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Patriarchy, Empire, and Ping Pong Shows: The Political Economy of Sex Tourism in Thailand

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Capstone Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Cultural Studies

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Abstract

This project provides a postcolonial feminist analysis of the prosperity and reputation of the sex tourism industry in Thailand. It examines the ways in which Western imperialism created the space for the globalization of sex work, as well as providing a postcolonial analysis of the hegemonic structures which have existed throughout Thailand's history that enable the sex tourism industry to thrive today. This project also explores how policy making and enforcement in Thailand affects the sex tourism industry, as well as the ways in which activism works to change or support these policies, and how this affects individuals who are both trafficked into the industry and those who use their agency to participate. Ultimately, it will illustrate the different ways that Western colonialism and imperialism, both historical and contemporary, influence the global sex tourism industry.

Keywords:

Thailand, Sex Work, Sex Tourism, Feminism, Postcolonial Theory, Globalization, Human Trafficking

Introduction

In Thailand, prostitution is illegal under Thai law. However, it is estimated that anywhere between one and nine percent of Thai women participate in sex work. While commercial sex consumption is common among Thai men, it is because of the dependence of the Thai tourism economy on commercial sex that it is not only tolerated by law enforcement, but also exists on a massive scale. Because of this, Thailand has gained a reputation as one of the world's most infamous 'sexscapes' for Western male tourists. This project provides a cultural studies analysis of the current conditions of the sex tourism industry in Thailand by revealing and interrogating the forces that constructed this industry in Thailand and have allowed it to continue to develop; including historical and contemporary Western colonialism, imperialism, and globalization, as well as the Thai state and cultural attitudes regarding both sex work and tourism and the effects that are felt by both the industry itself and its laborers.

It is important to note that the Thai commercial sex industry is not exclusive to heterosexual female sex workers. In fact, Thailand's commercial sex industry is infamous for its "lady boys", or male to female transgendered sex workers. There are also cisgender men in Thailand who participate in sex work, though on a much lesser scale. When it comes to children participating in sex work, it is essentially impossible to detach the issue from human trafficking, as they are not old enough to give their consent; thus losing any sense of agency and empowerment. So, for the purpose of this analysis, this project will focus specifically on the colonial patriarchal heteronormative relationships that are reinforced and reenacted

through sex tourism, and therefore will refer to a sex worker in terms of a heterosexual cisgender woman.

As an American subject, my goal is to offer a feminist critique of the Western Imperialism that exists when Western men enter “Eastern” or postcolonial spaces for the purposes of purchasing sex. While this project suggests some of the reasons as to why Thai women may choose to participate in sex work, it in no way aims to question the morality or ethics behind sex work itself. In 2014, I had the opportunity to study abroad in Bangkok, an incredibly multifaceted city that has so much to offer to all kinds of tourists. Going into the experience, I arrived with some preconceived ideas about Bangkok’s infamous “night life” scene that had been formed primarily by dominant Western media representations of Bangkok and Thailand. Commercial sex is much more visible than it is in America, particularly in the tourist areas that this paper discusses such as Soi Cowboy, Soi Nana, and Pattaya. The “go-go bars” cater specifically to Western men, and even though I am a woman I found that because I am a white Westerner, the Thai people often associated me with my male counterpart and the sex tourism experience, and I found myself being ushered into ping pong shows and even pulled into a few bars by the female bar workers. Through this experience, especially in getting to know Thai people and culture, I became very interested in this world that exists around reenacting ideals of patriarchal colonial domination and sexualization, and in the people for whom this world is their everyday life reality.

Historical Context of the Commercial Sex Industry in Thailand

Thailand has had a long and precarious relationship with Western imperial and colonial powers that existed for centuries in Southeast Asia. Thailand was never officially colonized by the West; however, it was not without a great understanding of colonialism by Thai leaders and careful strategizing of international relations by which this was achieved. While Thailand managed to maintain its sovereignty from direct colonial rule, the Western colonial forces in the region still played a very imperial role in Thailand's history.

Official reports of prostitution in Thailand as recorded by the Dutch date back to the early seventeenth century, in which it was reported that one Thai official had received a license to establish a monopoly on the commercial sex industry. Before that, sex work came in the form of concubines or slavery, by which the number of "slave wives" or concubines that a man possessed was an expression of his power within society. In the nineteenth century there was a mass migration of Chinese laborers to Thailand after the Thai government passed legislation making it easy for migrants to find work, and along with them came thousands of sex workers (Bishop and Robinson, 159). The commercial sex industry existed in Thailand for a long time outside of the tourism industry; however, it was through the presence of American troops during the Vietnam War that Thailand gained its global reputation as a sex tourism destination.

The Vietnam War was an act of American imperialism in Southeast Asia. While the war was centralized in Vietnam and unofficially in parts of Cambodia and

Laos, much of the world felt the heavy effects of the forceful anti-communist manifestation. While Thailand remained militarily uninvolved, the Vietnam War reshaped both Thailand's economy and relationship to the West and served as the catalyst for the militarization of the Thai state.

At the time, generals who built competing alliances and often took over the state apparatus by force ran the Thai government. Thai General Sarit, who led the 1957 coup d'état against the Thai government, helped U.S. troops by making Bangkok a central site for military action during the war. To encourage the flow of foreign capital and investment, the Thai government used the Vietnam War as an opportunity to host U.S. troops on Rest and Recreation.

According to Simpkins,

"In the 1960s, nearly 50,000 U.S. troops were stationed near Bangkok as a result of superpower concerns about the spread of communism in Southeast Asia, specifically in Vietnam. The presence of U.S. troops precipitated a crucial change in the scope of commercial sex, with lasting consequences for Thai women's economic roles. Although the U.S. military forces did not impose commercial sexuality on Thailand's women, militarization was a strong impetus for the development of the sex industry in Thailand"

(Simpkins).

The presence of U.S. troops in Thailand during the war presented an opportunity of economic growth from foreign capital, and commodified sex was in high demand.

Between 1965-1972, \$100 million was spent by U.S. soldiers on R&R, including

commercial sex, in addition to direct monetary aid from the U.S. government (Simpkins). The Vietnam War marked the emergence of a sex tourism industry in Thailand.

The situation of militarized prostitution is not in any way unique to Thailand. Many states in which there is a developed market for commodified sex are in fact postcolonial states, as colonialism creates a situation in which colonized bodies are easily commodified for the colonizer to consume. Jan Jindy Pettman explains that; “There is a long and now well-documented international politics around military prostitution, from colonial times to the present, as colonial authorities and now foreign military commanders and local government officials negotiate to make sex available to soldiers, while reducing the local political impact” (“Worlding Woman”, 203). Thailand’s relationship with Western imperialism mirrors colonial relationships in many ways. During the Vietnam War Thailand took advantage of this relationship in attempt to advance economically. In an electronic source, Dulcey Simpkins describes: “The presence of military bases in developing countries such as Thailand, the Philippines, and Vietnam created opportunities for wage labor based on selling sex. As a result, poor women in the countries hosting superpower bases were integrated into an international political economy via sexual imperialism” (Simpkins). The emergence of a market for sex work geared towards American military personnel offered Thai women a space to participate in the international market economy.

