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## Incentives for Bangkok Sex Workers in Conservative Buddhist Thailand

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### Abstract

This study is a qualitative analysis that examines the incentives for Bangkok sex workers to engage farang (foreign tourists) in Thailand. A total of 86 informants were divided into focus group discussions of 5-7 persons per group. Each sex worker (informant) must have lived continuously in Bangkok for at least 10 years. No underaged sex workers participated in the research. The Principal Investigator (PI) made use of non-participant observation along three main themes: (1) why, how, and for how long have they been in the industry; (2) what motivates them to remain in the industry, especially since there are no sex workers' rights in Thailand; and (3) what they think about the idea of being in an industry where body-shaming might ride roughshod in Thailand's conservative Buddhist culture. No names were taken but each was carefully briefed by a local Thai interpreter, and all had to give the PI and his research team permission to conduct the study. Five main incentives were deduced: (i) to have intimate interactions with farang vs. local Thai men; (ii) the sex workers' revealed a preference for farang clients who were willing to pay much more; (iii) the perception by both sex workers and clients that sex work and sex tourism was mainly recreational; (iv) a general lack of awareness of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD); (v) the industry was about providing a better life for their families. These incentives represent the group and individual motivations for receiving money in exchange for sexual pleasure.

**Keywords:** Thailand, Sex workers, Farang sex tourists, Qualitative analysis, Attitudinal surveys

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### 1. Introduction

The sex industry in Thailand is estimated to generate US\$6.4 bn a year and has between 200,000 to 300,000 women ([Washington Post, 2014](#)); US\$7 bn and 1,000,000 male and female sex workers ([Rappa, 2017](#)). Some scholars estimate that over 60% of sex clients are male, including farang sex tourists from Thailand, Singapore, Australia, and China. The rest of the sex tourists come from Southeast Asia, Japan, Korea ([Bishop and Robinson, 1999](#)). The other main source are Arab Muslims from the Middle East as anal sex is an Arab tradition ([Dialmy and Allon, 2005](#)). Only a small minority of ladyboys or transgender men cater to the Indians, Indian Muslims,

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Malay Muslims, and Arabs (Rappa, 2008; Peletz, 2006; Teh, 1998; Bacchetta, 1999; Dalacoura, 2014; Sweet, and Zwilling, 1993).

Tourism is more than a US\$3.8 to US\$4.2 bn a year business in Thailand, with 70-90% of the travellers being male and traveling alone. The sex industry has surpassed rice exports and become an essential economic pillar of Thailand. In this way, sex tourism has become a means of survival for many Thais (Podhisita *et al.*, 1994; Bishop and Robinson, 1999; Fumihiko, 2006) and tragically includes Child-Sex Tourists in Thailand (Montgomery, 2008).

The women who work in the sex industry in Thailand are often trafficked or forced into sex work through deceit by a parent or close relative, poverty or peers (Rappa, 2017). One of the informants also said that many of her client's (she refers to them as johns) were local and farang married men. She said that Thai women expected men to have "girlfriends" in Thai society or they were thought to be less than a man or gay "i.e. homosexual" (Dalacoura, 2014).

## 2. Method

The method used by the Principal Investigator (PI) involved the standard social scientific application of non-participant observation (NPO). There was also no breach of any ethical agreement by any parties including the participants. The surveys were based on much earlier fieldwork and local knowledge since 1987 but focussed on two main time periods – January 1, 2022 to January 28, 2022 and again from April 1, 2022 to April 29, 2022. The surveys took place in Bangkok, Pattaya, and Chiang Mai, Thailand. They were not held at the usually sites the farang clients pay custom at such as Pattaya Beach; as well as various entertainment outlets massage in Chiangmai; Nana Plaza and Sukhumvit Road Soi 3 to Soi 33 in Krung Thep Maha Nakorn (Bangkok). No inducements were provided to get to the truth, except for some light refreshments, simple lunches or simple dinners. The focus group discussions were held at local 4- star hotels with a minimum of two research assistants per group of 5-7 participants; one local Standard Thai Language (STL) interpreter and one scribe.

