

American evangelicals work to end sex trafficking in Thailand

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BANGKOK (RNS)—A small, delicate silver cross hangs around Mint's neck, a charm she reaches for nervously as she speaks.

☒ Mint, a former sex worker, now makes jewelry that helps support the work of NightLight International. (RNS photo by Bear Guerra) Mint is her nickname, an Anglicized version of her long Thai name she would rather not make public. As a former prostitute, the 24-year-old fears bringing shame to her family. Even so, she notes everyone in her village in the northeastern province of Issan—a poor agricultural region along the border with Cambodia and Laos—would realize she had to be trading sex for money to send back home.

The International Labor Organization conservatively estimates sex work in Thailand generates 7 percent of the country's gross domestic product. A report from the late 1990s says sex workers sent home \$300 million a year to rural areas, "more than any government development project."

Most people in Bangkok recognize many of the massage parlors, go-go bars and karaoke joints throughout the city as thinly veiled fronts for prostitution. Heavily made-up girls hang around the periphery of businesses catering to Western tourists.

☒ Promotion of Nightlight International's jewelry sales, used to help women escape the sex trade. Due in part to international pressure, Thailand is seeking to curb human trafficking—the sale, transport and profit of people forced to work for others, often referred to as the modern equivalent of slavery. Dozens of American groups, many of them

evangelical Christians, have entered the country in recent years to fight the issue.

Mint now has a steady job with NightLight International, the anti-trafficking organization that got her off the streets. The motto for NightLight International is emblazoned on its website: “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned” (Isaiah 9:2).

And the oppressed, as far as NightLight founder Annie Dieselberg is concerned, are women and children exploited by the sex industry or at high risk for such exploitation.

Dieselberg founded NightLight in 2005 after almost a decade of missionary work in Thailand with her husband, a pastor who had been assigned to an evangelical church in Bangkok. Dieselberg enjoys rescuing women. She roams the streets at night, searching for those who may need a way out of prostitution—the “survivors,” as she calls them.

☒ NightLight employs 50 women, paying them around \$250 a month to make crafts and jewelry. A fellow evangelical found Mint working a corner many nights and referred her to NightLight. Some women arrive there after one-on-one conversations on the streets. Other organizations—and the police—fight sex trafficking by storming brothels in search of underage sex workers.

NightLight employs 50 women, paying them around \$250 a month to make crafts and jewelry. The salaries are above Thailand’s minimum wage, and the organization provides medical insurance and a savings plan, as well as a small child-care center.

Most of the women at NightLight’s four-story building, just blocks from Bangkok’s infamous Nana Plaza sex district, are younger than 30 and come

from Thailand, Burma and Laos.

Mint works part-time assembling jewelry. She has found a community at NightLight, a sense of belonging she didn't have before.

"Now I can do good work that will not hurt my body," she says. "I don't have to fight all the time."

This goal of fostering individual human dignity drives many evangelicals in the United States to fight sex trafficking, said Brie Loskota, managing director of the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California.

"It is a moving idea for just about anyone, but particularly in the evangelical world," she explains. "The fact that they come together in a way that is nonshaming for the victims is a remarkable testament for how evangelicals are being smart in this movement."

More than a decade ago, the U.S. Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act established a set of legal tools to combat trafficking nationwide and around the world. To help Thailand, the U.S. government awarded almost \$12 million in funding to nongovernmental organizations in East Asia that ran anti-trafficking programs in 2010; about one-sixth went to faith-based organizations.

"We work closely with many of them, and they give us tips on who the trafficking victims are and where they might be," said Saowanee Khomepatr, director of Thailand's Bureau of Anti-trafficking in Women and Children, part of the Ministry of Social Development.

But last summer, the latest U.S. State Department Trafficking in Persons Report found the Thai government was not complying fully with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking.

That means possible U.S. trade sanctions if the Thai government can't prove by the end of 2014 that more trafficking victims are being helped, or more traffickers are ending up behind bars.

 A view of Soi Cowboy, a popular sex tourism district in Bangkok. The area is named for a U.S. Vietnam War veteran who opened one of the first bars on the street in the '70s, and often wore a cowboy hat. (RNS photo by Bear Guerra) Not everyone agrees sex trafficking should claim highest priority. Some critics argue in an effort to fight trafficking, the United States is clamping down on prostitution worldwide while overlooking other kinds of human trafficking.

"There are other places to focus on, like children, or people who are exploited in the factories who cannot leave, or the fishing boats," said criminologist Sam Derbali, a Belgian researcher at Mahidol University in Bangkok. "There are thousands of fishing boats in Thailand, and nobody knows what happens there."

According to the International Labor Organization, an estimated 75 percent of people trafficked around the world at any point in time do not end up as sex workers, but in fishing, farming, domestic work or construction industries.

But Dieselberg at NightLight has her hands full just focusing on sex trafficking. She remains convinced most women would quit prostitution if offered a decent-paying alternative.

"We usually have a waiting list of women wanting to come work at NightLight," Dieselberg says. That tells her women aren't so eager to sell their bodies on the streets.

According to NightLight, 160 Thai women and 45 women from other countries have come through the organization since its founding in 2005.

"We could do much more, but the financial and human resources needed are so high, and we are limited in how much we can help," she said.

Mint, for one, is grateful for NightLight's help and has no desire to go back on the streets.

For two years, she has been making jewelry and crafts at NightLight. During that time, she said, she has developed new skills that will keep her from having to earn a living as a prostitute. Someday, when she has enough savings and business know-how, she plans to start her own crafts store in Bangkok.