The presence of the American military in Thailand in influenced the militarization of the Thai government, as it often supported American imperial

interests. While the militarized Thai government acted in favor of the consumer demands of American soldiers during the war, the institutionalization of a commodified sex market, and more generally a market catered to American military R&R during the war, was not met with support by the general Thai population. “During the Vietnam War, Sarit’s successors General Thanom and Praphat, developed a national consumer infrastructure to serve more than 50,000 enlisted men and increased numbers of foreign capitalists and tourists. These leaders tolerated what many Thais felt was inappropriate and even colonizing behavior on the part of foreign soldiers and business people toward Thai women (Anderson, “Withdrawal” p. 15-18, quoted in Simpkins). While the use of Thailand as a space for U.S. military R&R on the surface served government interests, it was also a colonial gesture on the part of the United States in that it was occupying Thai space and resources and using Thai women’s labor and bodies for its own gain. The attitude by the Thai government towards the informal occupation of Thailand by the U.S. military opened up Thailand as a space for other Western powers to take advantage of its growing commercial sex industry. Simpkins explains Thailand’s transition from American R&R site to sex tourism destination when she writes that; “Soon after the American military established bases in Thailand, the World Bank began to argue that tourism could solve developing countries’ need for foreign capital. The World Bank did not explicitly promote *sex* tourism, but Western visitors had already begun to associate the ‘Thai experience’ with sex. Thus militarization enlarged the consumer market and provided the infrastructure for a much larger sex tourism industry.” The American imperialism that took place in Thailand during the war

created the reputation of Thailand as a sex tourism destination and opened a space for the globalization of this image for consumers from other Western countries. The World Bank, in an attempt to encourage Thailand to participate in the global market economy, argued the profitability of capitalizing off of tourism interests.

The binary that exists within the sex tourism industry between consumer and laborer directly correlates with that of colonizer and colonized. The colonial, or Western imperial powers are almost always the consumer, while the colonized, or native population of a “developing” or “third world” nation, is almost always the laborer. “Some Western European states, the USA, Australia, and Japan have a reputation for sending the sex tourists: other states, notably Thailand and the Philippines, are reputed sex tourist destinations, (not coincidentally, they were significant sites for militarized prostitution, too) in turn, sex tourist destinations are represented in terms of culturalized and sexualized difference-- as exotic and erotic” (Pettman, p. 96). In order for justification of colonialism, it is necessary that the colonial power establish themselves as different from the colonized population through the process of “othering” them. Not only was Thailand vulnerable to the circumstances of developing a sex tourism industry due to its convenient proximity to the war in Vietnam, but there are also racial and cultural boundaries between Thailand and Western powers that allow for the othering of Thai women, and therefore the justification of purchasing their bodies for sexual labor.

The Uses of a Postcolonial Perspective

The exotification and erotification of Thai women and culture as a means of

legitimizing Thailand as a sex tourism destination can be explained by Edward Said's concept of Orientalism. His theory explains the hegemonic power-dynamics between the East and the West, or the Orient and the Occident, by which the East has been "Orientalised" by Western discourse, in which it is subjected to being interpreted, defined, and then spoken for by the West. In this process of Western perception, the "Orient" loses its voice and therefore can easily be "othered" in Western discourse, which is a necessary strategy in the legitimization of colonialism. Said explains the projection of Orientalism upon the Eastern woman in the following example. He writes: "There is very little consent to be found, for example, in the fact that Flaubert's encounter with an Egyptian courtesan produced a widely influential model of the oriental woman; she never spoke of herself, she never repressed her emotions, presence or history. *He* spoke for and represented her" (Williams & Chrisman, 133). In the justification for Western men purchasing sex from a female sex worker, Orientalism becomes a key factor in the Thai sex tourism industry as is made obvious in Western sex tourist's preference to spend the extra money to travel in order to engage in such interests, as opposed to the cheaper option of purchasing sex in their home country. Orientalism also allows Western discourse to dehumanize Thai women by deeming them as "exotic" or "submissive" to white Western superiority.

Said explains that it is through Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony by which Orientalism is allowed to exist. Representations and existing discourse of the East as "Oriental" or unquestionably different than the West reinforces the power behind Orientalism (p. 134). Since this information, to a

Western audience, has been primarily produced by the West, it is easy to give access to the information that would, in fact, point out cultural binaries between the East and West and therefore gain Western cultural hegemony of othering the East and later consent to imperial gestures and colonization. “Additionally, the imaginative examination of things oriental was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged. First according to general ideas about who or what was oriental, then according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections” (p. 134). For many sex tourists, it is much easier to justify the purchasing of commercial sex if one can separate, or other, the laborer from himself or herself. Since orientalism is so prominent in Western produced discourse of the East, it has become an essential tool in the development of Thailand as a sex tourism destination.

In a post-colonial world, orientalism can be used to reinforce the values of colonialism at the colonizer’s convenience. In order to justify sex tourism, a Western tourist may have to revisit some of the societal forces, including racism and patriarchy, which justified colonialism. “Dominant group men’s access to the bodies of subordinated, colonized or slave women was part of the privilege of power. These women were frequently constructed as sexual, available, promiscuous, or alternatively as passive, or already abused: excusing the using men from responsibility towards the women or their children” (Pettman, “Body Politics”, p. 97). The construction of the colonized woman as not only different, but also as inferior is part of the process of orientalism. Said explains a necessary component of

orientalism as being the idea that the European identity is superior to all non-European people and cultures. In other words, it is not enough to simply “other” the sex worker, but she must also be made to be different in an inferior way.

Jan Jindy Pettman explains the way in which even in postcolonial society, colonial ideals of race and gender continue to be reinforced. She writes: “Colonial power made use of certain ideas of women and sexuality to construct and police both women’s bodies and racialised hierarchy in world politics, through structural relations of domination, subordination and exploitation. ‘Whiteness’ and ‘Non-white’ are still significant political identities in the world today” (“Worlding Women”, p. 25). Today, “Whiteness” is still recognized as racially privileged in the hierarchical binary of “Whiteness” and “Non-White”. This allows privilege to white, often Western, consumers of commercial sex in the sex tourism industry, and therefore allows for the colonial gesture of domination, subordination, and exploitation of the “Non-white” sex worker. Pettman goes on to describe the situation of gendered colonial dominance: “Even when such sexual relations did not constitute rape and when indigenous women embraced a sexual or love relation with colonizing men, there was still an element of conquest: sexual access to local women legitimized the colonial relation’ (Jolly, 1993: 08))” (p. 32). Sexual dominance has been a powerful tool in colonialism throughout the world. As an “element of conquest” this is inherently patriarchal, and therefore projects Western patriarchal values onto the colonized people. The use of female bodies to legitimize colonial and imperial relationships is visible in the relationship between sex tourist and sex worker.