## 3. The Fulfilment of Masculine Conservative Roles

Masculinity is about egotism at many levels, therefore, in order to fulfil their masculine desires, women become the soft targets for their sexual, physical and emotional abuse. However, in public view, most local men in Bangkok, Pattaya, and Chiangmai do not show any form of affection for their wives, girlfriends, or *giks* (friends with benefits). Women are not allowed to touch monks and vice-versa. Conservative men are also in the local majority and most Thai men maintain steady, long-term committed relationships with their wife or wives. Although polygamy and bigamy are illegal in the Kingdom, the authorities close a blind eye to this as many political leaders, police officers, army generals and even the current King (Rama X) have had many wives.

## 4. White Fantasy

As Yamamoto and others have noted (Yamamoto, 2000) the white fantasy about Asian women cuts across the American landscape through film, movies [and now social platforms of the Internet]. It is what Len Ang refers to as the curse of the Asian woman's smile (Ang, 1996).

It is in effect a long-held and a basic premise among women sex workers in Thailand to be the "dream girl of her client for as long as possible" at least until the money runs out. Or at least to convey this prized achievement through her movements, her smile, her sexual technique. As Montgomery (2008), Thompson *et al.* (2016)

Thompson *et al.* (2016) and other scholars have shown in the past, sex work involves very young Thai girls and boys to the very old ones and their families are often complicit in these nefarious activities where demand is always present in white western countries. Symbolically, many farang men dream of having an exotic Thai girl or teen as his girlfriend or wife. This is because the farang most often is fat, obese and obnoxious looking and cannot get a girlfriend or a wife in his own farang country. Interestingly, these sex clients or perverts, they complain that farang women are too manly, masculine, borderline butches, or simply too fat for their taste. Both sides have their reasons and the men and some women end up lurking the streets of Bangkok, Pattaya, and Chiangmai. This leads us to the notion of the exotification of Asian women. These are the bases of the White Man as the master and conquering hero, notions of supremacy and dominance over alluring young,

fertile, and promiscuous Asian women of the South Pacific; which for the South Pacific and Asian woman was a "coming of age" ritual, a symbol of female attainment of maturity (Mead, 1925; Mura, 2005).

## 5. Exotification of the Asian Woman

The exotification of Asian women began well before Thailand was used as a place for Rest and Recreation (R&R) during the Korean War and Vietnam War (Rappa, 2006; 2011). Hence the iconic notion of Susie Q, Jim Morrison and Jimmi Hendrix and the entire votive of American music industry with its supporting cast of brilliant drug-induced rock music (Ang, 2006). Exotic is something not found anywhere else. Submissive, compliant, obedient, silent, and smiling. the idea of Asian women as "exotic" and "erotic" is a incentive to visit Thailand. The "exotification of Thai women" is a balance of power relationship tilted towards male pleasures and female submission. They have to keep pleasing their *farang* (foreign) male clients or receive a severe beating from their pimps (souteneur).

## 6. Research Findings

A total of five main research findings were arrived at from the attitudinal social scientific surveys and focus group surveys (FGS). These are: (a) length of each worker in the entertainment business; (b) in spite of the lack of human rights' protection and the illegality of sex work in Thailand there continued to be a continuous entertainment business day and night with the sex workers bearing the most health and civil rights risks; followed by the *farang* (foreigner) and the local Thai and *farang* pimps (souteneur); and (c) the lack of personal shame and embarrassment for those in the sex work industry (d) there was a clear preference among sex workers for *farang* (foreigners) who were willing to pay much more for prostitutes; and, (e) the participants were not concerned about contracting venereal diseases including AIDS.

