnight. All respondents said that they are free to choose the clients they sleep with. They are not pressured by the *mother* to go with clients against their will, unless the clients are **police (uniformed people)**. It is in the interests of the *mother* and the SSP to stay on the right side of the **police (authorities)**.

Clients are predominantly Lao Lum aged from 19-55 approximately. Thai customers are numerous given Houei Xay's proximity to Thailand. Chinese clients are common too and respondents said they had western clients now and again.

Thai baht is the currency used and referred to exclusively by respondents for referring to sexual transactions. Not one respondent referred to prices for sex in terms of Lao kip. Earnings vary considerably; respondents may earn between 8,000 baht a month to 25,000 baht a month, depending on the number of clients.

Many clients come to the beer-shops only to drink beer. For sitting at a table with clients respondents receive between 10,000 to 15,000 kip. Respondents earn 1000 to 2000 kip per bottle of beer sold. The price of a bottle of beer ranges from 12,000 to 15,000 kip. (Wholesale price is 6000 kip a bottle) The number of clients seeking sex ranges from four a month to 25 a month. The price of short-time sex ranges from 500 to 700 baht, while overnight ranges from 1000 to 2000 baht.

Most respondents prefer their clients to be older Lao clients as well as Thai clients, because they are generally better off and can pay more. Older clients expend their energy faster and the respondents have less work to do.

All respondents said that clients in their early twenties were the ones they like the least, as they are often drunk and ill-mannered. Respondents said that they like to be spoken to politely. All respondents disliked being man-handled or touched in an inappropriate way

while sitting at tables, and being spoken to rudely and abrasively.

Out of 20 respondents one declared experiencing pleasure while having sex with clients. Job satisfaction, respondents said unanimously, lies primarily in the financial reward, but also in the sense of freedom which they enjoy.

Visits to beer-shops and informal discussions with women working revealed a picture of the life of a SSP free of coercion, manipulation and imprisonment. Respondents live in a communal atmosphere, sharing accommodation and cleaning duties and cooking together. During times when there are no clients the girls play cards together, listen to music, play with make-up and mobile phones and they seem to do so in a jovial atmosphere.

All respondents said that their life was better now than before. This improvement in quality of life for all respondents is measured in monetary terms and in access to consumer goods like cosmetics, clothes, mobile phones etc. Additionally, respondents referred to electricity, television and toilets as being improvements on village life. Many respondents stated that they enjoyed drinking beer. These are all luxuries which respondents could not afford in their village.

1.9 Mobility

Our survey indicates that there are high levels of mobility amongst respondents, both inter-provincial and between the places of work themselves. 15 out of twenty respondents came to Houei Xay from other provinces and as the women are free to leave when they please, they go home after a few months to visit their families. Alternatively, they go home to recruit another young woman from their village. After a period of time at home, usually no more than a couple of months, they return to SS.

In Houei Xay the beer-shops are located close together; the majority are along a stretch of road approximately three kilometres long. Respondents said that it is quite normal for them to visit each other. In this way the respondents not only see the living/working environment of the other beer-shops but SSP stories about the clients and the earning potential. This network of information helps facilitate the high level of mobility within SS as SSP seek beer-shops with higher earning potential and better living conditions.

Mobility is in the interests of all concerned. For the *mothers*, new women attract more clients; a SSP moving to a new beer-shop also benefits from the fact that she is 'new.' In informal visits to beer-shops SSP when asked: 'how long have you been here?' often reply 'three days' or 'one week.' If true, this indicates the high level of mobility and if not, it suggests the desire for mobility, for 'fresh' women.

1.10 HIV/AIDS/STI Awareness/condom use

All respondents claim to use condom with their clients at all times. One respondent said that once she thinks she didn't use a condom with a client because they were both drunk but she cannot be sure. All respondents are aware of the benefits of using condom and cited protection from AIDS/STI and prevention of pregnancy as the main advantages. All respondents with boyfriends said that they did not use condoms with their boyfriends. One out of twenty respondents reported having had symptoms of STI at one time. One

respondent became pregnant from her boyfriend and aborted using “Chinese” medicine. Another respondent twice got pregnant by different boyfriends and aborted both times. All respondents are familiar with Number 1 condom though many complained about the unpleasant smell and said they preferred Thai condoms.

17 out of twenty respondents have received advice on sex education from educators, PCCA or in three cases the Lao Red Cross. Most respondents were unable to remember the name of the organisation but remembered the name of the educator. All bar three had attended sessions on AIDS/STI prevention and CDM use, and the vast majority had no difficulty understanding.

Two respondents complained that the information was given too quickly and in an unsympathetic manner. In addition, respondents said that peer education with regard to condom use is a norm amongst SSP and often the *mother* distributes condom to the SS. Two respondents said they would like PCCA to offer counselling whenever they need it. One respondent who knew many different STI was invited by the PCCA to be a peer educator but as she cannot read she refused.

1.11 Expectations

Seven out of 20 respondents said that they planned to leave SS in a period of time ranging from two weeks to six months. 17 out of 20 respondents said that in the future they planned to go home; many said they missed their parents. Five out of 20 respondents expressed a wish to marry sometime in the future. Five respondents said they wanted to open a shop of some kind in their village; two wish to open hairdressing salons in their village; one wishes to open a cosmetics shop; three wish to return to farming; one wishes to become a chef and earn a good salary; one wishes to study nursing; one is unsure of her plans but expressed a desire to change job; one plans to open a beer-shop/restaurant (without SSP) three respondents have no idea about the future. Of these last three, an 18 year-old of Yuan ethnicity, who was married at 14 and a mother and divorced before 15, said she doesn't know about the future but she doesn't want to marry again.

2. LUANG NAMTHA

Luang Namtha is a mountainous province in the north-west of Laos. It shares borders with Myanmar and China and is home to 39 ethnic groups, the greatest diversity of any province in Laos. Its proximity to China means that a large number of Chinese live in the main towns of Muang Sing and the capital, Luang Namtha. Until recently, electricity in the provincial capital was only available for four hours in the evening and power cuts are still common. Eco-tourism is a major industry. In recent years the 220,000 square kilometres of national protected forest in the province, home to some of the greatest biodiversity in south-east Asia, has come under pressure from logging, mining and commercial tree plantations

Profile of respondents

2.1 Age/Beliefs

A total of 21 SSP were interviewed by our survey team as well as (three) *mothers*. The

age of respondents ranged between 16 and 20. The Lao Lum respondents are Buddhist and the other ethnicities are spirit worshipers. Most of the interviews with respondents were drawn from SSP working in beer-shops with the addition of several mobile phone workers. In the case of many mobile phone workers, they do not consider themselves to be SS, but rather are augmenting their income with occasional sexual transactions.

2.2 Ethnicity/Origin

The majority of respondents belong to ethnic groups other than Lao Lum

, Eight out of 21 respondents are Lao Lum, nine are Khamou and there is one Kalom, one Leu, one is Punoi and one respondent is of mixed Kalom/Leu ethnicity. The respondents' home villages are located in the following provinces: Luang Prabang (nine); Phongsali (three); Udomxai (six); Luang Namtha (three). This reflects the pattern observed in Bokeo whereby SSP originate from provinces distinct to those they work in.

2.3 Family/Economic Background

Most respondents come from families of low economic means, although one respondent's father owns 200,000 rubber trees, while the mother is responsible for raising cows, buffalo and pigs; the family own a lot of land and produce 6 tons of corn every year. The majority of respondents come from agricultural families and the Khamou respondents' families practise dry-rice cultivation on the lower slopes of the mountains. One respondent who came from a village with no electricity described her family as poor but said they had no debts. One respondent from the Leu ethnic group said that her family had to rent land, One Khamou respondent whose parents are both dead said that her family were poor and that other families in the village gave them food from time to time; her only older brother worked as hired labour whenever he could. Another respondent said her family were not poor, having enough to eat but not enough money for beer and fun. One respondent's father is a physiotherapist and her mother is a midwife; they have a pharmacy at home.

2.4 Education

The majority of respondents have limited education. Seven respondents left school between the ages of ten and 16. One respondent left school at 18 but only began school at the age of 13. One respondent has never been to school. The Khamou respondents interviewed in particular have a low level of education. The Kalom/Leu respondent spoke Lao very slowly. None of the respondents have any vocational training.

2.5 First Sexual Experience

The first sexual experience was between the ages of 13 to 19. Of the 21 respondents 8 sold their virginity, (the youngest at 14 years of age) for between 100,000 kip and 3,500,000 kip. One respondent was raped at the age of 16 by a soldier (no idea) from a nearby barrack. Another respondent became pregnant and was forced by her boyfriend to have an abortion.

2.6 The Path to Sex Work/Accidents of Life

The death of a mother at 14, a pregnancy at 16 followed by abortion under coercion, a rape at 16, parental prohibition to marry a boyfriend; these are some of the traumatic events which spurred respondents to leave home. In several cases a sense of shame and stigma accompanied the respondent in her village, driving her away from home. Other respondents left home out of a curiosity to know the world outside their village and as they put it: "*ma lir*" (have some fun.)

The next step into SS largely reflects a desire/need for money. One respondent, on arriving at a beer-shop where a friend worked, wanted to go home on discovering that the beer-shop was also a brothel; lacking the money for a ticket she started going with clients. Several respondents reported admiring the attractive clothes and beautiful look of their friends who were already doing SS; they decided they would do likewise, following the path to SS like moths to a bright light

2.7 Recruitment into Sex Work

Moving to a provincial capital in search of work is a common way for respondents to get stranded without money. Several respondents followed a friend to a beer-shop and usually began SS within a couple of weeks. (One respondent from Nambak, Luang Prabang said that four girls in her village were employed in SS) Often, the friend pays the bus ticket and the respondent is indebted and under pressure to find money to pay off the debt.

Several girls were offered money by beer-shop clients for their virginity. Although the sums involved are low (100,000 kip to 350,000 kip) for many village girls these sums represent more money than they may have ever owned, or even seen. One respondent had worked as a tailor, another as a dish washer in a restaurant and another working in a garment factory in Vientiane; all three deemed SS in a beer-shop preferable to working six or seven days a week in a factory for as little as 400,000 kip.

The common denominator in all these cases is that at some point or another respondents felt pressured economically, and SS offered the most convenient and most lucrative way out of their predicament.

2.8 Conditions of Work

All respondents declared that they are free to choose their clients; there appears to be no coercion in this respect. Earnings vary according the number of clients entertained, with prices for short-time ranging from 50,000 kip to 200,000 for short-time and from 100,000 to 300,000 for overnight. These prices may indicate a less robust economy in Luang Namtha when compared to Bokeo. The large differential between minimum and maximum prices, particularly for short-time sex may reflect the negotiating abilities of the respondents.

Clients are predominantly Lao Lum although there are a large number of Chinese clients, reflecting their importance in the local demographic. Respondents reported having Vietnamese clients too.

The number of clients on a daily basis ranged from one to three. Chinese and Vietnamese clients tend not to drink beer when they visit a beer-shop whereas the Lao

almost always do. If the customer consumes beer then respondents do too, as in most cases they may earn between 1000 kip to 2000 kip per bottle of beer consumed. One girl said she doesn't like drinking beer but does so every day with clients.

One respondent reported earning between 300,000 and 400,000 a week only from beer sales. Most respondents receive no money at all for sitting at tables with the clients and two respondents receive no money for either sitting with clients or for selling beer.