The sexualization of colonial dominance relies on “otherness” to maintain the hierarchical structure of race and gender that reinforces that dominance. “One desires contact with the Other even as one wishes boundaries to remain intact. When bodies contact one another, touch, it almost always a white hand doing the touching, white hands that rest on the bodies of colored people” (hooks, p. 29). While maintaining the colonial relationship, it is possible to have experiences of intimacy across the binary of colonizer and colonized without breaking this structure as made possible by capitalism, and the exchange between consumer and laborer. While the act of sex between colonizer and colonized seemingly would break down the barriers of hierarchy kept in place to reinforce colonial power, it is through the commodification of consensual sex, or through rape as a colonial force by which these barriers remain intact. hooks argues that: “When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other” (p. 23). In the colonial situation, sex is used to reinforce colonial binaries. In terms of the sex tourism industry, the colonizing power is reinforced as superior through the exchange of capital as power. The tourist pays the sex worker for their labor, but under the constructs of capitalism this puts the tourist, or the consumer, in a position of control and therefore superiority. Pettman states that: “Sex tourism becomes a metaphor for relations between men and women under capitalism, and in colonization and racism” (*Worlding Women*, p. 196).

Even though sex tourism is often legitimized through colonial ideologies around racial hierarchies, the modern day sex tourist often rejects the idea that his or her legitimization for their actions is racist. “The international tourist in Bangkok who pays for sex to a Thai sex worker speaks to the economic value of sex work as well as its cultural value: she or he could have had sex in her or his country of origin but went to Bangkok because the cultural context of Bangkok matters” (Singh & Hart, p. 156). The cost of living in Thailand is considerably cheaper than in many Western countries, and therefore the profit that a sex worker would have to make in order to earn livable wages is presumably cheaper than her or his Western counterparts, in addition to generally inexpensive food, drink, and accommodation options for the tourist. However, the tourist must first still purchase airline tickets or other means of transportation in getting to Thailand, as well as going through the hassle of taking time off from work, making travel arrangements, etc. While it would be much easier for the sex consumer to simply purchase commercial sex in his or her own country, the cultural context of Thailand is very important. First of all, their identity as a tourist is important. As a tourist they are on vacation and therefore the goal is to enjoy leisure time and activities. Sex and romance have become very integral aspects of Western representations of leisure travel. “The rise of sex tourism is hard to understand without noting the increasing scope and intensity of globalization and the fantasies of people, places, and things tourism generates” (Singh & Hart 2007 p. 157). The cultural context of Thailand matters because not only can it be romanticized as paradise with beautiful beaches, exciting nightlife, and delicious cuisine, but also it is also romanticized with romance: fantasies of

sexual pleasure, and adventure. “Encounters with otherness are clearly marked as more exciting more intense, and more threatening the lure is a combination of pleasure and danger” (hooks, p. 26).

Arguably the most important reason why the cultural context of Bangkok matters in a sex tourist’s decision to purchase sex abroad rather than in his or her own country of origin is because the cultural context of the sex worker matters, or rather the cultural differences. Singh and Hart explain, “but what attracts so many foreign men to Thailand? Putting it crudely, surely price does not account for demand alone as the cost of hotels and airfares make it comparable to sex bought even in affluent economies. In economic terms, the formation of tastes is equally important. The foreign choose to travel far from home to fulfill their fantasies” (161). Because of the cultural context of Thailand in relation to its history with Western imperialism and colonial ideologies, it represents a space to the tourist in which he is empowered to exercise not only sexual dominance, but also privileges that come with racial and class structure. These colonial ideologies of superiority are culturally hegemonic in Western discourse of the East, and therefore are enabling of the sex tourist in othering the sex workers in sex tourism destinations. “Asian women’ circulate globally in representations which resonate with and reproduce colonial romances and ongoing domination relations” (Pettman, “Body Politics”, 97). The cultural context of Thailand is that of which a Western man is enabled to exert his colonial dominance upon an Eastern woman. The colonial context opens a space to legitimize his actions through orientalism, and therefore through dehumanizing the sex worker, it exempts himself from the same ethic and

moral dilemmas by which he would be faced in participating in sex consumerism at home.

Globalization of Tourism: Implications in Thailand

On the Tourist/Labor Dichotomy:

In order for a global economy of tourism to exist on such a mass scale, there must be in turn a massive labor force that stands behind it. While tourism is very profitable throughout many “First World” countries, the historical context of these countries’ tourism industries differs greatly from that of many developing nations. After colonial or imperial occupation ceased to exist in many countries this relationship was translated in very close resemblance from that of colonizer/colonized to tourist/laborer. The tourism industry is a very integral component of globalization. While it can be very lucrative to developing nations as a source of foreign capital, it still abides to the constructs of capitalism by which foreign capitalists primarily own the industry’s businesses and the labor force is made up of the native population.

In *Globalization: The Human Consequences*, Zygmunt Bauman explains his concept of the binary between tourist and vagabond. The tourist is the consumer and the vagabond the producer. “For the first world, the world of the globally mobile, the space has lost its constraining quality and is easily traversed in both its ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ renditions. For the second world, the world of the ‘locally tied’, of those barred from moving and thus bound to bear passively whatever change may be visited on the locality they are tied to, the real space is fast closing up” (88). The

first world, as the ideal consumer under capitalism, has the privilege of agency, not only in regards to geographic space but also the agency to chose what they consume. The tourist is granted access to space in reality, in that they are not only able but moreover encouraged to travel the world, their foreign capital often giving them the advantage within the local economies of their destinations. They are also granted virtual access to space as they are bombarded with media and advertising depicting different parts of the world, encouraging them to adventure into the exotic and unknown (while still providing a safe space of the unknown with predetermined stereotypical ideologies about different peoples and cultures as perpetuated by the media). The second world, the world of the vagabond, is subject to the conditions created by the tourist's agency. Bauman explains, "There are no tourists without the vagabonds, and the tourists cannot be let free without tying down the vagabonds" (93). The tourism industry cannot exist without either force, however their experience of the industry differs greatly. While the emergence of a tourism industry in a post-colonial society may offer opportunity for locals to capitalize, it is also structured in a way that secures the laborer's dependence on the industry for survival. Bauman argues, "What is acclaimed today as 'globalization' is geared to the tourists' dreams and desires. Its second effect-- a *side-effect*, but an unavoidable one-- is the transformation of many others into vagabonds. Vagabonds are travellers refused the right to turn into tourists. They are allowed neither to stay put (there is no site guaranteeing permanence, the end to undesirable mobility) nor search for a better place to be" (93). While Thai women are provided the space to capitalize off of Thailand's commercial sex tourism industry, it is within the context of immobility

that they are offered this choice. “Thai commercial sex work often translates into more money for women and families who are struggling to support themselves in an increasingly globalized world sheds light on the real limitations on their agency” (Brennan, 165). While Thai women are empowered in the way that they are able to profit off of the heteronormative ideologies of the sex tourism industry, it is forces such as poverty or the patriarchal structure that limits them from wage labor opportunities by which they are faced with the choice of prostitution as means to provide for their family or earn substantial wages. The constructs of the globalization of the tourism industry in Thailand create a situation in which women, primarily from rural parts of Thailand, can use their agency to profit off of Western tourism in order to provide for themselves or families. However, not all sex workers in Thailand participate in the sex tourism industry consensually, and the divide between consensual and non-consensual sex work becomes very blurry when forces such as poverty are at play.

