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The World of Thai Prostitution: Its Influences, Illegality, and How it Affects Stakeholders

Daniella Keene

ABSTRACT

I will be diving into the sex industry of Thailand and how it affects business owners, workers, and officials, both socially and economically. This paper will work to uncover how influences from multiple sources, including Thailand's history, religion, cultural values, and legal system, impact how the sex industry is executed. Furthermore, I will be focusing on how they both benefit and suffer from the illegality of the industry.

LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH

Due to the nature of this topic, there were some research limitations. Sex work and topics revolving around it tend to be quite taboo in Thailand. This creates some tension, awkwardness, and a range of emotions when discussing. Individuals may feel shameful about their profession and would rather not discuss their experiences. This limits research, especially government-funded research, when even officials themselves do not want to talk about it or cause any conflicts.

...governments have found it exceedingly difficult to tackle the problems, in large measure because of the sensitivity and complexity of the issues involved and the range of circumstances of those working in the sex sector. The sex sector is not recognized as an economic sector in official statistics, development plans or government budgets. It has only been in recent years that some aspects of the commercial sex sector, in particular child prostitution and sex-related tourism, have attracted large-scale attention and prompted public discussion and national and international action. (Lim, 1998, p. 1)

Another barrier is the complexity of Thai language, and how sometimes meanings and words can be lost in translation. Translations of interviews and books may be slightly off, as well as native Thai speakers having trouble finding the correct English word or phrase to describe their feelings or thoughts.

There are also cultural differences between Canada and Thailand, so interpretation may vary. For example, Thailand has an indirect communication style, so a Westerner may misread their intentions or meaning. Furthermore, it may be difficult for many sex workers to talk about their experiences due to the directness of interviews and the topic, and may not want to share too much. "Keeping the harmony" and not causing conflict is a Thai value, so subjects may avoid confrontation about personal questions, avoid interviews, or may lie about answers in order to keep the conversation going, without having to say no to a question.

INTRODUCTION

The sex industry in Thailand is one of the most famous in the world. This industry is interesting – it is simultaneously illegal and looked down upon, yet is condoned, celebrated, and utilized by millions of people every year. Under the "Prevention and Suppression Act B.E. 2539 (1996)", prostitution, prostitution establishments, and anyone who

owns or manages a venue or prostitute are illegal (“Prevention and Suppression,” n.d., section 4, 5, 11). Being an illegal industry, you would think it would not be a popular business venture. This is not the case in Thailand.

Prostitution is illegal, but it is easy to evade the law. Bribery and pay-offs put money into the pockets of police officials, while prostitution provides an income for workers and businesses, all while contributing greatly to Thailand’s GDP.

In the last three to four decades, prostitution has undergone dramatic changes in some Southeast Asian countries. The scale of prostitution has been enlarged into the economic, social and political life of these countries. The sex business has assumed the dimensions of an industry and has directly or indirectly contributed in no small measure to employment, national income and economic growth. The organizational structures and relations within the sex sector have become very diversified and complex. They involve a growing number of vested and powerful interests and network of dependencies. (Lim, p. 1)

No matter how many times Thai officials deny the power of the sex industry, it is without a doubt one of the top contributors to Thailand’s GDP, and has a massive presence in the country, for both locals and foreigners. It can be argued in a multitude of ways - whether the sex industry promotes sexual freedom for those involved, or if it is simply exploitation and traps vulnerable individuals. Furthermore, a question that can be asked is: how are stakeholders, meaning sex workers, business owners, and Thai police, impacted economically and mentally by prostitution, and how does the illegality of it impact them further?

DEMOGRAPHICS

Today there is an estimated number of 250 000 prostitutes in Thailand (“Prostitution Statistics”, n.d.), although this number is solely an estimate that may be grossly off, due to prostitution’s undercover and illegal premise. Since the sex industry is illegal in Thailand, sex workers cannot register with the government, and many hide their profession, therefore it is impossible to know truly how many sex workers there are. Sex workers are made up of cis-gendered women and men and well as trans people. It proved difficult to find the percentage breakdown between male and female sex workers, as well as the number of transgender workers. To give a number, it is estimated that there is a 6:1000 ratio of transgender females (male-to-female transitioned) to cis-gendered males in Thailand (Yadegardfard, Meinhold-Bergmann, & Ho, 2014, p. 348). Many transgender females are referred to as “ladyboys” and make up the majority of Thai transgender sex workers. Although there is some demographic information available regarding Thai sex workers, it is limited due to the hidden nature and illegality of the sex industry.