Lao kip is almost always used by respondents to refer to prices. Only one respondent mentioned Chinese Yuan but it is highly possible that Chinese Yuan is readily accepted as there are a large number of Chinese clients. It was observed that prices at the Chinese market are quoted in Yuan and not kip. Only one respondent referred to Thai baht when talking of the price for short-time sex.

Respondents speak positively of the *mothers*, commenting frequently on their kindness. Money is the main motivation for entering and staying in SS, and earnings varied between 600,000 a week to 700,000 a month. One respondent reported that with her earnings she is building a house in her village. The majority of respondents send money home on a monthly basis and ranging from 200,000 to 500,000 kip. One respondent sends food and goods home. Another respondent sends nothing home as she is afraid her family will be suspicious of how she earned the money.

Respondents showed a preference for Lao clients and several commented how some Chinese and Vietnamese clients are reluctant to use condoms. Respondents unanimously disliked servicing clients with ball bearings or stones inserted in their penises and refuse to have sex with them. Similarly, predominantly Vietnamese clients who inject oil into their penises to enlarge it are also refused every time. All respondents like polite clients and clients who speak correctly with them. Clients who are fun, without being coarse or rude, are also liked.

Many respondents talked of good relations with their colleagues and the *mother*. All respondents acknowledged that their life now is better than it was before. All appreciated the modern comforts of electricity, television, a shower, a bathroom etc. One respondent observed how 'wonderful' it is to have electricity and a hot shower.

Many respondents commented on how much they value their independence. Although no respondents talked of pride that they are able to send money home to support their families it is possible that their self esteem is boosted and their status in their family too.

2.9 Mobility

Survey shows that there is less mobility amongst SSP in Luang Namtha (both inter-provincial and between beer-shops) compared with Bokeo. In Bokeo it was observed that *mothers* will often go directly to the village to recruit women but this appears not to be the case in Luang Namtha. In most cases women are introduced to beer-shops and ultimately SS via a friend; the friend is from the same village and has been employed for some months in SS.

Whereas in Bokeo, SSP have often travelled to and worked in more than one province as

SSP, in the case of Luang Namtha most respondents came directly from their village to a beer-shop in Luang Namtha. All respondents are from the Northern provinces, and all those respondents from outside Luang Namtha come from neighbouring provinces.

Beer-shops in Luang Namtha are spread over a wide area, certainly when compared to the density of beer-shops in Bokeo. Respondents in general do not go from one beer-shop to another. Several respondents said that they chose a beer-shop or stayed in a beer-shop because they don't know any other.

Respondents' circle of friends is usually restricted to their colleagues in the beer-shop where they work. Most respondents do not have friends working in other beer-shops and do not visit other beer-shops socially. Consequently, the survey team did not find in LNT the networking system and exchange of information observed in Bokeo; respondents are not very aware of the working and living conditions in other beer-shops and tend to stay in the beer-shop they first arrived at.

Respondents have been working in their beer-shop from a few days to one year. When asked by the foreign members of the survey team how long they have been working here, respondents usually reply that they have been here a few days or a couple of weeks; this may be true, reflecting the high turn-over of SSP or it may be that the foreign members of the team, both male, are viewed as potential clients and so respondents give the reply that they think the clients like best, that is to say that they are 'new' faces. One *mother* told the Lao members of the survey team that some girls stay between ten and 20 days and then either go home or go to another shop. She added that very few girls stay for more than six months.

2.10 HIV/AIDS/STI Awareness/condom use.

All respondents said that they use condoms at all times with clients. Several respondents have fallen pregnant to clients however; one girl of 17 has had three abortions. Respondents in Luang Namtha declared a higher number of symptoms of STI than in Bokeo. A large proportion of respondents mentioned that Chinese and Vietnamese clients in particular like to have sex without using condoms; although respondents stated that they insist on condom use. One respondent cited six occasions where clients had removed the condom during sex. Most respondents are unaware of the use/benefits of using lubricants. Condom breakage affects most respondents.

Of four mobile SS interviewed all said that they had had symptoms of STI at one time or another. Two had symptoms at the time of being interviewed. Many mobile SSP fall outside the known circle of SS; often they are not registered with PCCA and most have no desire to be registered, preferring to maintain their anonymity within their own community.

All respondents are aware of AIDS but are significantly less knowledgeable about STI. One respondent asked a member of the survey team how long someone can expect to live if they have an STI. A large number of respondents who reported having had vaginal discharge or symptoms of STI seek treatment in pharmacies. Many respondents administer their own treatment; one respondent with symptoms of STI applied Dettol to her vagina and another with potential symptoms of STI applied toothpaste which she said made her feel cool.

Most respondents do not go to hospitals to seek treatment. In part, this may be due to a desire to preserve their privacy. One respondent of 18, whose father is a physiotherapist and whose mother is a midwife has had symptoms of STI since the age of 14. She went to the public hospital and stated to the interviewer that the doctor was unsympathetic, indiscreet and abusive.

Luang Namtha seems a less developed town than Houei Xay, where SSP have a lot of contact with Thai clients. Respondents in Luang Namtha reported an even lower degree of education than respondents in Bokeo, particularly the Khamou respondents.

In many of the villages of LNT there is no electricity so respondents do not have access to television and exposure to AIDS awareness campaigns through this media. The low level of education, a lack of information and linguistic difficulties for SSP of ethnic groups other than Lao Lum, combine to make them vulnerable to AIDS/STI; a SS who does not command the Lao language is at a disadvantage when negotiating prices and condom use for SS and at the same time is less able to control the situation when with a client.

2.11 Expectations.

Nine out of 20 respondents said that in the future they wanted to return to their home village; five of these respondents said that they would like to return in a period of time ranging from one month to one year. Eight respondents said they wished to get married someday. Five respondents said they wanted to open a small shop; 1 wants to open a beer-shop in her village without SSP; one respondent wishes to open a cosmetics shop in her village; two respondents wish to open a beauty salon in their village; one respondent will stay in SS until she has enough money to build a house in her village; two respondents have no idea what they would like to do in the future though one said she would like to change her work; one respondent, an 18-year-old Khamou, wants to back to her village but doesn't think about getting married as she fears she and her family would be stigmatized.

3. SAVANNAKHET.

Savannakhet is the most populated province in Laos with 620,000 people. The provincial capital (pop. 120,000) was once known as Savan Nakone (City of Paradise) but these days is more commonly known as Savan. The western part of the province borders the Mekong River and neighbouring Thailand, while the eastern part borders Vietnam.

Savannakhet is enjoying something of a boom-time; the Australian gold and copper mine at Sepon began production in 1999; the Japanese-funded bridge across the Mekong between Savannakhet and Mukdahan, opened in January 2007, facilitating the flow of goods and people; the improvement of Route 9 has cut travelling time from Lao Bao on the Viet border to Savannakhet from eight hours a decade ago to three hours today.

A Special Economic Zone (SEZ) has been established to promote trade and investment. The number of tourists has increased from 90,910 in 1999 to 192,500 in 2005 since. The expanding economy in Savannakhet is evidenced by the growth in the number of restaurants, bars, clubs, guest houses and internet cafes in the centre of the town.

Savannakhet

With approximately 60 beer-shops and an additional 20 clubs in Savannakhet, the City of Paradise is a magnet for SS from diverse points in the country. In Bokeo and Luang Namtha, it was observed that many girls drift unknowingly into SS through lack of a viable alternative, or else are actively recruited into SS. However, the situation in Savannakhet is that many SSP make their way to Savannakhet with the intention of undertaking SS.

Estimating numbers of SS in Savannakhet is difficult due to the seasonal nature of SS (fewer clients in cold weather, more clients during festival times) and high levels of mobility of SSP. According to figures from the PCCA there are between 300 to 700 SSP in the province and between 300 to 500 SS in the town. There are also five Vietnamese beer-shops with a SSP population of between 40 to 50 which cater largely for the Vietnamese population of Savannakhet.

It was noticeable that there is a significant population of mobile SSP in Savannakhet. The greater number of mobile SSP noted by our survey team is in part a question of demographics. It is perhaps also a reflection of an increased awareness on the survey team's part regarding this less visible aspect of SS. Experience gained in Bokeo and Luang Namtha meant that the survey team was more conscious of mobile SS and how they operate by the time the team arrived in Savannakhet.

Some hair/beauty salons run by *khatoeys* (*a khathoey is a biological male who is attracted at young age (seven to ten) to female attitudes and attire also referred to the third gender*) are always able to provide SSP on demand. One *Khatoey* hairdresser in Khaisone district when asked how many telephone numbers of mobile girls he had responded: "Many, many." Similarly, guest-house/hotel concierges and night porters can usually provide a SS on request to male clients. The guest-house receptionist repeatedly offered the male members of the survey team mobile SSP. He said that they were available at any time.

Profile of the Sex Worker.

3.1 Age/Beliefs

Out of a total of 20 respondents from 18 beer-shops and two clubs, the ages ranged from 16 to 28. 13 out of 20 were single mothers, with the child living in their home province with relatives. The vast majority of respondents are Lao Lum. All Lao Lum said that they are Buddhist and go to the *vat* on the important festival occasions. Most respondents work in clubs.

SSP in Savannakhet are generally very well dressed. SSP in many clubs must follow a dress code, which means wearing the traditional Lao *sin*. Cosmetics are carefully applied and care is taken with the hair.

3.2 Ethnicity/Origin

Of the 20 respondents a total of 18 are Lao Lum. One respondent is Hmong; one is Phoutai and one is Khamou. Six respondents come from Vientiane (three from VTE capital, three from VTE province), two from Savannakhet, three from Luang Prabang, three from Bolikhamxay, two from Houaphan, one from Pakse, one from Udomxai, two from

Khammouane,

3.3 Family/Economic Background.

The vast majority of respondents come from farming backgrounds. The families are usually subsistence farmers. Respondents reported having between four to nine siblings. Except in a couple of cases where a parent had died, all respondents stated that their parents were still together. No respondents acknowledged experiencing an unhappy or traumatic childhood. Most respondents described their families as being poor. One respondent from Bolikhamxay province said that her family often has insufficient to eat and that she and her six siblings had one broken bicycle between them.

3.3 Education

The majority of respondents did not complete their education; one respondent left school at ten years of age; and other respondents left school at 13, 14, two at sixteen, two at 17 and two at 18. The most common reason for leaving school early was in order to help the family by working on the farm. One respondent abandoned her studies at 16 to nurse her sick father. One respondent said she left school at the age of 18 because her family had no money for the school uniform or for books. Another respondent said that of seven siblings in her family only two went to school due to lack of money. Two respondents said they had sisters at Don Dok University, Vientiane, one studying management and English, and another studying Finance and Accounting.

3.4 First Sex

Respondents stated that their first experience of sex came between the ages of 15 to 19. Out of 20 respondents Seven sold their virginity for between 1000 baht to 20,000 baht. Four respondents had their first sexual experience with their boyfriend (two at 17, one at 18, one at 19); six respondents had their first sex with their husband; three respondents were raped.