The Western Gaze Upon Thai Female Bodies as Perpetuated Through Media and Advertising of the Tourism Industry

Thailand’s reputation as a sex tourism destination could not exist without reinforcement of the Western gaze that rests upon it that is reinforced through media representations of Thailand and tourism advertising produced both in the West and by the Thai tourism industry itself. The general discourse around Thailand within Western media does not often go without mentioning its infamous commercial sex industry. Advertisements for Thai tourism aimed towards a

Western audience also feature images and messages suggesting that commercial sex is an integral part of the Thai tourism experience. The Western gaze of orientalism upon Thailand is often internalized by the Thai tourism industry, which then reproduces images of the exotic and erotic in attempt to capitalize off of these “resources.”

The reputation of Thailand as a destination for cheap and easily accessible commercial sex has become a stereotype within Western media. This stereotype has become so dominant in Western discourse that even mainstream media, such as *Saturday Night Live* aired a skit poking fun at Thailand’s reputation as a destination for sex tourists. The skit, which aired in 2013, featured Rosetta Stone Thai, and portrayed white male tourists intending to travel to Thailand learning phrases such as “How much?”, “Is that for the whole night?”, and “ping pong ball.” In this case, *Saturday Night Live* is making fun of sex tourists, while at the same time reinforces Thailand’s reputation as a sex tourism destination.

While, like most stereotypes, the media often portrays a hyper-exaggerated portrayal of the situation of commercial sex in Thailand, Bishop and Robinson explain, “Sex isn’t sold everywhere in Bangkok, but it’s available in enough places and enough kinds of places at a low enough price to confirm the First World view that the whole city is an erotic theme park” (7). While the entirety of Bangkok is not a site for go-go bars and sex shows, there are a few infamous areas for commercial sex such as Patpong Road, Soi Cowboy, and Soi Nana Tai (Steinfatt, 30), these few areas of the city seem to be the face of Bangkok in Western media representation. Steinfatt describes Patpong Road as potentially “the most recognized commercial

sex district in the world,” as it is the setting for many Hollywood movies featuring commercial sex in Southeast Asia for Western consumption, such as “The Deerhunter,” “Miss Saigon,” and “Emmanuelle in Bangkok” (30), and more recently the box office hit “The Hangover Part II.” Other notorious sites for commercial sex tourism in Thailand as perpetuated and reinforced by Western media include Pattaya, Phuket, and Chiang Mai.

These four major cities are very highly frequented by Western tourists. Media representation is responsible for their reputations as being well known tourist destinations, especially though the promotion of these cities in tourism advertisement. While many of the large hotels in Bangkok are well-known Western corporate hotel chains and participate in the advertising of Thailand as a “sexscape,” it is also the Thai-owned tourism enterprises that hold responsibility for the portrayal of Thailand as a destination for commercial sex in advertising. Furthermore, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) plays a major role in the reproduction of the image of Thailand as a space for commercial sex tourism as a method to promote tourism in Thailand in general in order to capitalize off of tourism as the country’s main source of foreign capital. Simpkins explains, “The Tourist Authority of Thailand (TAT) was established and worked closely with capital groups in hotels, advertising, and the Thai national airline company to coordinate construction and investments. The TAT also promoted commercial sex as a complement to tourist attractions-- or indeed as *the* tourist attraction-- for male visitors to Thailand.” Once the imperial forces of the American troops had vacated the country, the Thai government stepped in to establish the security of the flow of

foreign capital that the country had been profiting off of from Western military tourism. The TAT began to promote Thailand as a space for Western sex tourism, and in order to do so it required that these advertisements of Thailand as a sexscape reinforce the ideas of Orientalism and the “exotic other” that justified the commodification of Thai women to the Western male consumer. While today, the TAT has reformed its advertising campaigns to focus more on promoting the natural resources of Thailand and the friendliness of the Thai people, its original involvement in promoting sex tourism contributed greatly to the reputation of Thailand as a sex tourist’s fantasy.

In order to successfully market Thailand as the ideal destination for commercial sex tourism, advertisements must not just construct the image of the exotic and erotic Thai woman, but it must also construct an image of imperial masculinity, or the tourist as the ideal representation of masculinity as defined within the context of patriarchy that is constructed under imperial relations. Hobbs, Pattalung, and Chandler give an example of this type of representation in advertising: “Phuket nightlife is portrayed as a patriarchal world where a man believes he can live his fantasy of being the perfect hegemonic male. After all, the websites we studied advertise that Thailand is the home of “the best sex encounter in the world” (*Thai Sex*). It is a land where the “girls are legendary” (*Thai Sex*) and the “bam bam” is so “great” that a man will feel more like a man than he has ever felt before (*Thai Girls*)” (99). Advertising must not only promote the commodity for sale, but also an image of the consumer as made better by the purchase of the commodity. In advertisements for commercial sex tourism the consumer must be

portrayed as adhering to Western ideals of masculinity, and in Western media discourse the message is that this can be obtained through sexual domination or conquest over the female counterpart. The message then through this advertisement is that sexual domination over Asian women is easily obtained, therefore empowering the consumer's self-image of masculinity. Messages of sexual domination within the postcolonial context of Western male tourist and Eastern female laborer then reinforce imperial masculinity.

Media representations of commercial sex in Thailand that aim to promote sex tourism must attempt to capitalize on differences of gender and race within the colonial relationship. These representations must reinforce the Western gaze upon the body of the Oriental woman. Pettman argues, "Particular representations of 'the Asian Women' circulate globally, reproducing racialised and gendered difference. Media images, tourist brochures and airline advertising such as the Singapore 'girl', or Thailand as the land of (young women's) smiles associate the Asian women with male adventure and female availability. These kinds of images are used to sell third-world tourism and make 'other' women available to the tourist/predatory sexed gaze" (*Worlding Women*, 105). She later continues, "They join the colonial/third-world scenery as unspoiled and natural resources, there for the taking" (195-196). The gendered difference in this context promotes adventure as a trait of masculinity and sexual availability for male consumption as a value of femaleness, as defined by the male gaze and imperial masculinity. As these messages have made their way into mainstream advertisement of Thai tourism, the Thai woman has been commodified as a natural resource of Thailand, available for the tourist's consumption, and sex

work becomes the stereotype of Thai women within the discourse of mainstream media.

Thai Cultural Institutions and the Reinforcement of Gender Roles

The relationship between Buddhism as a Thai cultural institution and sex work is multifaceted. Theravada Buddhism is an integral to both Thai politics and culture. While Thai citizens have the right to practice freedom of religion, the Thai King is required to be the “Supreme Patriarch of Buddhism,” or the keeper of Buddhism in the country. The teachings and practices of Theravada Buddhism promote and reinforce a patriarchal society in which women are inherently inferior to men. This creates circumstances by which sex work is not only enabled to exist and flourish but also becomes naturalized as part of women’s role in Thai society. Thai attitudes towards sex work are also heavily influenced by Buddhist teachings and practices as Buddhism reinforces the cultural acceptance or tolerance towards sex work that allows it to continue to exist on such a mass scale without proportionate amounts of protest by the Thai people or government.

