

COLUMBIA  **SPECTATOR**
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Columbia Daily Spectator, Volume CXVIII, Number 47, 6 April 1994 — Researcher speaks on Thai prostitution [ARTICLE]

Researcher speaks on Thai prostitution

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Contributing Writer

Therese Caouette, a research associate for Human Rights Watch, spoke last night in Ferris Booth Hall about the prostitution of Burmese women in Thailand.

The lecture, which approximately 50 people attended, was sponsored by the Thai Students' Association, and was jointly planned by APAAM (Asian Pacific American Awareness Month) and Women's History Month.

Caouette, who is a contributing writer of the Human Rights Watch book "A Modern Form of Slavery," said although prostitution is illegal in both Thailand and Burma, more than one million young Burmese women, many from remote villages, have been transported to Thailand to work in brothels.

Caouette said the vast majority of these women do not speak Thai and do not have any basic knowledge of urban technology, adding that most of the women would not even be able to use a telephone to call for help.

"Most appalling is the low self-perception of these women, who see all of this as their own fault," Caouette said. "There is a lack of anger at what others have done to

anger at what others have done to them.”

Caouette added that the local police aid the prostitution instead of deterring it. Many of the women are transported to the Thai brothels in police cars, and officers are given certain privileges, such as free visits with prostitutes, in exchange for their assistance, she said.

Additionally, up to 70 percent of the Burmese prostitutes are HIV positive, due to a lack of health care and a schedule that includes an average of 10 clients a day, according to Caouette.

Ellis Shenk, coordinator of the Campaign to End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism (CECPAT), said prostitution is an international problem, and presented a video of an episode of the television program “Inside Edition” which investigated the issue of Americans who travel overseas on “sex tours.” The video revealed that an increasing number of young girls are becoming prostitutes in Thailand, Taiwan, India, and Bangladesh,

among other countries.

“It’s part of our inter-relations in an unequal world where the powerless are being abused,” Shenk said.

Shenk encouraged members of the audience to support organizations that fight Asian prostitution, and to urge the United States government to ratify a United Nations convention that supports children’s rights, which has already been ratified by at least 150 other countries.

Pia Hernandez, CC ’95, a member of the women’s history month planning committee, said an important element of Caouette’s speech was her reminder that slavery is an issue in this problem as well as prostitution.

“People would rather deal with the issues of AIDS and prostitution, but a preponderance of the victims are women,” Hernandez said. “We forget that it’s about women. It’s about the slavery and abuse of women.”