

Girls lured into Philippine cybersex industry

By **Kate McGeown** BBC News, Olongapo City, the Philippines - 3 March 2011 Updated at 00:52 GMT



Kim and Maricel were forced to work as cybersex chat girls in the city of Olongapo

Maricel is a shy, attractive girl, who looks younger than her 15 years. But in her short life, she has already had to deal with experiences that would badly scar many adults.

Two years ago her aunt told her about a job in the city of Olongapo, several hours away from her home.

"She told me I would be working as a domestic helper and a babysitter," said Maricel. "But when I got there, she told me to dress up and go in front of the computer.

"She even showed me how to do it - so I had no choice but to follow her instructions."

Maricel had become what is known here as a "cybersex chat girl".

Her friend Kim was soon lured into the same trap, and worked alongside her.

"We did a show in front of the camera, using a webcam and a phone," said Kim.

"When the customers requested us to show our bodies, we removed our clothes... If they were satisfied with our show, they requested us for another show."

Cybersex den raid

Cybersex, or sexually explicit chat over the internet, is a growing industry in many parts of the world - and one of the countries where business is booming is the Philippines.

An already established sex trade, high levels of poverty and a population that speaks at least basic English means there is a ready supply of girls.

Neither the police nor the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) have accurate statistics, but they estimate that thousands could be working in the back rooms and small apartments that are the usual locations of these so-called cybersex dens.



Lesley Ermata found six girls in various states of undress when she raided this cybersex den

All internet sex is classed as pornography and therefore illegal in the Philippines, but what most concerns the authorities is the number of girls who are trafficked into these dens - many of whom, like Maricel and Kim, are well under 18, the legal age of consent.

The plight of these girls is a major concern for Lesley Ermata, a police officer specialising in women's issues. She is based in Angeles City which, like Olongapo, has a thriving sex tourism industry.

"It's one of the main problems we face here," she told me, as we got into the car on the way to a small one-storey house about 10 minutes from the police station.

Last year, she raided this building with a group of colleagues, and found six girls in various states of undress. The youngest was just 13.

From the outside, there is nothing to suggest this house is any different from all the others around it. It is on a busy suburban street, with a shop on the corner - many people pass by every day.

The landlady of the building, who also lives next door, denied she had any idea that it was being used as a cybersex den. In fact she said she had never even met any of the six girls who were working there.

Whether neighbours genuinely do not know what is going on, or whether they choose to remain silent, is a matter of debate. But either way, the fact that these cybersex dens are so hidden away makes it very difficult for the police to find them.

Ms Ermata says her team is almost entirely reliant on informants - the rare girls who have escaped and are brave enough to speak out, and also have enough evidence for the police to obtain a search warrant.

"We were able to raid this house because we had an informant who'd just escaped. She had a cellphone - she had videoed the other chat girls when they were online so she had evidence."

'Go to hell'

But even when the police are able to raid a cybersex den, there is no guarantee they will be able to find the owners.

"As of now, we don't have the capability to trace where the operations are being conducted," said Migdonio Congzon, the head of the computer crimes unit at the NBI.



Migdonio Congzon says it is difficult to trace where the operations are being conducted from

"They already use proxy servers; their websites are [often] hosted by a system outside the Philippines."

And he added that even if he did manage to track down the cybersex bosses, he faced another uphill battle in trying to convict them.

"The laws are really behind. There have been cases filed before the prosecutors' office, but the case goes to the prosecutors before it goes to court and as far as I know all those cases are still with the prosecutors' office."

In other words, he is yet to hear of a single conviction.

Perhaps the biggest problem Mr Congzon faces is that many members of public simply do not realise this is a serious issue - often involving under-age, trafficked girls.

Cybersex operations here have even likened themselves to call centres, saying they are part of the outsourcing industry - a sector which is booming in the Philippines.

The call centre industry is distancing itself as far as possible from these claims.

For Kim and Maricel, working in this industry was an experience from which they will need time and space to recover.

They have now left the cybersex business. Their den was raided late last year, and they are in the care of a charity in Olongapo called Preda, which is run by an Irish priest.

But the memories of the men who paid them to perform in front of a camera are still fresh in their minds.

"I felt embarrassed every time I saw them in front of a computer - I hated them because I felt that I was a child, so why were they doing this to me," said Maricel.

Kim was more concise. "I hate them - I want them to die and go to hell".

The names of the girls have been changed for their own protection

Ref.: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-12597245>

Look more here: www.Prostitution.PhilippineChildren.ph - www.CyberCrime.AboutPhilippines.ph