Buddhism is patriarchal in nature beginning with the Lord Buddha’s teachings. In Theravada Buddhism, women are not allowed to be ordained into the *Sangha*, or community of monks, which is necessary to achieve the highest level of merit-making in order to reach enlightenment. Thang-Dam Truong explains, “Lord Buddha warned that if permission were given to women to leave the home and to enter the homeless state under Buddhist doctrine. Buddhism could stand fast for only five hundred years instead of two thousand years” (136). While pointing out

the importance of domestic work to the survival Buddhist society, Lord Buddha is at the same time assigning this labor role exclusively to women, therefore limiting them to the realm of the household. Because Buddhism's influence on Thai society as well as few other cultural factors, even today Thai women find themselves with few labor options outside of domestic labor. Sex work, however, is a relatively profitable option for women and offers them a chance to work outside the home.

It is taught in Theravada Buddhism that to be born a woman, as opposed to a man, is a result of imperfect *karma* (Truong, 135), therefore reinforcing women's inferior role in society. Good *karma* is necessary in achieving enlightenment, and so it carries a very powerful weight in Thai society. When it is taught that being a woman is a result of some measure of negative *karma* this causes not only men to devalue women but also women may internalize this and accept their role in society as inferior to men. Ordination into the *Sangha* is necessary to achieve enlightenment, and since women cannot be ordained a woman may spend her life attempting to earn good merit in order to be reborn as a man so that she has a chance of reaching enlightenment in the next life. In living one's life in hopes of being reborn a man, this internalized patriarchy is very harmful to women in understanding their own rights to equality and their own self-worth.

The understanding of women's bodies in Buddhism is that of sexual desire and childbearing, and therefore they are associated with nature. This is in comparison to men's existence as being that of logic and philosophic capability. This belief reinforces the gender binary that exists in Thailand. By categorizing women's bodies as the "natural" in comparison to men's as the "psychological" it once again

privileges men in achieving enlightenment as it is a mental state rather than a physical one. Arguably more importantly, it delegitimizes women's access to the realm of the intellectual within society, therefore working to exclude them from positions of power such as government or education. This is not to say that women do not have access to these spaces, but within them men still experience privilege. Not only are women not allowed to be ordained into the *Sangha*, but also due to the position of their bodies as promoting sexual desire, monks are not allowed to touch and in many cases even speak to women. However, women can earn merit by providing the monks with food as they make their morning rounds, and the highest level of merit that a woman can earn is by giving a son to the *Sangha*. These opportunities for merit-making once again reinforce women's roles as the domestic and the natural in regards to childbearing.

While Buddhism holds strong influence over ideologies of gender roles in Thailand, it also plays a role in the relatively non-condemning attitude towards sex workers in Thai culture. Truong explains:

“Prostitutes and courtesans are not degraded in Buddhist thought for there is no notion of sex as sin. Rather, there is the notion that sexual cravings are part of the world of ignorance. Therefore, the status of a prostitute is not considered as a result of sexual impurity, but karmic impurity. Just as all individuals can improve their *karma* through social acts, so too can prostitutes. However, the conditions for prostitutes to improve their karma remain within the dominant terms of Buddhist discourse, namely to

discontinue sexual relations, and to acquire the role of motherhood and reproduction” (137).

Since the act of sex itself is not considered a sin, it opens up Buddhist society to a more tolerating understanding of sex as labor. Sex workers also avoid condemnation, as they are still eligible for merit making by donating some of their earnings to the *Sangha*. Hobbs, Pattalung, and Chandler point out that perhaps because the *Sangha* receives considerable donations from commercial sex workers, Buddhist institutions in Thailand neglect to take a position on the commercial sex industry (82). Because sex workers are not denied opportunity to obtain good *karma* and Buddhist officials do not often publically denounce the commercial sex industry, it creates a space where commercial sex work is, if not culturally acceptable, but culturally tolerated without being demonized.

The only guideline of what constitutes sexual immorality as addressed by Lord Buddha was to engage in sex with another man’s wife. He never took a position on sex outside of marriage; therefore, an unmarried sex worker does not necessarily reduce her chances of merit making by participating in commercial sex (Steinfatt, 87.) Compared to many Western countries which are heavily influenced by Judeo-Christian ideologies, sex work and attitudes around sex in general are much more tolerant in Thailand largely because of the massive influence that Buddhism holds on the culture. This creates a relatively safe environment for sex tourists to participate in sex consumerism, assuming that they have travelled to Thailand from

a Western country where people may be more critical of association with commercial sex.

Buddhist and other Thai cultural ideologies create a safe environment for sex tourists to participate in commercial sex; however, they also create a space where commercial sex exists on a mass scale in catering to local customers as well. The local commercial sex industry has existed in Thailand for much longer than the industry that serves foreign men; however, the success of the sex tourism industry has had long term effects on the local industry. Bishop and Robinson explain, “The money and prestige that comes from international sex tourism, however, provides impetus for the local industry. In much the same way that the Thai pop music scene models itself on Western pop music and would probably not even exist without it, the local sex industry might be less pervasive if the international one were not omnipresent” (159). While the two industries provide the same services, they for the most part stay separate from one another. They operate in different spaces; the sex tourist industry operating out of go-go bars in central Bangkok and Pattaya, and the local commercial sex industry, taking place on the outskirts of Bangkok and in rural areas of the country in the form of brothels and massage parlors. While many Thai women see the sex tourism industry as an opportunity to make money and meet foreign men, it is in the brothels that cater to local men that sex trafficking and indentured servitude are commonplace (Steinfatt, 51.)

Laws and Policies Regarding the Regulation and Criminalization of Prostitution

Prostitution has a reputation for being the world's oldest profession, and Thailand is in no way exempt from this. Before King Rama V abolished slavery in Thailand in 1905, prostitution often took place in the slave market as women were bought as "slave wives" or "slave women." While the condition of earning money in return for sex work was situational for these "slave women," this formal market for sex trade laid the foundation for the growth of a commercial sex market in Thailand. After slavery was abolished in Thailand, many of these "slave wives" or "slave women" turned to sex work, as it was often an easy transition into wage labor.

Commercial sex remained legal in Thailand between 1905-1960; however, several laws were enacted in the government's attempt to better control the rapidly growing industry. In 1909 the government passed The Control and Prevention of Venereal Disease Act. The act was an attempt by the government to control the commercial sex industry through a series of licensing and fees that were required of sex workers in order to be registered, and therefore a legal worker. In order to obtain proper licensing, a sex worker must be free of venereal disease. The law also required that brothel owners obtain licensing through the government (Section A-1), that "no girls shall be forced to stay in business against her will" (Section A-4), and that no brothels must not confine a prostitute" (Section A-8 (c)) (Human Rights Watch, 1993, 21). While the law sought to prevent the spread of venereal disease and at the same time provide a small profit margin to the government through the use of licensing fees, it was not completely effective as it was not fully enforced, and many brothels and sex workers neglected to comply.

The Venereal Disease Act briefly addressed the issue of trafficking in stating that “the girls must be refuge subject to resettlement in third countries or repatriation”, however as human trafficking into the sex trade was increasing throughout Southeast Asia, the Thai government implemented the 1928 Anti-Trafficking Act. Human Rights Watch’s division Asia Rights Watch and the Women’s Rights Watch published a 1993 report titled “A Modern Form of Slavery Trafficking of Burmese Women and Girls Into Brothels in Thailand,” in which we are presented an explanation of the Anti-Trafficking Act;

“According to the Trafficking in Women and Girls Act (Anti-Trafficking Act), any person who brings women or girls into Thailand for the purpose of having sexual intercourse with other persons, and any person who is involved illegally in the trading of women or girls brought into the country for such purposes, will be liable to not more than seven years imprisonment or a fine of not more than 1,000 baht (\$40 in 1993 currency) or both” (21).