Although prominent and important to be aware of, I will not be touching on the subject of child prostitution in Thailand, as almost 100% of the time the children are forced into the industry and have no choice. This paper discusses workers who both voluntarily and involuntarily join the sex industry, and since child exploitation is done, by nature, involuntarily, it will not be included in this discussion.

HISTORY OF PROSTITUTION IN THAILAND

Prostitution in Thailand stems from hundred of years ago in the 14th century Ayutthaya period. Origins can be broken down with first the position of women in Thai society, and then the societal structures. In this period, many women were still slaves and did not have the same rights as men. The political system was broken down into two sections – high class and low class, i.e. the royals versus the commoners. The royals offered the commoners protection if they served them whenever asked, meaning men would often leave home in order to fulfill their duties. While gone, the idea of “temporary wives” began. Prostitution itself was not established yet, but these

temporary wives acted both as a servant for a man and also for what they would typically do with their wife, i.e. sexual acts, for the time they were stationed in different towns. When prostitution began, it was legal in the 1300s to 1700s, but women were still the property of men. Polygamy was legal all the way up to the 1930s, and before that men had multiple wives ranging from one for the purpose of child-bearing, to slave ones for the purpose of sexual relief. Having multiple wives became a social norm in Thailand. When polygamy became illegal, the Thai sex industry was a huge resource for men looking to fulfill the benefits polygamy allowed them (Reyes, 2015).

Relating, slavery was abolished in 1905, so prostitution was a job option for former slave women - many chose the path solely to survive. There was little choice for the uneducated, so selling their bodies was one of their only options. There were many influxes of prostitution use in Thailand, including huge increases during World War II. When Japanese military occupied Thailand, the Japanese utilized the sex industry massively (Reyes). Moreover, Americans participating in the Vietnam War would use their weeks of "Rest and Relaxation" in Thailand and use sex services repeatedly. Because of this influx, the sex industry grew massively, with more and more brothels, sex parlours, and bars popping up everywhere. The well-known sex-capital of Thailand, Pattaya, was originally a relaxed beautiful fishing village, which attracted many soldiers. Wherever the soldiers went, they wanted sex services, thus, bringing prostitutes and business owners to set up camp. There was rapid growth of resorts between 1968 and 1973, constructed from agreements between Thai businessmen and the U.S. military to secure their occupancy. Trade collapsed in 1975, and the occupancy of the resorts dropped rapidly. Trying not to be defeated, the businessmen hired workers to promote the resorts and paint the picture of Pattaya as a beautiful vacation town. Soon enough, their efforts worked out, and by 1981, Pattaya was booming once again (Montague, 1989, pp. 10-11). Naturally, the reputation of Pattaya being a sex-town spread like wildfire and brought in many male tourists, contributing to the sex tourism industry Thailand has today.

PROSTITUTION AND BUDDHISM

In Thailand, Buddhism is practiced by almost 94% of the population (Hayes, 2008), although, there is a paradox between the massive popularity of prostitution and the role of Buddhism in Thai culture.

...the crucial question is what role Buddhism played to define women's status and position and how sexual society and the very question of prostitution have been treated by Buddhist philosophy. The subordination of women comes through the epigraphic and documentary sources and Buddhism sanctioned this subordination too. Buddhism structured the world in such a way that karma the physical, verbal and cognitive actions of past lives – and the accrual or loss of merit in consequence of those actions conditioned the differences between any two individuals in social status, talent, wealth and power. Karma also considered gender. To be a woman and not a man meant that a woman had an inadequate store of merit, and the only way to remedy this situation was for a woman to make merit through acts of religious devotion (Ghosh, 1998, p. 876).

Due to the inequality of women in Thai Buddhist culture, there is always a contradiction, one could call it a double-edged sword. Women are seen as subordinates and should do all to please their husbands and men, but at the same time, are punished for being sexual beings. Moreover, celibacy is considered a goal that many Buddhists should achieve, yet the sex trade industry in Thailand is arguably one of the largest in the world. 75% of Thai men have engaged in paid sexual services at least once (see Figure 1). Prostitution is seen as an acceptable part of Thai men's culture, so the topic can often be conflicting. Furthermore, women are expected to "pay off merits" according to Buddhism. It is considered that the women owe their family, and paying them off with money is one of the ways to repay them. Many earn the money through prostitution, as it is some women's only option, and then send the money back to their family.