3.5 The Path to Sex Work/Accidents of Life

In several cases respondents left their home due to a broken heart; in one case because the boyfriend did not wish to marry; in another case a respondent became pregnant by her boyfriend at 17 who then abandoned her to marry another girl in the village; three respondents left home shortly after being raped. One respondent was raped at the age of 16 by a man of 42 and offered 70,000 baht by way of apology; another respondent was raped at 15 years of age by a man of 27. She was forced by her own parents to marry the man to save the family face. She was divorced a year later with a son of less than a year; seven respondents left their village and entered sex work shortly after getting divorced. In six cases the husband was unfaithful; (on occasion openly so) in one case the husband was verbally abusive. One respondent was widowed shortly after marrying. In the above eight cases the respondent was left with at least one child to take care of. These eight respondents concurred that SS was the best option to provide for their children.

A sense of duty and responsibility to the family propels many respondents into SS. One respondent decided to sell her virginity in order to help her family who fell into debt due to

her brother needing an operation.

Only one respondent reported having been deceived. She was offered a job selling clothes at a market and found herself instead selling beer in a beer-shop. Several respondents began by selling only beer in beer-shops. After a period of time ranging from one week to six, they began going with clients, attracted in all cases by the money available to them.

A trauma or disappointment in love, (abandonment, abuse, divorce, infidelity) sometimes leading to depression, is common to most respondents; however, one respondent wanted only to follow her friends. She left school when they did, went to work in a factory when they did and followed them into a beer-shop and ultimately SS.

Recruitment into Sex Work

In half the cases the respondent came to work in a beer-shop because a friend already working there advised them to join them, often citing the money to be made. In two cases the beer-shop *mother* comes from the same village as the respondent. Most respondents on leaving their home village seek a place where they know someone. Often they have a friend from their own village working in a beer-shop and this fact alone often determines their destination.

Several respondents stated that initially upon arriving at a beer-shop they didn't think about doing sex work; they are however, unable to make sufficient money for their needs only by sitting at tables with clients and serving beer. The earning potential of SSP is irresistible to most respondents. One respondent said she was reluctant to go with clients at first, but was spurred on by the thought of her child's needs at home in her village with her parents. Respondents who are single mothers concur that SS is the best option to provide for their children.

A couple of respondents described entering factory work after leaving their home village; the wages however, were so low, (500,000 kip per month) that when the offer of money for sex came along they felt they could not refuse. Another respondent described the physical hardship of working in a saw mill; she abandoned it after a short time, and on the advice of a friend entered work in a beer-shop. Within a matter of weeks she was going with clients.

3.6 Conditions of Work

Interviews with 20 respondents reveals a wide range of earning potential among SSP. one respondent claimed to have one or two clients per week on average whilst another reported having twenty five clients last month. The last client ranged from last night to two weeks ago.

Short-time sex prices range from 500 baht to 1000 baht. Overnight ranges from 1000 baht to 2000 baht. Prices are often negotiable; young clients (18-28) tend to have little money and older clients (30 to 55+) usually have more money. Two respondents said that they often elicited generous tips (2000 to 10,000 baht) on telling their personal history to clients. Thai clients are appreciated by respondents for their generosity in tipping.

One respondent reported earning 1,000,000 kip last month and another reported saving 100,000 baht in four months. It is also difficult to gauge spending patterns as none of the respondents was able to give a detailed account of daily/monthly expenditure. One respondent said that she spends from 50,000 kip to 150,000 each time she goes to a nightclub with her friends. Many respondents have difficulty remembering exactly how they spend their money.

Two respondents have a clear notion of how much money they have saved though this is not the norm. Most respondents do not carefully control their money. Often the *mother* acts as a bank for the respondents and they are able to withdraw whenever they want. Several respondents stated that they are unable to save; nearly all respondents enjoy spending money on clothes and going out with friends.

Working hours vary considerably; respondents working in small beer-shops can be on call all day if they live at the beer-shop. On the other hand, several respondents working in large clubs (30 to 40 girls) reported working from 9pm to 12 pm every night.

SSP who work in the large clubs live on-site, sleeping in a dorm with up to thirty other girls. Some SSP prefers their privacy and pay for private accommodation. A visit to one SSP's (26 years old, Vientiane) residence revealed a very simple existence; a shack of wood and hardboard, with a corrugated iron roof which cats run over during the night. The shack is at the back of some shops, in an open courtyard where roosters stay. The door is a sheet of corrugated iron with a padlock.

Inside the shack, about 8x8 feet, the respondent's Honda motorbike is parked; there is a Japanese television, a double bed a large fridge, a DVD player and CD deck and tuner and a large speaker. Clothes hang in a collapsible plastic wardrobe. The walls are completely covered with teeny posters of Thai pin-ups, posters of waterfalls, vases of flowers and bowls of fruit. A couple of aerials hang from the loosely constructed hardboard ceiling. There are no washing or cooking facilities inside. The respondent uses the bathroom of a neighbour's house.

There is a plastic rack with a number of plates, bowls, pestle and mortar, glasses and cutlery. Another plastic rack contains a box of cosmetics and a box of South Korean condoms. On the mantle of the bed's headboard there is a cheap ceramic of a newly married couple. The respondent said that she paid 1000 baht per month for this accommodation which she considered to be expensive.

All respondents enjoy the liberty of being able to leave when they please, assuming they have no outstanding debts with the *mother*. (For example a bus fare from their province to reimburse) One respondent works for two weeks and then takes two weeks leave thanks to understanding owners who recognize her need to go to Vientiane to see her young son.

All respondents are free to choose their clients and may refuse a client if they feel uncomfortable. Many respondents refuse clients with penis enlargements, (either through US\$100-operations in Thailand or by injecting oil into the penis.) Many respondents reported encountering clients with ball-bearings, stones and rings inserted in their penis and most refuse such clients, fearing pain and condom breakage. In such cases respondents did not acknowledge having any problems as a result of refusing such a client.

(examples of abusive clients)

Nearly all respondents describe good relations with the *mother*. In several cases the *mother* is from the same village as the respondent, but regardless, most respondents are at the very least respectful of their *mother* and often talk fondly of the *mother*.

The *mothers* (sometimes the beer-shop is run by a married couple) provide the young women with condoms; they advise them on condom use; advise them on handling clients; advise them on negotiating skills; keep money safe for the SSP; lend money if needed; allow them to leave when they want. One respondent out of 20 had a negative comment, saying that if she didn't pay her 100 baht tax per client to the *mother* then the *mother* steered clients away from her.

3.7 Mobility

Survey showed that mobility amongst SS is high. This finding is backed up by figures from the PCCA. According to the PCCA, Savannakhet, more than half the SS in Savannakhet move to find work in another province after one month and one in five move to another shop after one month. These estimates are based on mapping of SS which PCCA carries out every three months. Our survey shows that in the vast majority of cases, respondents travel to and work in at least one or two other provinces before arriving in Savannakhet. Such is the mobility of SS in Savannakhet that it is difficult to give anything other than rough estimates for the number of SS in Savannakhet at any time.

The 21 respondents originate from eight different provinces. One respondent from Savannakhet travels to Thailand with clients for periods ranging from a week to a month. A common pattern amongst respondents is to work to accumulate money and then return to the family; one respondent from Bolikhamxay province reported working in Savannakhet for between a few days or a week, to a month at a time, before returning home with the cash earned. An illiterate 30-year-old SS from Bolikhamxay left her village at the age of twenty and moved to the provincial capital of Paksan. She stayed there for two years before moving to Pakse. After one year in Pakse she returned to Paksan for about a year before trying her luck in Thailand. After an unsuccessful week she made her way to Savannakhet where she has been working for the last three or four years.

Respondents stayed in the same beer-shop for from one month to five years although the greatest number stayed in one beer-shop between one to four months before moving on. Those respondents who stay longer are often single mothers. Reasons for staying longer include familiarity with the owner of the beer-shop; they are comfortable with the working conditions; the money is good.

3.8 HIV/AIDS/STI Awareness/CDM Use

All respondents are familiar with HIV/AIDS and understand that AIDS kills. Most respondents have a basically sound understanding of methods of transmission. One respondent stated that she had heard a rumour that AIDS can be contracted by sharing a drink with an infected person. All respondents said that they always use condoms with their clients although one respondent stated that once she was smooth-talked by a client into not using a condom. Another respondent did not use a condom when she sold her virginity.

to a client and she got a vaginal discharge.

A high proportion of respondents stated that many clients ask to have sex without using a condom. The respondents always refuse, talking in a calm and soothing way to dissuade the clients gently. Many respondents reported condom breaking during sex. One respondent observed that this was because vagina was dry and another respondent commented that this was because she was dry and the condom was dry too.

Condoms slipping off during sex were noted by several respondents and are due to the following reasons:

- 1 Condom is too large
- 2 Respondent had put lubricant inside the condom
- 3 Client himself had put the condom on incorrectly.

One respondent said that she holds the base of the penis to ensure that the condom does not slip off.

The desire of many clients to have unprotected sex is seen in the fact that five out of twenty respondents described how clients removed condom during sex; one respondent has had five clients do this, and she has had vaginal discharge four times. Another respondent became pregnant when a client removed the condom

All respondents are aware of STI. Knowledge of the different types of STI is not consistent among respondents. One respondent believed she was protected during menstruation and got vaginal discharge. Two respondents reported condoms slipping off during sex because they had put lubricant inside the condoms. One of these respondents contracted an STI as a result but continued working without telling her clients. She said if she stopped working she could not maintain her lifestyle of beer, going to nightclubs, and buying clothes.

Knowledge of lubricant usage among respondents was not high. A number of respondents use it from time to time, particularly if they have more than one client in a day. Several respondents have little or no idea about the advantages of lubricants; most respondents are unaware of the use of lubricant for anal sex. One respondent uses it as a skin moisturizer for her face.

A total of two respondents have tried the female condom; one commented on how mutually satisfying it was for both herself and the client; another respondent tried but wasn't sure how to position it correctly and it caused pain to both herself and the client. She has never used it since.

A high proportion of respondents do not use condoms with their boyfriends. In many cases these boyfriends are regular clients. Once they become boyfriends they usually desire to stop using a condom. Several respondents reported insisting on condom use with their boyfriends on the advice of FHI volunteers. However, many respondents do not use condom with their boyfriends. One respondent who did not use a condom with her

boyfriend became pregnant and got vaginal discharge; another respondent said she suspects she got a vaginal discharge from her boyfriend

SS in Savannakhet are well served by various institutions with regard to HIV/AIDS/STI education/treatment. The Women's Health Centre, PCCA and FHI all provide information, testing and advice. All clients have met volunteers from FHI and several respondents (particularly from the larger clubs) reported receiving visits from FHI volunteers every week. Volunteers talk about HIV/AIDS/STI and supply free condoms. Other respondents from smaller beer-shops reported meeting FHI volunteers once a month. All respondents who have met FHI volunteers speak well of them.

Respondents generally feel comfortable with the volunteer because it is always the same volunteer who comes. A number of respondents said that they liked the easy-going nature of the volunteers, who are former SSP. Nearly all respondents know that FHI supplies free testing. Respondents commented on the fact that FHI volunteers will pick them up and take them to the centre if the respondent has no bike. Several respondents are aware of the Fresh Start program which runs a walk-in clinic three days a week; SSP can be tested and receive counselling here.

3.9 Expectations

Out of 20 respondents nine said that they want to go home in the future. One said that she wanted to get married. Six respondents want to open a small shop; four want to open a beauty salon; two wish to open a stall in the market; one wishes to leave SS to work in her cousins' new restaurant; one wishes to help the family on the farm; one wishes to save 100,000 baht, buy goods in Thailand and sell them wholesale in Laos; two respondents have no expectations of the future; two respondents wish to open a beer-shop and work as *mothers*; of these last two, one is a 30-year-old who never went to school and who has been a SS for 10 years. She doesn't want to go home and wishes to travel and enjoy life.