Under this law, the trafficking of [specifically] women and girls into the sex trade is criminalized and subject to penalization. Victims of human trafficking are exempt from punishment under the law; however, they are required to be sent to a state reform home for a minimum of thirty days (Human Rights Watch, 1993, 22). While under this law the Thai government acknowledges the lack of agency that women and girls have in participating in sex work, the mandatory sentencing to a

reform home is problematic in that it creates a situation where the women and girls are not able to have an income during that time period.

At the time that prostitution was legal in Thailand, the Anti-Trafficking act was very effective as sex workers who had been trafficked into the country and consensual sex workers were distinguishable. However, in 1960 the Thai government passed The Suppression of Prostitution Act, and in doing so blurred the lines between those engaging in sex work through their own agency and those who had been trafficked into sex work. Because of this, women who had been trafficked into the sex trade lost their legal immunity from imprisonment and fines.

The Suppression of Prostitution Act was passed in 1960, and is also known as the Anti-Prostitution Act. Under this law, all prostitution became criminalized in Thailand, whether the prostitute is participating in sex work consensually or is a victim of human trafficking. This meant that women and girls who were being forced or coerced into participating in sex work and had no choice in the matter, besides facing trauma, were additionally at risk of legal punishment, including imprisonment and fines. The law also punished those who profited off of commercial sex through facilitation in any way. However, these procurers of the commercial sex industry faced approximately half the punishment than that of the sex worker. Sex workers were subject to face up to six months of jail time and potential fines of up to 2,000 baht (approximately 80 USD at the time the law was enacted). Procurers faced imprisonment of up to three months and potential fines of up to 1,000 baht (\$40). Brothel owners were subject to up to one year in prison and up to 4,000 baht (\$160) in fines. While basis of the law was to criminalize

prostitution, it also attempted to reform prostitutes by providing medical treatment as well as vocational training. However the majority of vocational training provided by the government to sex workers is domestic work based, and therefore limits women to the realm of feminized labor, and in this form they have much less opportunity to earn wages compared to what they can earn in the commercial sex industry. The Suppression of Prostitution Act was passed under the rule of Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat under his Social Purification Campaign which he justified by claiming: “uncleanliness and social impropriety...led to the erosion of social orderliness” (Human Rights Watch, 1993, 22). While Sarit advocated his detestation of prostitution, he himself had purchased more than one hundred wives as “minor wives.”

The Suppression of Prostitution Act was highly problematic, not only in that it criminalized sex work, but it also faced criticisms by Thai women’s rights groups as being “weak, ill defined, and discriminatory.” The fact that the punishment for the procurers was less than that of the sex workers is highly problematic especially when issues such as human trafficking are at play. Under this section of the law, it undermines the Anti-Trafficking law in that while facilitating human trafficking is still illegal, it holds less of a criminal status than for those who are being trafficked and forced into sex work. Under the Suppression of Prostitution Act brothel owners are punished the most heavily; however, the law defines “places of prostitution” in a very vague manner, therefore making this section of the law the most difficult to enforce. Essentially the law is designed in a way that while criminalizing all who are

involved in the commercial sex industry, it targets the sex worker specifically. That is, it targets everyone involved with the exception of the customer.

Due to the conflicting nature of The Suppression of Prostitution Act with the interests of the American military during the Vietnam War, in 1966 The Entertainment Places Act was introduced. The object of The Entertainment Places Act was to regulate spaces where prostitution could be enabled, specifically businesses in which female workers attend to male customers. The law required that business owners obtain a license from the local police in order to operate. While prostitution had already been criminalized, police began to turn a blind eye to prostitution operating out of licensed businesses. This law gave local law enforcement a lot of power in that it enabled them to keep track of these businesses, mainly for the purposes of extorting money under the guise of requiring a license, rather than actually arresting sex workers. It also gave law enforcement an opportunity to legally extort money from unregistered businesses. Most importantly though, the introduction of The Entertainment Places Act created a situation in which it was legal to both run establishments that promoted commercial sex as well as to purchase sex, yet sex work was still illegal. This meant that every player in the commercial sex industry was immune from legal penalization, except for the sex worker. Simpkins explains the power dynamics created by this combination of laws: “In addition, the bureaucratic power of the TAT reinforced sex tourism by enabling leisure travellers from high-income economies to consume the sexual services of Thai women in well-organized style without any fear of criminal accusations. Thus, sex workers’ autonomy was weakened despite their increasing

importance in the Thai economy.” These laws decreased the agency of the sex workers even though they were crucial to the survival of the industry and the massive profitability of the industry by the Thai economy. The following year after The Entertainment Places Act was passed, the Thai government and the U.S. military made a deal in which troops on R&R would visit Thailand.

While some of these laws, such as the Anti-Trafficking Act, work to protect the sex worker from abusive situations, and some, such as the Prostitution Suppression Act, work to criminalize sex work, thereby making life much more difficult for the sex worker, it is the contradictions that exist among these laws as well as the failure by the Thai government to consistently and effectively enforce these laws that make the laws generally ineffective, which creates a situation where commercial sex is allowed to exist and flourish, yet the sex worker is left at risk due to being forced into work in an underground economy. Human Rights Watch explains the consequences of the legal contradictions; “As a result, inconsistencies and even contradictions emerged: the Penal Law [anti-rape legislation] severely penalizes persons who have sex with minors, the Anti-Prostitution law does not; the Anti-Trafficking law exempts women trafficked into prostitution from imprisonment or fines; the Anti-Prostitution law makes so such exemption; the Suppression of Prostitution Act penalizes prostitution, the Entertainment Places Act, at least indirectly, regulates and even taxes it” (27). While these inconsistencies made it difficult to control prostitution and trafficking, it is the Thai government’s negligence in enforcing these laws that allowed for the massive growth of both prostitution and human trafficking. This is primarily a result of both the promoting

and profiting of sex tourism, as well as the large demand for commercial sex by Thai locals.

Along with the Thai government's highly flawed execution of the laws in place, the tourism industry works with law enforcement to promote sex tourism as well. Steinfatt explains that a sex worker's identification card may be required to be held at the front desk of the hotel of the tourist during her visit, in order to ensure that she does not steal from her customer as well as to secure a side payment for the hotel by the customer for having an unregistered person in the room (not for providing a space for commercial sex) (67). The police also do not want to upset foreign tourists, and therefore do not make arrests of sex workers in foreign oriented bars, unless the bar owner has neglected to keep up with their payments as required under the Entertainment Places Act.

The status of sex work as being criminalized is very dangerous for sex workers for many reasons. Criminalization threatens sex workers' physical health as it limits their access to sexual health services, condoms, and harm reduction services, due to the inability to be honest about their sexual health history for legal reasons as well as the fact that criminal status of sex work creates negative stigmas about sex workers that in turn leads to discrimination. Criminalization can lead to increases in violence towards sex workers from both health care providers and law enforcement. It can also promote shaming, as well as the lowering of self-esteem of the sex workers, which reduces their ability and power to make informed decisions about their personal health. In turn they may be less likely to report sexual assault,

all of these factors leaving them powerless and at high risk of health problems, including high rates of HIV infection (Godwin).