CULTURAL FACTORS – HOFSTEDE MODEL

Hofstede's cultural dimensions (see Figure 2) describe a country's cultural values and attitudes and how those can influence behaviour. Some of these dimensions have notable influence on Thai society's behaviour towards the sex industry.

Power Distance

Power distance can be described as the distance between lower and higher classes and how prominent the gap is, specifically, "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" ("Country Comparison," n.d.). It is engrained in Thai culture that there should be a power distance between members. This can mentally promote classism and sexism that often remains unquestioned. Power distance between clients and workers can sometimes be dangerous, as it promotes the message that the client has control over the situation, as they are the more powerful individual. This can be the same case for managers or owners of prostitution venues and their respected employees, as well as police and officials engaging with workers and business owners.

Individualism

Thailand's low score for individualism pressures members of society to conform to social norms and to look out for the collective whole rather than the individual. For example, Prae, the Thai sex worker I interviewed, felt it was her duty to provide for her family and also felt immense pressure to do so (see Figure 3). Similarly, family loyalty and respect is high priority, so engaging in acts that bring shame to family members is highly offensive ("Country Comparison"). For many families, sex work is something that can disrupt the group, so workers will keep their profession a secret in order to "save face" and not draw attention to themselves or their family.

Long Term Orientation

Thailand has a low score on long term orientation meaning they value tradition and norms and do not welcome societal change easily ("Country Comparisons"). This low score points to how traditionalist Thai people are often against family members working in the sex industry. Sex workers are profiled and discriminated against in many cultures, and the movement towards sexual freedom and liberation that often accompanies sex work is denied by normative Thai people. Although, after speaking with some young Thai students, the attitude may be slowly changing as younger generations become more liberal towards the topic.

MENTAL EFFECTS OF PROSTITUTION IN SEX WORKERS

The range of mental effects on sex workers greatly depends on a variety of factors such as work conditions, health status, income, and how they got started in the sex industry. For example, if a sex worker was forced into the industry, or are working as part of a debt bondage, it is much more likely for them to suffer from mental health issues. Some prostitutes are forced to sleep with as many men as possible per night, which can wreak havoc on both physical and mental health. With awful working conditions, long hours, risk of sexual disease and infection, and looming anxiety over who they owe money to, it is easy to understand why many sex workers have an unhealthy mental state. Many women are brought over from neighboring countries and promised a job, but in reality, they arrive in Thailand and are told they must now pay off the debt of the travel through prostitution. Some migrants may be told a specific number, but even if they think they have earned enough for repayment, the end of their sex career is not in sight.

In order to cope with these dark times, women often begin to abuse drugs or alcohol, further worsening health conditions. Liza, a former sex worker, states she once was forced to strip on stage even though that night she

suffered massive bleeding from a miscarriage. Furthermore, she quotes, “that night there was a Chinese businessman at the club. He was a friend of the owner and told him that he wanted me to be his girlfriend – exclusive to him. I was brought to his apartment and handcuffed to a chair. He made me his sex slave” (Lewis, 2011, para. 7). To imagine this horror is terrible in itself. To be subjected to the level of inhumanness being a sex slave brings, it is something that can be irrecoverable from. Similarly, rape is common in the sex industry, as sex workers will often put limits on what they are willing to do with a customer, but there are cases where the customer denies the worker’s request and rape occurs. Even worse, because prostitution is illegal, there are few services to help a worker recover and heal from this.

Sex workers who experienced violence find that if they report any crime, even very violent crimes like rape, they are threatened with arrest on prostitution charges and frequently turned away from the police station. They also find that they struggle to have complaints taken seriously as well. Unable to seek help from police and local authorities for fear of being prosecuted or unfairly judged due to stigmatization, sex workers have to tolerate these abuses which also make them vulnerable to STI/HIV (“Joint UPC Submission,” n.d., p. 2).

This is the case for Thai-born workers, and those who are undocumented face an even tougher situation – if they face the police, they risk deportation or being arrested.

Psychological effects from the taboo of sex work are also prominent. It is a very controversial subject in Thailand and most of the world, so it can be a difficult topic to discuss. Many workers will keep their work a secret in fear of judgment from friends, family, and society. Keeping large secrets like this can cause major anxiety and interfere with daily life. On the other hand, allowing others to know of their profession can be judged extremely harshly and bring shame upon the individual. The individual may be ousted to the public, become an outcast in their social group, or made fun of by others. Physical abuse may happen in some cases, as family members “slut shame” them or believe they are bringing disgrace to their family. This kind of attitude towards sex work promotes the isolation of workers and diminishes their dignity. When one faces massive belittlement and degradation, negative feelings and thoughts can take over.