4. SEKONG

The south-eastern province of Sekong is bordered on three sides by the provinces of Attapeu, Champasak and Saravan and on its eastern extreme by Vietnam. The population of the province is approximately 82,000 and the provincial capital, Sekong, has a population of 14,000. There is a sizeable Vietnamese presence in the town. Sekong is one of the poorest provinces in Laos. The GOL states that this poverty and slow development is due in large part to the high levels of unexploded military ordnance. (UXO)

During the second Indochinese war a section of the Ho Chi Minh Trail ran through the eastern part of the province and was the target of intensive bombing. In 1996, an estimated two thirds of all villages were contaminated by UXO. The main economy in Sekong is logging. Logging trucks are a common sight and Vietnamese, Thai and Cambodian businessmen come to buy this lucrative commodity.

Profile of the Sex Worker

4.1 Age/Beliefs.

Ages of the 18 respondents ranged from 17 to 27. Aged 17-19 (eight); aged 20-22 (four); aged 23-27 (six). One respondent stated her age as 17 but the chronology of her story suggests that she is 17. Out of 18 respondents 14 are Buddhist, and four worship ancestor spirits.

4.2 Ethnicity/Origin

14 out of 18 respondents are Lao Lum; one is Pu Noi; one is Khamou; one is Tai Dam and one is Kalieng. The respondents come from a total of eight provinces Vientiane (three); Oudomxay (one); Luang Prabang (three); Sekong (one); Attapeu (three); Bolikhamxay (three); Xayabouli (one); Huaphanh (one); Xieng Khouang (1); Savannakhet (1)

4.3 Family/Economic Background

Of 18 SSP interviewed, all belonged to families of low economic status. Respondents have between two to ten siblings (on average five). 14 out of 18 respondents come from farming families. Out of 18 respondents nine described their family as being poor. One respondent related how she married at the age of 14 to avoid being pushed into SS by her older brother. One respondent described how she married at the age of 16 to a Thai man of 28 because her family needed the money. The family of one respondent with seven siblings suffers seasonal rice shortages and she had to sell vegetables at the market before going to school. One respondent's family has a stall selling clothes at the local market; two respondents' families own shops; one respondent's family grow fruit. Four of 18 respondents said that their family had enough money to eat and enough to live.

Five out of eighteen respondents suffered the loss of a parent; two respondents' fathers died of lung disease; one respondent's father died of unspecified illness when she was a young child; one respondent never knew her father as he abandoned the family when his wife was three months pregnant. Two respondents' mother died when the respondents were 17 and 18 respectively; one of these respondents' mother died of an illness because the family did not have enough money for an operation.

4.4 Education

None of the eighteen respondents completed school. Respondents left school between the ages of ten to 18. In the case of the respondent who left school at 18, she started school at the age of ten. Most respondents left school early because their family could not support the cost of maintaining their child in school. Commonly, respondents left school to help with farming duties. One respondent left school at 14 to help her parents sell clothes in the market; one left school at 14 to help her mother when her father became ill. Two respondents had no schooling; one respondent left school at the age off 14 and all six of her siblings failed to finish school. One respondent started school at the age of seven and left school at the age of ten. One respondent started school at the age of eight and finished at the age of 12. (the grade/age of school leaving can be misleading as children in Laos

often start school late and may drop out due to economic difficulties in the family to later return; thus, the age range in a grade can vary considerably) At the time of leaving home none of the eighteen respondents had any vocational training. One respondent later learned tailoring in a factory in Vientiane where she earned 200,000 basic per month, 400,000 kip with overtime.

4.5 First Sexual Experience

Respondents' first sexual experience came between the ages of 14 and 25. 14 out of 18 respondents' first sex occurred between the ages of 14 and 18. Four out of 18 respondents sold their virginity between the ages of 17 to 25; three did so for between 20,000 baht to 25,000 baht, whilst one respondent received a Ko Lao motorcycle in return for her virginity. Seven respondents' first sex was with their boyfriend; five respondents' first sex was within marriage, including a 15 year-old who was married in an arrangement with a man of 37 years of age; two respondents were raped.

4.6 The Path to Sex Work/Accidents of Life

A common motive among respondents for leaving the village is disappointment in love; five out of eighteen respondents related being broken-hearted in their teens by a boyfriend who either deceived them, refused to marry or disappeared; two respondents said they were abandoned by their boyfriend after becoming pregnant; one of these last two respondents was obliged by custom to buy and sacrifice a buffalo in order to apologise to her family and her village for having a child out of wedlock. The family was forced to sell land to buy the buffalo. One respondent said she was refused permission to marry her boyfriend by her parents. A broken marriage was the catalyst for driving several respondents from their village; one respondent with a young son was abandoned by her husband; three respondents divorced their husbands leaving them to fend for young children; one respondent who married at 15 years of age had a son who died in infancy, after which her parents forced her to divorce her husband against her wishes. One respondent's 24-year-old husband was murdered; one respondent described being raped at the age of sixteen, shortly after which she abandoned her village.

4.7 Recruitment into Sex Work

Out of 18 respondents eight were introduced to SS by a friend from their village already working in a beer-shop, or with previous experience of working in SS. One was introduced to SS by a cousin; one respondent heard from a girl in her village that SS provides good money; two respondents knew *mothers* from their own village; one respondent knew four girls in her village who provided sexual services to older men in the village as well as in the town and was introduced to a broker; one respondent described how she was deceived into going for cleaning/babysitting work which turned out to a job in a beer-shop; two respondents went looking for work; one of these found work directly in a beer-shop and another made her way to a garment factory in Vientiane shortly after which she was introduced to SS by a colleague in the factory.

4.8 Conditions of work

The price for services varied little among respondents but the earning capacity varied

quite a lot, depending on the number of clients per day/week and the profile of the client. Short-time prices ranged between 100,000 kip to 1000 baht and overnight prices ranged from 200,000 kip to 2000 baht, with an average price of 500 baht for short-time and 1,500 to 2000 baht for overnight. Prices are negotiable, usually with poorer clients.

Some beer-shops have no facilities for the sexual service of clients and SS take them to a nearby guesthouse. All respondents receive 2000 kip per bottle of beer sold; one respondent said she could earn 30,000 to 40,000 kip per day selling beer - in the last week this respondent earned over 500,000 kip from sex and beer. One respondent arrived five days previous to the interview and began working on the day of her arrival; in the first five days she said she had earned 1,000,000 kip. In Sekong most girls are not paid for sitting at the table with clients; instead tipping is at the discretion of the client. Clients who tip leave between 10,000 kip to 20,000 kip per table.

The number of clients received by respondents varied greatly, from four to six clients per week to four or five clients a month. Earnings are correspondingly quite diverse among respondents. Respondents reported monthly earnings ranging from 1,500,000 kip to 5,000,000 kip. Respondents said that clients are often government officials and businessmen, particularly those involved in the logging business. The majority of clients are Lao, with Vietnamese, Chinese and some Thai businessmen

The work has its seasonal highs and lows, with more clients in December/January when there are many conferences for government officials, logging traders and coffee merchants; around March/April is another busy period with the population swelling for Pi Mai Lao (Lao New Year); the end of the rainy season also sees large numbers of Chinese clients appear as they come to pan the Sekong River for gold.

Most respondents expressed a preference for older clients aged 40 to 50+ as they have more money and tend to be better mannered than young clients. One respondent said that she only goes with older clients and men of position, and cannot understand why some SS play around with young guys who have little money. Commonly, respondents said that they do not like their clients. Many respondents expressed a dislike of Vietnamese and Chinese clients because they are too demanding and they feel more comfortable with clients of their own language. Similarly, a large number of respondents prefer not to receive young clients as they are often drunk, loud and some SS fear they will be abused by them; fears expressed by two respondents included being forced to take drugs and being forced to service multiple clients if working out of the beer-shop.

Several respondents said they do not enjoy sex with their clients and one respondent said she has to build herself up to the idea of having sex with clients. Most respondents said that very few clients ask for oral or anal sex and almost none of the respondents provide this service. One respondent said that older clients often drink a lot of beer and spend the whole night chatting and holding the SS without having sex. Another respondent noted that she feels the older clients pity her and are tender with her. Several respondents said that clients who go overnight with them always ask them why they are SS.

The beer-shops vary in size and facilities. Often the beer-shops are by the side of the main road. Some shops have two or three SS and the bigger beer-shops may have up to ten SS. Some of the larger beer-shops also have a restaurant and live music. One

beer-shop consisting of wood and rattan walls with a dirt floor and four tables, could offer beer but no water, soft drinks or food. A few hundred metres down the road a large resort-style beer-shop on stilts offered a menu of Lao food and employed a full-time cook, book-keeper and musician.

Clients usually frequent the beer-shops in the evenings after work, but SS are on call all day and clients do turn up in the morning. Visits to beer-shops in the morning and early afternoon reveal something of the lifestyle of SS. In smaller beer-shops with two or three girls our team observed a certain degree of boredom among the SS sitting around playing with their mobile phones and often nursing hangovers. In larger beer-shops with more SS a more jovial atmosphere was observed.

A visit to one beer-shop at ten in the morning found an entirely different picture to the boredom of the small beer-shop; a communal bedroom at the back of the beer-shop was crowded with four SS and three boyfriends slumbering on mattresses pushed together, wrapped in each other's arms. A blind singer and the beer-shop musician with his keyboard sat cross-legged at the end of the mattress and improvised Lao songs and blues together. For an hour there was a steady coming and going of young people – friends and regular clients (all in their late teens-early twenties) who came to pass the time and hang out, as did staff, and the atmosphere was one of relaxed, good humour.

All respondents said that they are able to choose their clients. All but one respondent spoke well of the *mother* and there is an observable familial relationship between the beer-shop owners and the SS. Often the beer-shops are family concerns; several times respondents reported that a married couple run the beer-house and it was observed that the *mother* of one beer-shop is the grandmother of one of the SS. One respondent described how the *mother* takes care of the SS to the point where she will advise the SS not to take a client because she feels he may cause some problem or may be difficult for the SS to control.

Respondents who have arrived from another province have to pay the **police (local authorities)** a monthly residence tax of 50,000 kip. Two respondents reported having to pay 100,000 kip because they had no papers. In the past, one respondent related, the *mother* could arrange the papers, but these days the papers must be issued in the district of birth. This respondent preferred to pay twice the usual rate for not having papers, as officials write '*sao bolikar*' on the papers; in this way the SS's family will find out what she does for a living.

4.9 Mobility

Respondents come from eight different provinces. Most respondents worked in beer-shops in one or two other provinces before gravitating to Sekong. Respondents change provinces for a variety of reasons which include: lack of clients; a wish to travel; problems with the *mother*; moved on because a friend had moved on. The influence of friends in determining mobility is significant; in the first instance, most respondents leave their home village because of the insistence or advice of a friend; many respondents related moving to a further province (or moving to another beer-shop) to follow a friend. One respondent from Houaphan had worked in five provinces. Another respondent from Luang Prabang had worked in three provinces and told the interviewer that she planned to

move to Udomxai where a friend is working.