Not only does criminalization decrease the amount of agency that a sex worker has within dealing with customers, but they lose agency in dealing with abuse from law enforcement. “Sexual assaults by police reinforce the powerlessness and marginalization of sex workers” (Godwin, 22). When sex workers face abuse by law enforcement they have no options in terms of seeking legal protection, and no outlets by which to report the abuse. They are less likely to seek health services as exposure is a threat, and even less likely to use protection as sexual education is not readily available, and even possession of condoms can be used as evidence against them. Godwin continues to explain that; “Reports from sex worker organizations show that where sex workers are regularly targeted for arrest and prosecution, sex workers are less likely to access health services. In some countries, health service providers and outreach workers are harassed or jailed when reaching out to sex workers (e.g. India, Indonesia, and Nepal) (p. 22). This is highly problematic as it contributes to the spread of HIV as well as other sexually transmitted infections, and also may leave sex workers untreated, causing the health issues to worsen.

Criminalization of sex work is also contradictory to the agenda of the Thai tourism industry. Even though sexual consumerism is not illegal, the lack of access to health care by sex workers puts sex tourists at risk for contracting STI's. As Pettman describes this issue, “AIDS itself is conspicuously a part of this international political economy of sex, demonstrating how permeable state borders and people's bodies are to certain kinds of international traffic” (*Worlding Women*, 203). Sex

tourism cannot be blamed for the global epidemic of HIV and AIDS; however, it has greatly contributed to high infection rates across sex workers and tourists alike. Decriminalization of sex work would be in the best interest of everyone who participates from commercial sex as well as those who profit off of it as it would increase access to sexual health education, services, and preventative measures.

Conditions for Consent: Human Trafficking vs. Consensual Sex Work

When it comes to discussing sex work, it is crucial to address the ways by which people become involved in this type of labor. Sex work becomes very complicated as the lines between work and slavery become blurred because when there is a commercial sex industry; space is created for human trafficking to exist. However, not all sex workers are victims of human trafficking and the assumption that they are, as often perpetuated by Western discourse around sex work, can be very harmful to the sex worker's livelihood and working conditions. While some women are empowered by sex work, it is also important to note that some women make the choice to work in commercial sex within the context of limited choices for survival. Human trafficking is a human rights violation, and therefore, needs to be treated as such. Determining the amount of agency that goes into one's decision to become a sex worker is absolutely situational; however, it is important to examine the cultural, political, and economic forces that contextualize this decision making process, or lack thereof.

Thailand's reputable sex tourism industry creates a highly profitable job market for young women willing to participate in sex work. There are considerable amounts of research that express the economic advantages presented to a woman if she chooses to participate in sex work in Thailand. In Steinfatt's extensive study on bar work in Thailand, he found that the top ten percent of bar workers who participated in the study, were among the top wage earners in Thailand, including jobs that require high levels of education (155). Simpkins explains that out of any job sector, sex work presents the opportunity for working class women to earn a wage between twenty to forty times more than what a man or a woman could earn doing factory labor. Enloe rationalizes that; "A woman working in a Bangkok massage parlor can earn an average of 5,000 baht per month; wages in non-entertainment jobs open to women average a paltry 840 baht per month" (36). While women in the sex tourism industry have opportunities to earn higher wages than in the local commercial sex industry, the disparity in wages between sex work and "non-entertainment" based labor opportunities for women in Thailand is massive. One of the reasons for this is that outside of sex work, other options for labor are still feminized, often forms of domestic work, and therefore are not as lucrative or appealing as to what men's labor opportunities may be.

While sex work within the sex tourism industry can be a very lucrative job, there are many reasons behind why women would choose, or be forced, into working in the industry. Large portions of the women who participate in sex work in cities such as Bangkok, Phuket, and Chiang Mai come from rural villages in the poorer provinces of Thailand. Sometimes a daughter chooses to move to the city

and participate in sex work because she feels that her parents have spent money in raising her and it is her responsibility to repay them (Sing and Hart, 160.) In Steinfatt's twelve-year study, in which he interviewed many Thai bar workers, he sought to find the ways by which these women became involved in sex work. He found that among those providing commercial sex to tourists, the majority of women became involved through a female friend or family member who was already involved in the industry. Reasons behind choosing to participate in sex work were vast. The opportunity to make lots of money was the driving factor in the majority of women's decisions to participate in sex work, for both reasons of being faced with economic hardship, or coming from backgrounds of poverty and needing to provide for oneself or their families, as well as for reasons of economic advantage, or those who simply sought a better economic position even if they were already living comfortably (Steinfatt, 53). Ability, or the perception that one was physically desirable and therefore highly profitable, was one of the reasons as to why women became involved. Sex work also provides an opportunity for women to meet men that they normally would not, such as Western men who are privileged in the sense that they have money. While it is generally the case that the man will purchase the woman's company for just one night, there is still the potential for it to lead to something more, even love or long-term monetary support. "Workers who like a customer will often push him early in the relationship, perhaps on the first or second date, to see, in quantitative monetary terms, exactly how much he likes them" (Steinfatt, 54). In this type of relationship money is always involved even if love does become a factor, as the woman depends on it for survival; however, there is the

possibility that should the man feel strongly for her, he may come back to visit, begin wiring her money even after he has left, and sometimes even choose to take care of her by moving to Thailand or taking her back to his home country. While this fantasy of possibility to a sex worker is completely within the patriarchal ideology of relying on a man to provide for the woman, the woman still retains some power as she is working to earn the money.

Women also claimed to participate in sex work because they felt that it was an exciting environment as opposed to other boring job options of current situations in which they were feeling boredom within their lives. This boredom spoken of in regards to other work opportunities for Thai women goes to show the unrest and the unfulfillment that women feel when participating in primarily domestic-related work options, as is the situation in Thailand. The excitement that women feel from participating in sex work may also speak to the sexual agency of the female, in that it gives her an opportunity to be empowered through her sexuality and the fact that it is powerful enough that she can use it for her survival.

Many of the deciding factors for participating in sex work as identified by Steinfatt's study suggest a strong sense of agency in the situation. However, it is important to contextualize this agency in attempt to understanding what degree of power the woman has in making this decision. Pettman explains, "There is a political economy of sex pushing many young women, and young men, into the cities and often into hospitality, entertainment and prostitution work. Their movement is shaped by relations of colonialism, development, urbanization, industrialization, the growing internationalization of state economies, indebtedness, and the

conditionality and structural-adjustment policies of IMF and World Bank propelled policies” (*Worlding Women*, 197). The context of Thailand as a major destination for sex tourists creates a space for a growing job market for participating in sex work. Thai women can take advantage of their social location within a major sex tourism hub and the Western male gaze that has been placed upon them as Orientalized and fetishized and work within this system to profit from it. However, it is important to acknowledge the factors leading up to the consideration of this decision that many women face, such as poverty, inability to find work, or needing to provide for a family. Simpkins explains that the majority of women working in the commercial sex industry come from rural areas of Thailand, which are far more impoverished than the sites where sex tourism is taking place, and that at least one in every one hundred working women in Thailand is a sex worker. These statistics show that poverty is undeniably an underlying reason for many women to participate in sex work, meaning that while some sex workers have used their agency to participate in sex work it is often the case that this consent has been given within the context of immobility within an increasingly globalized world.