Relating, Thai “ladyboys” may experience worse mental health than cis-gendered workers. Even though transgender females may seem to be more accepted in Thailand than other countries, it is mostly the large cities that accept them. Having to hide their identities from their families or hometowns can be exhausting. It is also more likely for transgender women to face abuse, rape, violence, and hate speech than others (Togetherness For Equality & The Working Group for Gender Equality, Rights and Freedom Thailand, 2017, Substantive Violations of the Convention section). Moreover, it is less likely for them to report the abuse due to the untrustworthiness of police and government, who often take part in the abuse themselves.

Although negative experiences in prostitution is common, sex work can be liberating and positive for some. Asian Correspondent speaks with a transgender sex worker, Aris Sangkharom, on the topic of prostitution and her feelings about it.

Sangkharom wasn’t always a sex worker, nor did she ever envision herself as one. But, her prior employment — competing in lady boy contests in Isaan, a region in Northeastern Thailand — wasn’t a stable source of income. In search of economic opportunity, Sangkharom moved from her home in Isaan to Bangkok. After briefly working at a bar in Nana Plaza — one of Bangkok’s notorious red light districts — she relocated to Pattaya after her friends invited her to work at Club 131, a go-go bar that recently opened in the area. Sangkharom, who has been working in the sex industry for about 10 years, speaks with pride when she talks about her occupation. Not only does sex work allow her to be economically self-sufficient, but, as someone with an exuberant personality, it also provides her with the freedom she desires. “I like sex work

because... it makes me feel good," she said. "I can choose [the man]. It's up to me. I can do my way. I can dance and have music, drinking [and] relax." (Boccagno, 2015, para. 6).

Sex work is not just having sex with clients. It can include dancing, stripping, massages, or taking part in conversation. Some may find friendship with clients or romantic relationships. Some workers are able to choose their limits in how far they will go with a customer, and genuine fun can occur. As shown, sex work can be liberating, fun, and enjoyable for those who choose to take part in the industry. Many feel they have control over their sexuality, can express themselves freely, and get paid much better money than other job opportunities.

ECONOMIC EFFECTS

"Tourists don't come to Thailand for such a thing. They come here for our beautiful culture" (Tanakasempipat, 2016, para. 6), says Kobkarn Wattanavrangkul, the former tourism minister of Thailand, on sex work. This is clearly untrue, considering the massive revenue sex work brings in for Thailand every year. Thailand receives over \$6.4 billion in revenue from sex work each year, and has over 26 million tourists each year, with around 70% suspected to come to the nation to engage in the sex trade, also known as "sex tourists" (Lines, 2015, p. 89).

Bars, restaurants, and clubs who integrate sex work into their business plan can make immensely more than their counterparts. Pretty girls lure tourists and locals into the venues, and then can make money through sexual services they offer.

Sex workers often start in the business because it is a way to make the most money, compared to the few other options they have. It is a way out of poverty for many women, especially those from northern Thailand. Many sex workers come from no education, so sex work gives them a chance to get their feet off the ground, provide for their family, and survive. Even if a worker is not from poverty, it is an appealing profession for many due to its often high pay-off, with the average encounter starting between 1000 – 2000 baht (\$40-\$80 CAD) (personal communications, November 22, 2018).

Sex work also stirs up economies near brothels, massage parlours, go-go bars, etc. as people flock to famous alleys such as Khao San Road, Soi Cowboy, and Pattaya Walking Street, to see the infamous bars and workers, and as a result, other businesses reap the benefits as well. To shut down the sex industry would put thousands out of a job, lower Thailand's GDP, and also decrease tourism. Unless the government was able to provide resources and alternative jobs for sex workers, it would put many of them back on the street or into poverty.

ILLEGALITY OF SEX WORK

Prostitution is illegal in Thailand, but the stakeholders involved – sex workers, establishment owners and managers, and police – are impacted both positively and negatively from the illegality of it.