4.10 HIV/AIDS/STI Awareness/CDM Use

Knowledge of CDM use among respondents is high. All 18 respondents said that they always use CDM with their clients. One Thai Dam respondent of 17 said that she didn't know what a CDM was until she saw a client putting it on. Four out of 18 respondents said that a CDM had broken at least once with clients. A few respondent described CDM slipping during sex and two respondents said that a client had put lubricant inside the CDM. Half the respondents said that on at least one occasion a client had removed or tried to remove the CDM during sex; all four respondents in a Focus Group Discussion (FSD) described how clients had re-penetrated them without CDM after ejaculation. One respondent described how she removes the CDM after sex. Three respondents said that they had never had any problems with CDM and none of them had ever had symptoms of STI.

Seven out of eight respondents who said they have a boyfriend said that they did not use CDM with their boyfriends (all former clients) at all or 'sometimes'. One respondent said she has had STI three times, once from her boyfriend, once from a client and the third time she is not sure. She became pregnant by her boyfriend and had an abortion; the boyfriend still refuses to use a CDM. One respondent said that she always uses CDM but she is not worried about the possibility of becoming pregnant because she said she can always take medicine to abort. One respondent has two boyfriends, **one of whom is a policeman (one of whom is a civil servant)**. He sees her twice a week and refuses to wear a CDM. The respondent related how once she had symptoms of STI; the boyfriend said that he and his wife had the same symptoms. The respondent bought medicine at the pharmacy and a week later met her boyfriend who told her that he hadn't bought any medicine because he was too embarrassed to seek treatment. The respondent bought medicine for her boyfriend and his wife.

One respondent who had STI symptoms was upset at the treatment she received at the hospital. She recounted how the doctor who treated her spoke very indiscreetly, resulting in her being ostracized by her clients for two months. Another respondent who had venereal discharge was advised by her colleagues to go to the hospital; she preferred to seek treatment at the pharmacy because there are too many people at the hospital. She continued working during the period of her treatment. One respondent said that the DCCA told her to go the pharmacy if she has symptoms of STI; usually respondents buy "1 Stop" (PSI) which is for treating genital urethritis. A pharmacist in Sekong told surveyors that she sells 60 packets a month.

Among respondents, basic awareness of HIV/AIDS is higher than awareness of STI. All respondents understand that AIDS kills. Two respondents said that they do not know the difference between HIV and AIDS and one of these same respondents said she knew nothing about STI before beginning SS. One respondent has visited the health centre four times and has been tested for AIDS though she does not know how to use the female condom. One respondent said that she learnt about HIV/AIDS on TV and has met health staff from the district but she cannot remember anything about STI.

Every three months PCCA carries out STI checks and blood tests for SSP. PCCA come to the beer-shops and ask the owner to have all the SS take tests. 11 out of 18 respondents

have met with educators from PCCA or DCCA. One respondent said that PCCA came to her beer-shop and she learnt that condoms prevent diseases including HIV/AIDS but she was given little information. One respondent said that she has met PCCA many times and was happy to learn about HIV/AIDS. She added that talking about prevention is boring and people do not listen. She says that a reminder will do. One respondent said that in two months she has met PCCA once. Another respondent said she has not met PCCA in a month of SS in Sekong. One respondent who started SS five days said she knows to use condom with her clients and is aware that AIDS kills but doesn't know much about transmission and knows nothing about STI.

4.11 Expectations

Nine of the 18 respondents said that in the future they want to go home. Five respondents expressed a desire to marry. Four respondents want to open a shop; three wish to become hairdressers and perhaps open a beauty salon; three wish to learn English to attract foreign clients; one respondent said she will stop SS when she has more money; one respondent wishes to open a restaurant; one respondent wants to rebuild her mother's house but has no plans with regard to work; four respondents had no idea what they wanted in the future and one respondent said she just takes one day at a time.

5. PAKSE

The provincial capital of Champasak province lies at the confluence of the Se Don River and the Mekong River. The population of the province is 640,000 and the population of the capital is approximately 70,000.

The main industry in the province is coffee. Coffee is the fifth largest revenue generator in Laos after tourism, garment manufacturing, electricity export and wood export. The rich, volcanic soil of Bolaven Plateau is home to some of the finest Arabica coffee in the world. Tea and cardamom are also cultivated. At the end of 2000, a bridge across the Mekong River was opened, the second such bridge in Laos, bringing an ever increasing number of Thai visitors to Pakse as day-trippers and weekend party-goers. Visitors to Champasak province have almost trebled since the opening of the bridge in 2000, from 34,796 to 113,000 in 2006. The number of guesthouses, hotels, beer-shops and clubs has ballooned in the last few years and the construction industry is flourishing. Tourism is developing apace as Pakse is a gateway to Vat Pu temple and the Four Thousand Islands (si pan don)

There are approximately 450 to 600 SSP in the province and about 270 SSP in Pakse town, with seasonal variations in numbers. There are a total of forty beer-shops in Pakse as well as clubs. The smallest beer-shops have two or three SSP whilst the largest beer-shop has 30 SSP.

Profile of respondents

5.1 Age/Beliefs

The ages of the 22 respondents ranged from 15 to 26. 15-17 (four); 18-20 (eight); 21-23 (1); 24-26 (six); 28-33 (3) 20 out of 22 respondents are Buddhist with two practicing ancestor worship.

5.2 Ethnicity/Origin

16 out of 22 respondents are Lao Lum; four respondents are Khamou and two respondents are Ka The respondents come from a total of nine different provinces: Champasak (two); Houaphan (two); Bolikhamxay (one); Saravan (two); Savannakhet (one); Xieng Khouang (one); Vientiane (three); Khammouane (one); Luang Prabang (one).

5.3 Family/Economic Background

Most respondents come from families with numerous siblings. More than half the respondents have five or six siblings. Most sisters of respondents are either at school or are married; one respondent has a sister of 15 who is a SS and another respondent has a sister who is an ex-SS. Most respondents' brothers are rice farmers; one respondent has two brothers studying at Don Dok University, Vientiane. Several respondents said they have a brother who is a soldier; one respondent has two brothers who work as chefs in Thailand. One respondent has a brother who is a lawyer and another who is a policeman.

A total of three out of 22 respondents said their parents are divorced (one because her mother had a lover); one respondent's father died when she was 17 and her mother died when she was 19; one respondent's father was killed by a snake when she was seven. Both parents of one respondent are in jail for dealing *ya baa*; the father was sentenced to death but the family paid a retrial and the sentence was commuted to life plus seizure of all the family assets. All other respondents said that their parents are together. Four respondents described their family as being poor or very poor and two of these respondents said their family had debts.

5.4 Education

None of the respondents completed their education. School leaving age ranged from 10 to 19: 10-13 (four); 14-16 (eight); 17-19 (three). Two respondents did not go to school. Most respondents said they left school because their family was poor. One respondent left school because her husband had little money; one respondent left school at 15 because she said she was lazy to study and wanted to travel; one respondent left school to earn money to support her brother's study at college; two respondents left school because they considered themselves lazy and too stupid to learn; one respondent left school because her family moved house and she refused to take a bus to school, saying she wanted a motorbike to go to school.(see Case Study 2)

5.5 First Sexual Experience

Respondents' first sexual experience came between the ages of 14 and 19. A total of five respondents' first sexual experience came in the context of their marriage -three at 16 years of age and two at 19 years of age. Three respondents first sexual experience was with a boyfriend at the ages of 14, 15, and 16 respectively. Six respondents sold their virginity between the ages of 15 and 19 for sums ranging from 6000 baht to 50,000 baht. One respondent's mother arranged for the selling of her daughter's virginity (with the daughter's consent) to a fifty-year old man for 40,000 baht. In none of the above cases was a CDM used. One respondent's first experience of sex was rape, at the age of 20.

5.6 The Path to Sex Work/Accidents of life

A total of eight out of 22 respondents left home and entered SS after divorcing from their husbands. One respondent, who divorced at 17, was raped at 19 and entered SS at 20 years of age. Five out of these eight divorcees divorced their husbands because they had *mia noi* (mistress) (excessive drinking and drug abuse were two additional complaints) and all five respondents were left with two to three children to support. Of these same eight respondents several said that they entered SS after trying all means to support their family; one respondent entered SS to pay off debts for the house that she and her ex-husband had built; one respondent left home with the encouragement of a friend in the wake of a six-month depression following the divorce. After selling beer in a beer-shop for a while, she succumbed to the temptation of the greater money available for SS. One respondent who divorced her husband whilst four months pregnant said that she left home not because of her broken marriage but because she resented the control her father attempted to exert on her life. She left the village because she wanted her freedom and she said that she was not sad to leave, but happy and excited. Two respondents were impressed by the ability of their friends (SSP) to support their families and also by how great they looked, and wanted to do the same. One respondent came to Vientiane because all her friends were doing the same; she followed her friends when they went to work in a factory for 500,000 a month, and she followed her friends when they went to work in a beer-shop. One respondent from a poor Khamou family left her village to find work to pay for her ill father's health treatment; believing she was going to work in a factory, she was deceived and found herself in a restaurant/beer-shop without the price of a ticket home. After a few weeks she decided to go with clients to earn some decent money.

5.7 Recruitment into SS

Out of 22 respondents a total of 13 entered beer-shops via a friend who already worked there. One respondent entered SS independently and operated as a mobile SSP; one respondent came to work in a beer-shop because her younger sister of 15 was working there; one respondent came to a beer-shop because the *mother* was from her village; one respondent began working in a beer-shop which her aunt directed her to.

5.8 Conditions of Work

Among the 22 respondents there was a wide range in earnings; the norm was 500 baht to 1000 baht for short-time and 1000 to 2,500 for overnight. One respondent commented how a colleague of 32 years of age charged around 70,000 to 80,000 kip for short-time. Another respondent reported charging between 100,000 to 200,000 for overnight. Several respondents said that on a busy day they can have between two to four clients but more commonly respondents said they had three to four clients per week. One respondent reported earning 300,000 kip last month whilst another respondent earned 2000 baht last night for going overnight with a client. One respondent said that she goes with clients only when she needs the money. Another respondent remarked how she liked to spend money and spent anything up to 100,000 kip per day.

Many respondents recognized that providing SS afforded easy money but most disliked their work and disliked having sex with their clients. It seemed that the majority of clients are older men (30-50+). Most respondents and all the *mothers* we spoke with prefer older

clients; the reasons are because they have more money and are usually better behaved than young clients. One respondent described how a regular client of about 50 years of age comes to the beer-shop to see her every week; he is unable to have sex and wishes to drink and talk to the PSS. He said that he loved her. Owners generally dislike younger clients as they are often drunk, noisy, and argumentative and cause problems. One respondent noted how many young clients take *ya bad* to prolong the sexual encounter and for this reason they are not popular with most SSP. One respondent said that the most popular SSP with clients was not the most beautiful one but the friendliest, a SSP who knew how to talk with the clients and took care of them very well.

Ya baa and other drugs seemed not to play a significant role in the personal lives of the respondents although use of *ya baa* among younger clients was quite common. Respondents replied that very few of their colleagues used *ya baa* with one exception who along with a colleague takes *ya baa* daily and has sex with clients for up to an hour at a time. One *mother* said that she kicked a SSP out of her beer-shop for taking *ya baa*. One respondent said that a colleague recommended she took *ya baa* to slim and said added that although she never saw *ya baa* used by her colleagues in the beer-shop, it is possible they use it at home. Another respondent said that a colleague used a drug (unspecified) to enhance her desire for sex with the clients.