Because commercial sex is illegal in Thailand and must operate within an underground economy, there is a lack of regulation, thus creating a space for other illegal activities, such as human trafficking. Human trafficking is a fundamental human rights violation, and since so many women and children are trafficked into the sex trade, sex work and human trafficking are often closely associated with one another. Human trafficking into the sex trade in Thailand primarily victimizes poor Burmese migrants and people from the Northern rural areas of Thailand, an area

that is primarily populated by hill tribe people, who are considered an ethnic minority. While the sex tourism industry relies on the differences constructed through the othering of Thai people and culture by Western tourists, it is through the othering of Thailand's own minorities and neighbors that human trafficking into the sex trade is conducted.

Apart from the fact that it is slavery, human trafficking of people into sex work causes innumerable problems for the victims as a consequence. Pettman describes the situation of vulnerability that women face being trafficked across borders. She writes; "Illegal, isolated and unsupported, they face police and military involvement in the trade and fear deportation. Other border crossings leave many women stranded in refugee camps, where disorder and the predatory behavior of guards and some other refugees combine with lack of access to basic resources, and force women into providing sex in return for food or 'protection' (Pittaway, 1991; Bhabha, 1993)" (p. 206). The position of trafficked women is incredibly dangerous, even after the point of being "rescued" or escaping their traffickers. Often women who have been trafficked across borders lack legal documentation, making it very hard to return home or find work. Often, the only type of undocumented work that they can find that can provide a wage or protection enough for survival is sex work. Also, the illegal crossing of the border in combination with the illegal status of sex work makes them twice as vulnerable to facing arrest.

Because of the trafficking problem of women and children into Thailand from neighboring countries, there is a large anti-trafficking movement in Thailand in response. This movement consists of international, national, and local NGOs (Singh

and Hart, 166). While it is incredibly important as a basic human rights issue to fight human trafficking, it is also crucial that these organizations go about it in a way that will be least detrimental to the victims as well as to workers who have not been trafficked into the commercial sex industry. When the entire sex work industry is lumped under the category of human trafficking, it can be incredibly harmful to sex workers, especially when it comes to executing rescue efforts.

One highly notable organization in Thailand that is fighting to gain and protect sex workers rights is called EMPOWER, which stands for “Education Means Protection Of Women Engaged in Recreation.” The group is administered completely by sex workers in the best interest of sex workers. Due to the misconception that the anti-trafficking movement was leading to that all sex work is non-consensual, EMPOWER officially pulled out of the anti-trafficking movement, after assessing the real life effects that the movement was having on sex workers. EMPOWER argued that in attempting to “save” women from prostitution; it could be consequential to returning them to even worse circumstances (Singh and Hart, p. 166). Some of the negative effects of rescue that EMPOWER Chiang Mai attempted to publicize included; imprisonment, loss of savings and belongings, continuous interrogation, no compensation for loss of work during detainment, families who depended on money from sex workers often being forced to borrow money for survival, imprisonment of sex worker causing panic and anxiety for family, a family’s village and soldiers causing problems for the family after they find out, families have to pay bribes to soldiers, sex workers facing abuse during imprisonment or by the military, sex workers facing unemployment once they return home, and potentially having to

find a way to get back into Thailand to find work (Singh and Hart, p. 166). While EMPOWER in no way advocates that involvement in sex work through human trafficking is not a problem, they are working to address the issue in a responsible and educated manner that will not make the situation worse for the individual sex worker or the status of sex workers in general.

In keeping with the ambitions of making life better for sex workers, EMPOWER offers many resources. They claim to recognize community needs of access to information and tools as well the need to combat discrimination and stigmatization of sex workers. The organization also promotes an HIV and AIDS information project, which they have made highly accessible and realistic to sex workers' occupational health situations, unlike many other medical care providers. The project includes a newsletter and a resource center that provides prevention information, as well as activities to help deal with fear and discrimination that is faced when living with HIV and AIDS. In addition to health education, EMPOWER also provides education in language (including English), law, labor, and human rights issues, as well as life skills training programs including banking, computers, leadership, and art as a means of opportunity for self-expression, self-confidence, and community awareness. The organization works to make sex workers issues visible to policy makers and wider society in a way that is comprehensible and will be made important. EMPOWER also serves as a resource for documentation of sex workers when the state will not, and additionally serves as sex workers' human rights defendants through counseling, awareness raising, and advocacy of human rights abuses through all aspects of sex work.

EMPOWER serves as an excellent role model in dealing with sex workers rights. The organization addresses the needs and issues faced by both those who willingly choose to participate in an industry that faces oppression, as well as those who are victims of being trafficked into the industry. It is important on both a local and state level that the Thai government and other institutions address sex workers rights in a way that helps all sex workers instead of working to criminalize them further, and on a global level that the fight against prostitution shifts its views from prostitution as a human rights violation to working towards fighting the institutions that promote human trafficking into the sex trade as well as gaining resources for sex workers in an attempt to create a situation that anyone working within the commercial sex industry is there because they choose to be.

The criminalization of sex work is harmful to everyone who is involved, especially in juxtaposition with the decriminalized status of those consuming sex as well as operating spaces that promote commercial sex, and within the institutionalization that is the sex tourism industry in Thailand.

Conclusion

Thailand's sex tourism industry would not be able to exist to the powerful extent that it does without each of the complex factors that have been addressed in this project. Each plays a very important contributing role either laying the foundation for this situation to come to existence or in reinforcing the survival of the industry. While media representations, cultural and political attitudes, and historical context are all necessary components of the sex tourism industry, it is the conditions

that have been created in Southeast Asia by Western imperialism that have led to dependence on a global market economy and, therefore, situations of poverty that have led to Thailand's reliance on its tourism industry as one of its main sources of gaining foreign capital and its survival within the globalized world. It is only within this context that the patriarchal Western gaze is laid upon Thai women, offering them the "choice" of capitalizing off of these colonial ideologies and societal structures or risk being left vulnerable to the irrefutable forces of Western imperialism and the conditions that it has created within Thai society.

Through analyzing the multifaceted conditions by which the sex tourism industry in Thailand has been enabled to exist and prosper to a reputable state, it is evident that the sex tourism industry exists due to Western colonialism and imperialism as well as forces of globalization. Thailand has become a space where sex tourism has been enabled to flourish due to Thai law enforcement policies and practices that work in turn with the tourism industry to create a safe space for the tourist and facilitators of sex work to operate. While Thai women who work in the sex tourism industry tend to have some position of autonomy, it is important to now consider the ways in which their working conditions could be made safer and more regulated as to prevent exploitation and occupational health consequences. We also must question the patriarchal cultural structures that create a situation where sex work is the best option for labor, as made evident by the sheer number of women involved, in order to ensure that every sex worker participates in commercial sex because that's where she chooses to be.

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