Benefits

For sex workers, there are multiple benefits of working illegally that often outweigh the fear of consequence. First, anyone from any country can work in Thailand as a sex worker, even if they are an illegal immigrant. There are no background checks and as long as they make it into Thailand, they may start working. Sex workers are not required to register with the government, meaning they may keep their profession a secret if they want to. Many sex workers feel ashamed about their work, so maintaining secrecy is the number one priority for most. Needing to register would ruin many lives, bring shame to themselves, leading to leaving the industry and no longer having a reliable income. Relating, if someone is an illegal immigrant, not having to register allows them to work "under-the-table" without getting caught. There are no regulations for hours or working time either, so they can work as often they

like. Workers are also paid in cash, so they do not get tax cuts for their paychecks. Moreover, although not ethical, by not being bound by typical business laws and norms, they can easily scam tourists without risk of being fired, especially if they are self-employed and not working for a company. Legalization of prostitution can be seen as taking away the freedom it gives workers. Many see the work as liberating and having no boundaries, where legalization would set strict regulations and rules.

For businesses, there are also many benefits of sex work being illegal. For example, without workers' rights, businesses do not have to provide any benefits – insurance or vacation pay, to perks such as lunch breaks, staff rooms, and so-on. As immoral as it may be, this cuts down costs immensely. Owners and managers may hire and fire workers as often as they please, without any reasons needed. No matter how bad the working conditions are, workers cannot sue the business or take legal action. Many owners pressure girls to go far with their clients, and if they oblige, they may cut their pay. Also, without regulation, the profit from the business goes directly to their pockets, not the government's. Even if police come in to raid businesses, it is not common that businesses actually get shut down. Speaking about the raids, *Reuters* says, "...police raided dozens of brothels in major cities in what they said was a routine operation. Police said they were looking to prosecute venues employing underage and illegal migrant workers, but only one of the venues were shut down" (Tanakasempipat).

For police, the benefits may be reaped the easiest out of all the stakeholders. Bribes and pay-offs are guaranteed for them. If a business or worker refuses to pay them off in order to keep continuing their work, they can just have them arrested. It is a win-win for them. Monthly rounds to businesses and streets ensure a consistent profit for them. Officers make between 200 000 to 400 000 baht (\$8 000 – 16 000 CAD) per month, with most venues starting at 10 000 baht (\$800 CAD) each (Kornrawee, 2018, para. 6). As long as prostitution is illegal, police can always find a way to make workers or businesses pay up.

Consequences

Although there are many benefits for stakeholders from prostitution being against the law, there are grave consequences that can sometimes be overlooked.

The illegality of the industry makes prostitution far more dangerous for sex workers than if it were legal. There is no protection for the workers. If rape, abuse, or dangerous work conditions occur, there is nothing that they can do about it. If they make their work known, they will be arrested, or have to pay officials off, still without any action taken for the worker. There can be instances where clients take things too far and become aggressive or injure the sex worker. Sexist or classist mindsets are very dangerous in the sex industry, because when clients look down upon the worker, they may believe they have complete authority over them as there are no regulation or rules protecting the worker. More so, if someone wants to leave the sex industry, there are few resources available for help, trapping them further into the industry.

Regarding societal views, making prostitution illegal states the consumption of sexual services is not right and shames people's natural sexual curiosity. If someone wants to engage in or provide sexual services by their own will, it should not be shamed. As long as both parties consent, it is a fair transaction, and all parties are treated the way they would like, why shouldn't sex work be allowed?

Since the industry is illegal, there is little health care provided from the government, so the risk of sexually transmitted diseases and infections are high. Thailand has an HIV and AIDS issue, contributed highly from both the sex industry and little sex education and resources ("HIV and AIDS," 2018). For example, Pla, a sex worker in the documentary "Bangkok Girl," passed away a week after her interviewer left Thailand, due to a heart condition that was never detected. She could not afford health care, and there were no resources for her to use (Clark, 2005). This is a reality countless sex workers have to face.

Businesses suffer from the illegality by constantly having the fear of legitimate officers coming in and shutting down their business. They also must pay off police and provide bribes whenever requested. If prosecuted, businesses can face up to 15 years in jail and pay up to 300 000 baht (\$12 000 CAD) in fines (Kornrawee).

For police, the consequences may be less obvious, but still make a large impact. For example, they have to spend time seeking out venues or workers in order to be paid off, when they could be contributing their time to much more important issues. When you are a Thai police officer, it is easy to become corrupted. They are not being paid enough, so taking bribes is an easy way to supplement your income. Thus, corruption and bribery become an ingrained motive for police and government workers that is extremely hard to break. Even if someone does not believe morally in bribery, their family may need the extra money desperately. Contrasting to many beliefs, those who benefit from corruption are not always evil people.