All respondents drink alcohol on a daily basis. Several respondents said that if they were drunk they never went with clients though this did not appear to be the norm. One respondent said that when she had a client for sex she would get drunk because the clients liked to drink. She added that she drank for fun and also because all her clients ask her why she did SS and she had no desire to recount her sad story. One respondent said that she drinks a lot if she doesn't like her clients. One respondent acknowledged drinking a lot sometimes but only to keep the client happy. How much beer is sold/consumed depends on the size of the beer-shop and the number of clients, as well as the number of SSP; Small beer-shops might sell on crate of beer on a quiet day, and five to seven on a busy day and larger beer-shops might sell 10 -15 crates on a busy day. One respondent described how two SSP and one client can get through nine beers easily; she added that two clients and three to four SSP can get through 24 bottles. One *mother* encourages her SSP not to leave the beer-shop for overnight with clients before midnight to maximize beer sales. Our survey team observed that SSP habitually throw beer away when the client is not looking to increase sales and to avoid getting too drunk.

The place of work for SSP varies as much as the prices they receive for their services. Larger venues with 20 to 30 SSP have many of the facilities of a hotel; one beer-shop with 20 SSP catered primarily for *pu nyai*, (literally 'big people', meaning of important rank) that is to say Lao government officials and Lao and Thai businessmen. The venue, away from the main road had outdoor tables with thatched roofs where the clients drank with the SSP. A bar and kitchen provided a sizeable menu. An inspection of the rooms revealed a semi-circular leather sofa which could seat ten people comfortably, in front of a large TV for karaoke. The adjacent bedroom had a double bed and bathroom. The rooms were clean and the furniture of decent quality. The accommodation of the SSP in a nearby building was simple, but bright, clean and comfortable.

In spite of the fact that the venue received *pu nyai* the SSP were not wearing *sins*, nor did they have their hair specially tied; there was obviously no emphasis on formal attire.

Rather, they dressed like teenagers at a disco. To maximize the bill, packets of chewing gum are brought to the table by the waiter which the SSP consumed at the rate of a stick every few minutes. Similarly, packets of hand-towels are brought to the table and opened quickly.

On a visit to a club the survey team was greeted by a dozen SSP wearing traditional *sins*. The lighting was low, and tables which had not been cleaned in a while went from the edge of the dance-floor to the darker edges of the large room. A singer accompanied by a backing tape sang *lamvong* and from time to time the SSP took to the dance-floor for formation dancing to encourage the handful of clients. Air freshener polluted the atmosphere.

A visit to one beer-shop situated a few kilometres from the centre of Pakse revealed a basic set-up; shack by the edge of the unsealed road with a table where the papa san sat and greeted potential clients. There were four rattan and wood, open-fronted shacks for clients and SSP to drink beer and eat simple snack food of dried meat and dried fish. The male members of the survey team visited this beer-shop on two separate days, late at night, and both times the two SSP were drunk and visibly tired. The two SSP (one of them Hmong) said they were 18 but looked to be younger. There were no rooms for SS and SSP had to take clients to a nearby guesthouse. One of the SSP quoted 4,000 baht for overnight. This offer was politely declined, and a few minutes after leaving, the mobile of one of the team rang and a new offer of 2000 baht was made, and similarly declined.

Our survey team visited one side-road several times where as many as nine small beer-shops bedecked with strings of multi-coloured lights lined either side of the dirt road. *Tuk tuks* and motorbikes ferry the clients up and down the rutted road. The clients were a mixture of young and old. The younger clients were usually quite drunk in the evening. Several visits to one of these beer-shops over the course of our survey in Pakse and informal discussions with the *mother* and papa san revealed a snapshot of life in a beer-shop. The shop has two tables outside under a bamboo structure and a sofa-set inside in front of a TV blaring out music at an uncomfortable volume. Two SSP' rooms were at the back of the shop; simple mattresses and little in the way of personal belongings. Two other SSP are mobile SSP and rent their own rooms.

The teenage SSP came in from the beer-shop from time to time, picking up the papa san's one-year-old child and mothering him, changing his clothes and chatting and joking with the papa san. (the *mother* was often away playing cards for money) The floor was strewn with baby clothes, sunflower seed, and an old mattress. The noise and chaotic nature of the beer-shop was a constant feature. The papa san said that the SSP leave every month but nevertheless the SSP seemed to be extremely relaxed in this environment and completely at ease with the papa san and *mother*. There was no apparent distinction between the owners' space and the SSP' space. There was a communal atmosphere.

The *mother* said that none of her SSP uses drugs although there is a drug seller in the area. She said that SSP stay longer if they have a boyfriend and leave sooner if they don't as they get bored quickly with a place. The SSP tend to move to another place where they have a friend.

Several *khatoeys* in the area provide SSP for the beer-shops. The *mother* said that in her

opinion half the girls in the village are involved in some kind of SS. She said that a broker comes to the village to ask girls to go to Thailand. They have to pay the broker a 500 baht fee.

One of the SSP in the beer-shop described how a client hit her in the face in a misunderstanding over the price for SS. The client left the beer-shop and the SSP went to the *mother* who phoned the *nai ban*. The *nai ban* and the village militia blocked the client's escape. After some discussion the *nai ban* suggested that the client should pay compensation of 800,000 kip or the police would be called. The client paid and went on his way. The *nai ban* received 300,000 kip and the remaining 500,000 kip went to the SSP.

Respondents said that in their free time they sleep or play cards a lot. Several respondents said that they go to fortune tellers. One respondent related how a fortune teller told her she would die soon unless she made merit; the respondent described how she wasted no time in spending 90,000 kip on candles and incense to offer up at the nearby vat.

5.9 Mobility

Respondents came from a total of eight different provinces. Out of 22 respondents nine had worked in at least one other province (other than that of their origin) before coming to work in Pakse. According to a *mother* who ran a beer-shop for four SSP, the average time working is two months as young SSP are easily bored and move on to another beer-shop where they have a friend. Respondents had been in their current beer-shop for between four days to two years. Nearly all respondents had worked in at least one other beer-shop before coming here. Reasons for moving from one beer-shop to another are usually due to a lack of clients or to follow a friend. In a rare case one respondent described how she was forced to move to another beer-shop because the *nai bans* of Saisomboun district ordered the closing of all beer-shops.

5.10 HIV/AIDS/STI Awareness/Condom use

Among respondents HIV/AIDS/STI knowledge is good. Only one respondent out of 22 had not met an educator, but knew about STI from when she worked in Thailand and health educators came regularly to the factory to talk about STI and condom use; most of the other respondents reported meeting volunteer educators on a weekly basis. One respondent said that she used to meet the volunteers every week and go to the health clinic once a month but has stopped because she was raped a month ago and is afraid to go because she is afraid of what she might find. One mobile SSP respondent said that a volunteer comes to the guesthouse where she and six other SSP work on a weekly basis; the mobile SSP are all happy to see the volunteer, as she is friendly and jokes with them. Several respondents said that all the SSP in their beer-shop were given preventive medicine by the volunteers. Nearly all the respondents talk very positively about the FHI volunteers and the PCCA centre. Respondents reported that FHI volunteers go to pick them up and take them to the centre.

All 22 respondents claimed to use condoms habitually with clients though several respondents reported condoms breaking; one respondent became pregnant at eighteen when a condom of a client broke, and another respondent contracted symptoms of an STI

(which she could not name) after a client's condom broke. Another respondent has had vaginal discharge three times which she suspected was the result of condoms slipping once and breaking twice with clients. Another respondent said that when she started SS she didn't know how to put a condom on and twice had condoms breaking. One respondent said that often clients ask to have sex without using a condom but she reminds them that as married men with families they have to remember their responsibilities.

If the totality of respondents use condoms with their clients then just the opposite is true with their boyfriends. With only one exception, all the respondents said that they do not use condoms with their boyfriends. One respondent said that she and her six colleagues go to the **military (nearby)** hospital where her boyfriend is a doctor every month, but that none of them use condoms with their boyfriends. One respondent has two boyfriends, using condoms with one (at his insistence) but not with the other; she caught an STI from the boyfriend who doesn't use condoms who also infected his wife. He was too shy to go and seek treatment so the respondent had to get medicine for him and his wife. Two respondents who never use condoms with their respective boyfriends have each become pregnant on two occasions, aborting each time.

Family Health International started its health centre in Pakse in 2005. They have a counsellor, and once a week an STI specialist comes for consultation. FHI attempts to identify new SSP with the help of those who come for consultation. In November 2007, 91 SSP came for consultation and counselling of which 51 showed symptoms of STI. In December 2007, 48 SSP came for consultation of which 34 showed symptoms of STI.

5.11 Expectations

A total of 12 out of 22 respondents expressed a desire to go home to the village in the future. Five respondents said they wished to get married; of these five, one said she wanted to return to her ex-husband (who had cheated on her) because he was her first love and she wanted her children to have a mother and a father; another respondent wanted to marry her boyfriend but suspected he had another girlfriend. One respondent said she hated men and would never marry; another respondent said she would never remarry but wanted to live with her children again. Four respondents wanted to open some kind of shop in their village. Four respondents wanted to open a hair/beauty salon. Two respondents said they wanted to return to work in the rice fields on the mountain and one respondent said she wanted to return to the village to raise buffalo. One respondent wanted to make traditional clothes and another wanted to go home and learn weaving. One respondent (studying Information Technology) wanted to get a job in the gold-mine where her father was working. Three respondents said they didn't have any plans for the future; of these three, one respondent (whose parents are both in prison for dealing *ya baa*) said she didn't know where she would go or what she would do as she had nowhere to stay; another respondent, with no vision of the future, said she cannot go home because she would be bored after one week, and would miss the fun of the beer-shop with her clients and colleagues.

A question of gender

The question of HIV/AIDS, its spread and its modes of transmission has assumed a national importance in the Lao PDR for a number of years now; what has not assumed a

corresponding importance despite being inextricably linked is the question of gender, which is odd because HIV/AIDS in Laos is undeniably a gender issue.

To quote Barbara Meil Hobson: "*A society's response to prostitution goes to the core of how it chooses between the rights of some and the protection of others.*" (Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American reform Tradition, University of Chicago Press, 1990)) In the remotest villages of Laos throughout the country and in the Mekong provincial capitals the rights of girls are challenged at an early age through preferential family treatment of boys in education. When families cannot afford to support all their siblings in school it is usually a girl who drops out, in order to take care of siblings and help with family chores. Vulnerability at school age means disadvantages for many women later in life in the job market. Poor access to choice (for *most* women in this study the choice was mother/wife/farmer/factory work/SSP) means low expectations. ("What use is an education if I will never use it?" -15-year old female in Luang Namtha)

To have to make some similar kind of choice comes to many women in their mid to late teens. The number of respondents whose first sex was paid is testament to two things: firstly, the understanding by all in the community that a woman's "virginity" has an economic value; secondly, that women are made to understand by the men who pay, and the older women who negotiate the transaction ("how long should I wait before I let my daughter go with the clients?" - *mother* of a beer-shop in Sekong, half- joking about her 15-year old daughter) that they have a means of earning money outside the village which allows them to face the challenges of the fast-growing market economy. The high standard of living (relative to Lao) that these women enjoy and their ability to also support the family financially, empowers them. The choice of SS for many women when the alternatives are so limited is understandable.

