

Acting to stem the pornography tide

BY FRANK CHOI

A tide of pornography has spilled on to Hong Kong's pavements and threatens to keep on rising. What was once confined to a few back streets can now be found everywhere.

Some people are urging the Government to crack down hard on the publishers and distributors before the flourishing and lucrative trade harms schoolchildren.

This month religious and teacher groups are to launch a large-scale programme aimed at helping youngsters to cope with the temptation provided by pavement news stalls.

Already openly on sale at most stalls are more than 50 locally-published magazines, regarded as "soft porn" by the Government. These are aimed at people aged between 20 and 40, but they also draw an increasing readership from teenagers.

According to a publisher, these magazines have a circulation of well over 200,000 a month.

In the past few years the number of locally-produced soft porn magazines has been increasing, as have imported ones such as Playboy, Penthouse and Oui.

Some stalls are also selling "hard core" magazines, obtained from syndicates, squeezing more pocket money from youngsters who are curious about sex.

Most of these stalls are in Wanchai, Causeway Bay, Yaumati and Tsimshatsui —

districts where there are a large number of schools as well as nightclubs.

In a recent survey by the SCM Post, it was found that more than 80 per cent of the newspaper stalls in Hennessy Road and King's Road are selling various types of pornographic magazines — most of them locally published.

Two big stalls, one in Wanchai and the other in Causeway Bay, offer a large selection, including about 40 local magazines and 10 imported ones. They are open around the clock.

The survey also revealed the poor quality of most of the 50 local publications.

About 60 per cent of their pictorial content is copied from imported magazines, especially from the more popular ones. Few of the magazines appeared to use their own photographic material.

With the low cost of production publishers can make handsome profits from these sex books.

Prices for locally-published soft porn magazines range from \$5 to \$20. A copy of Playboy or Penthouse — regarded as high quality soft porn — sells for about \$25.

According to a publisher who has shares in at least five soft porn magazines, a publisher can make at least \$50,000 on every issue of a publication.

Investigations showed that about 60 per cent of local soft porn magazines have more than one owner while about 20 per cent are owned by

publishing syndicates.

The magazines are distributed by two agents — one on each side of the harbour. Also distributed by the agents are cartoons depicting violence and eroticism.

The distributors take about 30 per cent of sales revenue and stall owners about 25 per cent.

According to the owner of one of the big stalls in Hongkong, he once sold about \$2,000 worth of these magazines in 24 hours, at a profit to him of about \$500.

For magazines, on which the distributor gives no money-back guarantee, profits can reach about 40 per cent of the cover price, he said.

"Our readers range in age from 18 to 50, but when I am in charge of the stall I do not allow under-aged youngsters to buy them — it is against the law," he said.

The stall owner admitted he only checked the ages of people who looked under-age.

On the covers of most of the soft porn magazines a line states that they are not to be sold to those under 18.

Recently, a committee was formed by the local Catholic and other Christian bodies and the Hongkong Professional Teachers' Association to launch a programme to help youngsters cope with the "porn culture" on the pavements.

According to a spokesman for the committee, the Rev Lo Lung-kgong, it aims to re-establish among young people in schools and community

centres a system of moral standards and values.

"To change the attitudes of young people about sex, we shall start from the education system to teach students the basic moral values of a decent man.

"Teachers will also take part to set up extra-curricular activities for the young people in which they can release their excessive energy in more meaningful ways, such as community services and voluntary work.

"It is sad to say that the existing moral system is on the brink of collapse because young people cannot find the right person on whom to model their behaviour.

"It highlights the failure of our social institutions, especially the existing education system.

"The collapse of our moral system is one of the major reasons for a rise in juvenile crime. It has soared in the past few years," Mr Lo said.

He urged the Government to tighten controls on pornography, both in print form and in films.

"Action should start on the pavements where these dirty books are sold, and then on to the distributors, the printing shop owners and the publishers.

"A heavy penalty should be imposed.

Commenting on a recent proposal in the British Parliament to ban pornographic magazines from public display, and to permit their sale only away from public gaze, Mr Lo said: "Such a law

would only make things worse because young people are curious about sex.

"Teaching young people the right attitude towards sex is the only solution to stop the spread of porn culture," he said.

A spokesman said yesterday that the Government is not considering an amendment to the existing law, similar to the one proposed in Britain.

However, a working group of officials from the police and the Home Affairs Department is currently studying ways of enforcing the law more effectively.

Despite efforts by the police and Home Affairs Department to stem the tide of pornographic magazines in Hongkong, the material is increasing in popularity among young people.

A Government spokesman said that the ambiguity of the existing law — the Objectionable Publications Ordinance — and involved prosecution procedures have hampered efforts to crack down on pornography.

Police seized more than 2,000 copies of obscene books last year, resulting in 183 prosecutions — a 62 per cent increase over prosecutions in 1979.

However, the figures were well down on those of 1977.

The spokesman said there are no adequate guidelines over whether a particular magazine violates the law.

"Usually officials will first consider the public interest in deciding on a case, but this is

of only limited help in the battle against pornography.

"The operation has to start at the grassroots — the publishers — with heavier fines," he said.

The maximum penalty under the ordinance — a fine of \$100,000 and three years' imprisonment — has never been implemented.

One publisher was sent to jail in 1978 for six months. Other cases resulted in fines ranging from a few hundred dollars to a few thousand.

In an effort to stem the tide of pornography the Home Affairs Department asked the Urban Council to urge newspaper stall-holders not to sell pornography, when issuing licences to them. The request was largely ignored.

Investigators from the Trade, Industry and Customs Department's Copyright Protection Division are also involved in the battle.

One investigator said it is difficult for them to act effectively although most of the locally-published pornography violates the Copyright Ordinance.

"Since most of the pictures in local magazines are photocopies from overseas magazines, the publishers are violating the law.

"But, in order to make a case, a complaint has to be made to the division by the copyright holders.

"The division has a difficult time persuading overseas copyright holders to come here to help us press charges," he said.