## 7. Discussion

The data shows that *farang* men deliberately travel to Thailand for sex; and most often with sex workers. This is because "a john does not pay the woman sex worker to stay in his room; he pays her to leave" (Rappa, 2015-2016; 2022). *Farang* men have huge spending power, and are like two-week millionaires who find Thai women sex workers cheap and easy. Unlike the *farang* sex workers at home who are protected by human rights. Thai sex workers, both male and female, young and old are virtual slaves to their brothels and have no rights. No human rights either. Because of the 1% of the Thai elite and the king who own 99% of the land and wealth, there continues to be great and widespread poverty in the Kingdom, and not only in the rural northeast or in Isaan. As a result, there is always a fresh and continuous supply of young women and men in the Thai sex industry. The sex workers get into the trade because of such aforesaid poverty. They also get into the trade because they are lazy and do not wish to work in an office or in the hot tropical sun planting *padi*. Besides, when they are working in the sex trade far away from their homes and villages, no one tells them what to do. There is a lot of peer pressure to join the sex industry because of the capitalist wealth that women sex workers returning to their *Tambon* display. They display expensive bags, shoes and dresses. "Exclusivity is always promised to the johns but the moment the *farang* is away, the sex worker is with another customer. She can have several sources of wealth. This is known as exploiting different streams of wealth. Therefore it is not whether she is yours but whether it is your time yet" (Rappa, 2022). Some leave the sex trade if they can find a wealthy *farang* "ATM" to support them. Many of these *farang* ATMs eventually lose everything after a few years. This is because the lawyers, judges and courts in Thailand tend to fall on the side of the locals. And of course, there is corruption and bribery (Rappa, 2022). All Thai women too desire to have the ideal partner and like their counterparts all over the world, this is not always forthcoming so they search for alternatives every day. Women sex workers are the fantasy of many or most *farang* men from France, Australia, Germany, Japan, and the UK. But women sex workers also have reported in our focus groups that they derive pleasure from having sex with *farang*, and or local men. They derive sexual satisfaction as a means of escaping their own misery, poverty and hardship. Many *farang* men quickly fall in love with their exotic bar girls, teen schoolgirls and mostly the female sex workers. The sex act of the sex worker itself is both highly anticipated and desired (Rappa, 2022). Bar girls are not always paid for in cash, except for the "bar fine" and the watered-down "ladies drinks" but also in kind such as clothing, shoes, accessories, watches, and holidays. The better these bar girls and sex workers are at seducing men, the more cash and kind they get including overseas travel and exotic cars and as it was reported in the local press, a yacht and a condo. The exotification of Asian women aside, the *farang* men also often get a run for their money. "As long as you have money, you have the honey, as a local girl

quipped in STL recently" (Rappa, 2022). Or as Davis Brazil titled his book on Singapore *social escorts, No Money, No Honey: A Candid Look at Sex-for-sale* in Singapore. Only the accent is different. Everything else is the same (Rappa, 2021). Time passes very quickly when you have money in Bangkok or Pattaya, said a group of farang men from various Australian cities. "When you have no more money or when you cease to be an ATM, then time passes very, very slowly" (Rappa, 2022). In spite of this, at least 37,000 Australian male sex tourists descend on the brothels of Bangkok everyday (Rappa, 2017). It is just a matter of when your time is up.

## 8. Conclusion

The attitudinal surveys proved a timely update to the existing literature as most Asian scholars do not appear willing to research and publish such issues. This is especially critical in Thailand because prostitution is illegal and there are no workers' rights, human rights or union rights for those in the sex work entertainment industry. I conclude from my focus group survey (FGS) interviews that many young Thai girls and boys are "sold into sex work" by their own relatives and parents because of poverty. Some are duped by middlemen who deceive these youths into thinking that they will get high pay in the big cities when in fact they will not get a lot of money. Many of these are forced into the sex trade by the scouts of the entertainment business. The multi-billion US\$ industry is often bankrolled by corrupt military officers and police officers. Therefore, I conclude that sex work in Thailand is incentivized and motivated by various factors: (1) the kingdom's deep historical roots dating back to the Korean and Vietnam Wars. And that sex work and sexual slavery was part of Siamese culture dating back over 700 years or 7 centuries; (2) extreme poverty drives many of the 68 million Thai people to sex work; (3) (4) systemic corruption among the senior police officers and senior military officers lubricates the sex work industry; (5) the profits from sex work are very high in this "low risk, high reward" industry and that is why the corrupt officials often have a hand in ensuring the business continues to thrive; (6) the huge "return on investments" (ROI) motivates the wealthiest Thai business persons to create front businesses to protect their ill-gotten gains in order to send their children overseas for luxury holidays and to study in America and Europe; and, (7) a general lack of respect for international human rights for underaged children conventions as well as a lack of police enforcement in spite of the illegality of sex work in Thailand.

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