For so many respondents abandoned by boyfriends, the choice that remains is often single motherhood or abortion. For many married women the immediate concern is how to provide for one or more children when the husband and father has left for another woman. Rape, which ten of the women in this study suffered before entering SS, brings a sense of shame and guilt; the raped girl offered a buffalo by her rapist in an act which pardons him and stigmatises her in the eyes of the entire village; or the victim of an attempted rape, forced by her parents to marry her attacker lest the whole village think badly of the family. These considerations hold much more weight than any consideration for the well-being of the girl. For all these women the sense of failure, disappointment and loss of face is compounded by a lack of support in the family and the village. Their burden is double.

Her route out of the village is supplied by women. Women run the world of SS. Older women educate younger women about their "virginity price" and in the process stigmatise them. Women recruit women to work in beer-shops which are run by women. The SSP tend to spend a lot of time considering their physical appearance. They help each other make-up with a degree of competition to be the more beautiful, the more feminine, and this propagates a stereotype about what a woman should be because this is what a man wants.

Women are stigmatised in the village by sending money home because this is the mark of prostitution. At the same time none of the parents or siblings goes looking for their daughters and none of them it should be noted reject the money made from sex. (in Luang

Namtha, one father actually came from Luang Prabang once a month to collect his daughter's savings paying on average 280.000 kip for the round trip) If a woman SSP feels ambiguous about her status it is hardly surprising. That the money SSP's provide for the family (and the village) impacts so positively throughout the villages of Laos is rarely considered in its widest possible context; the money paid by men for SS and redistributed by women keeps siblings in school, allows families to avoid food shortages, cancels debt, repairs the house, builds a new one, pays health costs, and helps pay vocational training of brothers.

To say that these women are victims may be contentious, as among these respondents there was practically no coercion or manipulation in any of the cases – these women chose to enter the world of SS. One group who do consider themselves victims are the women whose husbands go with SSP. It is the SSP who is stigmatized more often than not however, for stealing the husbands, and who receives the slurs and the insults from these women working in the market. Little fuss is made of the husband deceiving his wife in a country where the social concept of the *mia noi* (*little wife*) or mistress, is institutionalised.

The HIV/AIDS prevention campaign undertaken by the GOL with the support of INGOs targets SSP in every province of the country (?) through its Provincial Committee for Control of AIDS. Family Health International too does tremendous outreach work, educating SSP in prevention awareness and Population Services International make sure there is rarely, if ever, a shortage of condoms. The SSP are the principal target of these prevention awareness programs, which is also odd, as although SSP are undoubtedly on the front-line of STI prevention it appears to be the male clients who ignore all the advice on safe-sex, judging by the number of men who ask the SSP to have sex without a condom, the number of men who remove the condom during intercourse against the wishes of the SSP and the vast majority of "boyfriends" who more often than not decide that there will be no condoms used in the relationship. This results in high instances of STI (also bad news for their wives) and unwanted pregnancy. This male behaviour is deciding the rights of some over the protection of others.

In the context of prevention, the question of gender would be a good place to direct focus. A questioning of the socially contrived gender hierarchy which discriminates against females from the earliest age would be the logical place to start. In the meantime, a rebalancing of responsibilities (with regard to AIDS prevention) which targets more the highest risk-taking group, i.e. men, may take some courage on the part of decision makers, but it may possibly have tremendously positive results on the efforts being made to control the spread of HIV/AIDS in Laos today.

Annex 2: Case Studies of SSP:

The names of respondents in these studies have been changed

Case Study 1: Pakse

At 29, Noi is old to be starting life as an SSP. She was born in a farming family in Ponedon district, Saravan province. The second of six siblings, she started school at eight but left at thirteen because the family did not have enough money to support her studies.

At nineteen she got married, and has three children, ten, eight and six years old. She became pregnant a fourth time but decided to abort as it was already a struggle to raise three children. Noi made her way to Thailand and worked in a fabric factory for three years; the five thousand baht she got every month supported her extended family. When she returned to Laos she and her husband separated because he wanted to move from the village to Saravan town and she didn't. He left and was never heard from again. Left to fend for herself and three young children, Noi tried everything in her power to get money for her children, but couldn't make ends meet.

One of her younger sisters, fifteen years of age, was already an SSP in Seno, Savannakhet and told her sister that if she needed money she should come to work in the beer-shop. Noi left her children with her younger brother and joined her younger sister. In one month the sisters worked together in three different beer-shops, but moved on each time because there were too few clients.

Arriving at the bus station in Pakse, they asked a *tuk tuk* driver if they knew of any restaurant looking for workers. The *tuk tuk* driver brought them to their current restaurant/beer-shop where they began going with clients immediately after arriving. Noi's working hours are from 6pm to 12 pm. She gets 500 baht for short-time with clients and 1000 baht for overnight. She phones her children every day. The other day her brother's stall was destroyed in a fire at the market so now she works harder to help him get back on his feet. Noi's parents know what she does and tell her to look after her health and change job when she has enough money. Noi says that she will never marry again but she does want to live with her children again. When she has enough money she will go home to her village and open a small shop, although she dreams of one day opening a beauty salon.

Case Study 2: Pakse

Bappah left school at fourteen. Her family had moved from their village to Vientiane capital but they were some distance from the nearest school. She could have taken a bus to school but wanted her own motorbike. Her father said if he had the money he would buy her a motorbike next year. In the meantime she dropped out of school and helped her mother sell vegetables at the market.

At sixteen she went to work in a factory five days a week. There she met a man whom she married two years later. Within twelve months they were divorced. Her husband's womanizing and *ya baa* habit was too much for her. When they divorced Bappah was four months pregnant.

Bappah decided to leave home because she felt her father was trying to control her life too much and restrict her freedom. She wanted to enjoy herself and the last straw was when her father told her angrily that she should stay at home and work instead of going to a party. Bappah packed her bags and came to Pakse where an aunt lived, leaving her young son with a sister. She didn't feel sad, but excited about the new life before her. One of her friends worked in a beer-shop and Bappah found the lifestyle interesting. After selling beer for one week she started going with clients. Soon, she had a boyfriend who she liked because he introduced her to his friends and family as his girlfriend, and not as an SSP. She soon became pregnant as they were not using condoms and she aborted. Even after the abortion her boyfriend refused to use condoms and she left him after she discovered he had another girl.

The beer-shop where she was working closed when the local *nai bans* closed all the beer-shops in the district. She moved to another district and quickly found work in another beer-shop and another boyfriend. Bappah can't explain why she has another boyfriend and says that she fears he will be like her previous boyfriend. They don't have sex that often but hug and talk together a lot. A lot of her clients are young men who take *ya baa* before coming to the beer-shop.; this means they have sex for a long time which she doesn't like. Once a Vietnamese client hit her in the face in a disagreement over the price but apart from that she never has serious problems with clients, although she doesn't like clients pawing her at the table when they drink beer together.

Bappah says she is happy as an SSP because she has a boyfriend, good friends in the beer-shop, she is able to travel and she has money. In the future she will go home and help her mother who makes traditional Lao dresses. She doesn't rule out returning to SS in the future either.

Case Study 3: Luang Namtha

Like many 19-year-old women, Om dreams of one day getting married and having children; she also wants to open her own shop. Unlike most 19-year-olds Om is building a house in her village with the 600,000 to 70,000 kip she takes home to her parents every month. She has been an SSP since she was 14 years old. She left school; at twelve, after just four years of education as her parents could not afford to send all five children to school.

Om wanted a job and money. One day a friend asked Om if she wanted to visit Luang Namtha. Having never ventured beyond the village Om was excited by the idea and went willingly. She didn't know her friend worked in a beer-shop. She worked at the beer-shop just selling beer, but she wanted to go home. Getting 2000 kip per bottle sold she wasn't earning enough to go home. Eventually she decided to go with a client. She sold her virginity for 1,500,000 to a Vietnamese client who didn't use a condom. With this money she left the beer-shop and went home.

She told her mother how she had earned the money and was unsure of how her mother would react. Her mother told her not to worry because she still loved her. Om worked on the farm for a couple of months but she could see that her family was struggling to make ends meet and at times they didn't have enough rice to eat. Om heard other villagers commenting upon her family's poverty and saddened by this, she resolved to help her family in the only way she knew how.

Om has been working at the beer-shop for almost three years now. She has three regular clients, all of whom are over fifty years old. They usually visit her once a week. She gets 300,000 for short-time and 500,000 for overnight, although if her regular clients are short of money she will go with them for considerably less. She thinks of her regular clients as her boyfriends.

Om loves the *mother* who is very kind to her. She thinks of the beer-shop as her true home. She became pregnant a year ago when the condom broke with one of her regular clients. He paid for her to have an abortion in the **military (nearby)** hospital. It's the only time a condom has broken and she prays that she will not have the same luck as one of her colleagues who has had three abortions already.

Once she refused a client who had a stone in his penis and he became so angry she had to run out of the room. Generally, however, she is able to pacify frustrated or angry clients.

Om goes to the vat every two weeks and gives alms to the monks. She dreams about her family and cries sometimes when she thinks about them. Once she has enough money to complete her house she will go home.

Case Study 4: Luang Namtha

By her own admission Nid was a lazy student, and after failing her exams she left school at 18. She was happy to finish with school. The same year she had sex for the first time with her boyfriend. Shortly after, she had her first paid sex with a man of 30. She did so because she wanted money to buy clothes and make-up and to be able to go drinking in pubs and discos.

Nid is a freelancer, a mobile SSP. She gets clients by herself in pubs or sometimes through a *mother* who calls her if there is a client. Nid doesn't know how much the *mother* gets as a cut. She never takes clients from Luang Namtha, because she doesn't want her family to know what she does. All her clients are from other provinces and are usually government officials or businessmen. Sometimes they stay in Luang Namtha for a week, sometimes a month or two. Her best clients are those with most money. Nid enjoys going to discos and drinking with young guys for fun but she never goes with them for sex because they never have much money.

Nid never needs to use lubricant with her clients because she enjoys sex with them and is always wet when she goes with them. Sometimes she can stay with a client for a month or even two. She likes spending time with them but never thinks of them as her boyfriends. She never talks money before sex and leaves the price up to the client, because if she agreed a price beforehand she would feel like a sex worker. Nid doesn't consider herself to be a sex worker.

Nid says she is bored with this lifestyle and wants true love. She asked her boyfriend if he could ever marry a woman who was a sex worker. He said if she stops he will marry her.

Case Study 5: Sekong

When Nan began grade 4 at the age of 14 she could never have imagined that before the end of the school year she would be married. Nor, above all, could she have imagined the circumstances. Her older brother, a violent and aggressive man, wanted her to become a sex worker to help the parents who are rice farmers with eight children in Vang Vieng. A cousin from their village was a sex worker and he knew that she made good money. If Nan loved her parents who had given her so much, he reasoned, then she would do this thing gladly. The brother used to beat Nan, telling her she was ungrateful to her parents. Facing a difficult situation Nan decided to marry a friend of hers, a 20-year-old soldier. At 14 she was married and had left school, but at least it had put an end to the nightmare with her older brother. Or so she thought.

Her first child came when she was 17, the second at 18. By the time she was 19 she was widowed, when her husband was murdered. He was hit on the head with a rock by two friends who wanted to steal his 'khong khang," a highly-prized and rare lucky amulet; it can only be obtained from certain shamans and is coveted because it is believed to protect its carrier from violent death. That same day, Nan's husband had left it for safe-keeping with his father. The two murderers were caught but escaped prison by paying compensation to the widowed Nan.

With the husband gone, Nan's older brother once again insisted violently that she become a sex worker to help the family. Nan protested, but the brother hit her in the face with a piece of wood, blackening her eyes. Five days later, still with facial bruising, she was sexually serving clients in the same beer-shop as her cousin in Sekong. She left home and came here to escape her brother. She cannot and will not go home while he is there. Nan's younger sister, Bea, came with her out of concern for her older sister. The clients eye Bea and ask her to go with them but she only sells beer.

Nan has heard of AIDS but knows nothing about STI. When some Vietnamese clients show an interest in her younger sister, Nan tells her to go to her room and starts crying quietly.

Case Study 6: Pakse

It seems people in Done's village are suspicious; how can a 20-year-old woman from a poor family in Houaphan earn enough money to build a house for her mother? It doesn't bother Done too much; after all, she isn't the only girl in her village whose job it is to service men sexually. Not all those in her village disdain her; some admire what she is trying to achieve for her family.

She started SS at the age of 15 or 16; she can't remember exactly. She left school at 12 because her family couldn't afford to support her education. She saw how some of her friends who had left the village were sending money back; money enough to build a house for the family. When Done saw her friends she liked their nice clothes and fine hair-styles. She asked them how they earned such money. At first they wouldn't tell her but she asked them repeatedly until they told her they were SSP. She decided she wanted to do the same.

Her first beer-shop was in Thakhek where one of her friends worked. She sold her virginity there for 6000 baht to a Lao man of 30. In the next four years she moved from Thakhek to Paksong, and from Paksong to Pakse, each time following the route of a friend.

Done says that SS is easy work. She sent 800,000 kip home to her parents and sometimes sends as much as 2,000,000 kip home. She has a boyfriend, an ex-client. They never use condoms. Once she got an STI. She went to the health centre for treatment but didn't appreciate the manner of the doctor who was unsympathetic and critical. A week later her boyfriend turned up but told her he hadn't had any treatment because he was too shy. Done had to go back to the health centre to seek treatment for her boyfriend and his wife.

Case Study 7: Bokeo

Wan, 19, is from a poor Tai Dam family from Muang Nong Back, Luang Prabang.. There was no school in her village and she and her six siblings helped their parents collect all manner of products from the forest and the river; fish and river weed, leaves for soup, tree bark for medicine and whatever small animals they could catch. When Wan was 16 they moved to a new village with a school but Wan felt she was too old to enrol.

At 17 her parents decided she should go to work to help the family. She didn't have the courage to go alone to Vientiane where she knew nobody and eventually through a connection her mother got her a job in a guesthouse in Luang Prabang where she earned 150,000 kip a month as a maid and babysitter. Several guests offered her money to sleep with her but she refused,. Eventually she went with a guest when she was drunk. She woke up alone the next day and discovered she had lost her virginity. The man had left her 20,000 kip. The guesthouse owner knew what she had done, and ashamed she decided to return home.

At the bus station however, she met a woman who was looking for girls to work in a beer-shop in Udomxai. She worked in this beer-shop for two months, making 60,000 kip to 70,000 kip a week from selling beer. Then she met a *mother* who persuaded her to come to Luang Prabang. Wan worked there for two months and was going with clients to get more money. After two months she followed a friend from the beer-shop to Bokeo where she worked for five months before moving to her present beer-shop.

Wan feels her job is good here; Thai clients tip well, even if they only drink beer. She has been going with clients for eight months. She uses No. 1 condoms which are stronger than Chinese condoms which break more easily, but she prefers Thai condoms because they smell better than No. 1 condoms. She mainly does short-time sex and got 800,00 kip last month, half from beer, and half from sexual service. She likes the *mother* and respects her because she is very kind and looks after her and the other girls.

Wan has a Lao-American boyfriend who was a client before. He lives in America. He says he will divorce his wife and come to marry her and take her to live in America. She will work in this beer-shop until he comes for her.

Case Study 8: Savannakhet

There weren't enough teachers at her school so Pa dropped out when she was eleven. She didn't mind, she said she was lazy to study and she was embarrassed because she was older than the other students in her grade. She's the first of nine siblings in a Pu Thai family. Her mother is a rice farmer and her father is a driver in the gold mine at Sepon. Her village is five hours from Savannakhet so she only goes home once a year. If she feels homesick she just calls.

Pa's married life was short. She married a wood merchant of 35 when she was 19. It was his third marriage and as Pa was to find out he had several *mia noi* on the side. Two months after giving birth, she divorced him, tired of his playing around. She had the backing of her family. They wanted her to marry a government official. She didn't.

On the advice of a friend Pa went to work in a beer-shop in Saravan, just a few days after getting divorced. She worked there for a year. One of her regular clients, a 48-year-old, wanted her to be his *mia noi* but she declined; he said he would divorce his wife for her but she didn't believe him. Pa then moved to Savannakhet and her current beer-shop where her cousin worked. She has been for three years.

She says she is very experienced. She has seen men with enlarged penises after operations in Thailand. The wife of one such client refused to have sex with him after his operation, as did Pa and all the other girls in the beer-shop. She has no problem doing oral or anal sex with clients. Once she had eight clients in a day but usually has one or two. She uses lubricant because she is never moist with her clients, and makes noises to please them. She never does goes overnight with clients because she can get more clients doing short-time. Pa enjoys servicing virgin boys as she says this brings her good luck. She always uses a condom with clients although she had an STI once when a condom broke with a client. She went for treatment at the FHI centre. One client has visited her three times; she thinks he is her boyfriend.

Pa drinks three or four bottles of beer a day and boasts how she and a friend can make clients drink beer "by the crateful." She has already sent home nine million kip to build a house for her baby. The last time she went home, three months ago, she brought one million kip back. Her family knows what she does but do not criticise her.

In the future she will open a beauty salon in Savannakhet because she likes it here.

Annex 3: Breakdown of money distribution

1. Lowest rate per client of SSP

exchange rate 12/2007 1 \$ 9350 kip

Client disbursement	Price	QTY	Total (Kip)
Beer	12,000	4	48,000
Table fee	10,000	1	10,000
Fee from dlt for SSP	30,000	1	30,000
Room rate (1-2 hour)	30,000	1	30,000
Fee for Sex	150,000	1	150,000
Total (Kip)			268,000
Total (USD)			29

Income of SSP	Price	QTY	Total (Kip)
Selling beer	2,000	4	8,000
Table fee	10,000	1	10,000
Fee for Sex	150,000	1	150,000
Total (Kip)			168,000
Total (USD)			18

Income of Mother	Price	QTY	Total (Kip)
Profit from beer	4,000	4	16,000
Fee from dlt for SSP	30,000	1	30,000
			0
Total (Kip)			46,000
Total (USD)			5

Guesthouse' In- come	Price	QTY	Total (Kip)
Room rate (1-2 hour)	30,000	1	30,000
Total (Kip)			30,000
Total (USD)			3

Beer company' Income	Price	QTY	Total (Kip)
Beer price	6,000	4	24,000
Total (Kip)			24,000
Total (USD)			3

2. Highest rate per client of SSP

exchange rate 12/2007 1 \$ 9350 kip

Client disbursement	Price	QTY	Total (Kip)
Beer	15,000	4	60,000
Table fee	20,000	1	20,000
Fee from clt for SSP	30,000	1	30,000
Room rate (1-2 hour)	80,000	1	80,000
Fee for Sex	280,000	1	280,000
Total (Kip)			470,000
Total (USD)			50

Income of SSP	Price	QTY	Total (Kip)
Selling beer	2,000	4	8,000
Table fee	20,000	1	20,000
Fee for Sex	280,000	1	280,000
Total (Kip)			308,000
Total (USD)			33

Income of mother	Price	QTY	Total (Kip)
Profit from beer	7,000	4	28,000
Fee from clt for SSP	30,000	1	30,000
			0
Total			58,000
Total (USD)			6

Guesthouse' In- come	Price	Unit by Client	Total (Kip)
Room rate (1-2 hour)	80,000	1	80,000
Total			80,000
Total (USD)			9

Beer company' Income	Price	Unit by Cli- ent	Total (Kip)
Beer price	6,000	4	24,000
Total			24,000
Total (USD)			3

3. Breakdown of money from 15 clients per SSP in one month

exchange rate 12/2007 1 \$ 9350 kip

Client disbursement	Price	QTY	Total (Kip)
Beer	12,000	60	720,000
Table fee	10,000	15	150,000
Fee from clt for SSP	30,000	15	450,000
Room rate (1-2 hour)	30,000	15	450,000
Fee for Sex	150,000	15	2,250,000
Total (Kip)			4,020,000
Total (USD)			430

Income of SSP	Price	QTY	Total (Kip)
Selling beer	2,000	60	120,000
Table fee	10,000	15	150,000
Fee for Sex	150,000	15	2,250,000
Total (Kip)			2,520,000
Total (USD)			270

Income of mother	Price	QTY	Total (Kip)
Profit from beer	4,000	60	240,000
Fee from clt for SSP	30,000	15	450,000
			0
Total (Kip)			690,000
Total (USD)			74

Guesthouse' In- come	Price	QTY	Total (Kip)
Room rate (1-2 hour)	30,000	15	450,000
Total (Kip)			450,000
Total (USD)			48

Beer company' In- come	Price	QTY	Total (Kip)
Beer	6,000	60	360,000
Total (Kip)			360,000
Total (USD)			39

Annex 4: Estimation of money generated by SSP in Lao PDR

As has been mentioned elsewhere in this report the money sent or brought home to the family has a huge influence on the household economy. Just how big an impact women as a group have is brought into focus by a UN report of 2006 which calculates that the money sent home to Laos by women working in Thailand, totalling over US\$100 million per year, is more stable than foreign direct investment.

Importantly, the money sent home by SSP goes directly to those who need it; there is no bureaucratic lessening of the impact of this money. Every penny counts.

(Annexe 4) Estimates of the money generated per year by SSP in Lao PDR

No. of SSP*	New client per month	Regular Partner	Total	No. of months worked	Client fee/ once US\$
8000	12	2	14	8	10
8000	12	2	14	8	15
Total	US\$	8,960,000			
Total	US\$	13,440,00			
12000	12	2	14	8	10
12000	12	2	14	8	15
Total	US\$	13,440,000			
Total	US\$	20,160,000			

* 8000 to 12000 is the range of estimated SSP working in Laos according to UNAIDS in Lao PDR:

Annex 4 shows estimated figures for the amount of money generated by SSP in Laos in one year. The number of SSP is drawn from UNAIDS estimates; 8000 is a figure widely agreed upon as a minimum, (though certainly a conservative number.) The figure of 14 clients per month, of which 12 are new clients (*kek*) and two are regular clients, is based on the survey team's findings across the five provinces Eight months work per year takes into account the rainy season when clients are fewer as well as periods when the SSP are inactive because they go home or are not working due to questions of health. The figure of 10 to 15 dollars per sexual act is again a conservative figure. The lowest estimated total of US\$8.960, 000 would place SS ninth on the list of industries in Laos in terms of money generated, just behind coffee. The highest estimated figure of US\$20,160,000 would place SS seventh on the list of most important industries, with more than twice the revenue generated of coffee, and sitting just behind agricultural products.

Though admittedly estimations these figures go some way to suggesting the level of economic impact of SSP in their villages and in the wider community.