ALTERNATIVES

“The crime control model we use is clearly not working” (Kornrawee, para. 2), says Mataluk Orungrot, an assistant professor from Thammasat University. She vows prostitution decriminalization is the next step, because the illegality of it makes it more dangerous for workers. A main issue in Thailand is under The Prevention and Prostitution Act 1996, the sex worker is fined rather than the customer. This is opposite to Canadian law currently, but both sides are controversial. Many believe the customer should be punished rather than the sex worker, as it can be seen as decreasing the amount of customers partaking in sex acts. “If we punish the customers or make buying sex illegal, we make them consider: ‘Is it worth it if I have to pay for the sex and offend the law?’ When the investment is risky, do they still want to invest?” says Orungrot (Kornrawee, para.12).

But, there are many ways to contradict her statement – “Ping Pong”, a Bangkok sex worker says, “If buying sex were illegal, only those who are not afraid of the law – like people with criminal records – would be our customers” (Kornrawee, para. 14). If criminals are the ones purchasing the sex, the lives of sex workers would likely become far more dangerous than previously. It also poses the risk that sex workers will try to take their work more underground and more secluded in order for their customers to come to them, furthering the risks.

Other than switching the punishment from sex workers to customers, decriminalization overall may be more beneficial. Comparing to legalization, it may have less strain on the workers. In a general definition, the legalization of sex work means it would be regulated by the government with strict requirements, and if sex workers went outside guidelines or laws, they would be punished. It may also include specific areas they are allowed to work in or not, with regular police visits (Mullin, 2015). Decriminalization means the laws of prostitution are removed, but those in the sex work industry must still abide by all regular country laws. Decriminalization would make it safer and easier for all of those in the sex industry in a few ways. For example, if it was legalized, those working undocumented would be in even more dangerous conditions, as legalization often requires registration. Furthermore, registration has negative effects for other reasons, including outing those who keep their profession hidden due to social stigma or other reasons. For example, in Germany, only a miniscule amount of workers registered with the government, overwhelmingly due to shame brought on by the stigma attached and fear of being outed (Oltermann, 2013). Overall, it seems decriminalization of prostitution would be the safest route, especially for sex workers.

CONCLUSION

The sex industry in Thailand is a complex and controversial subject. It can be analyzed in a multitude of ways, with arguments from many viewpoints. After researching the effects imposed on workers, business owners, and police, it was demonstrated that there are prominent benefits and consequences of the industry, as well as how differently

the illegality of it affects the stakeholders. It can be concluded that the current situation of the industry is dangerous and the Thai government needs to decipher a plan of action that ensures every stakeholders' safety.

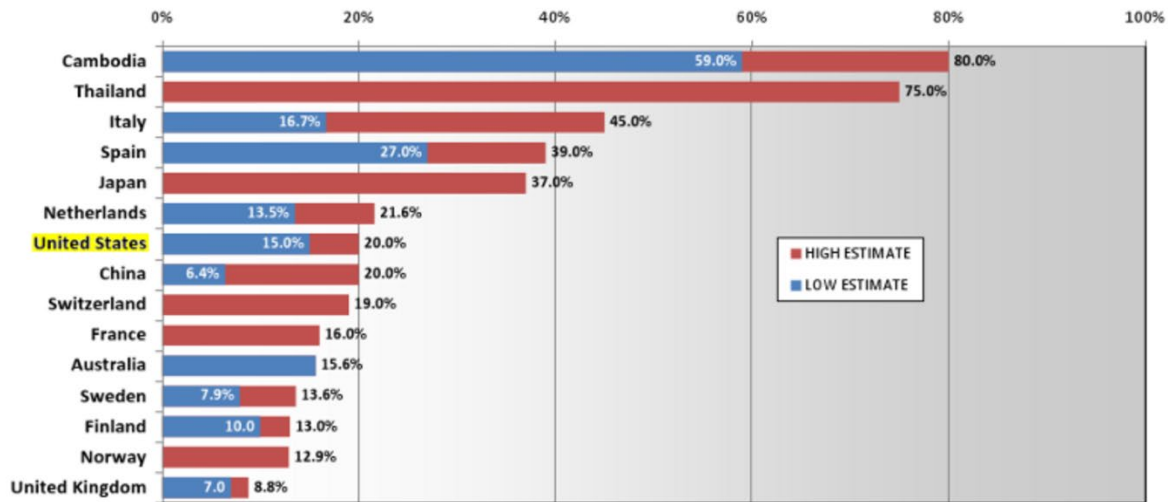
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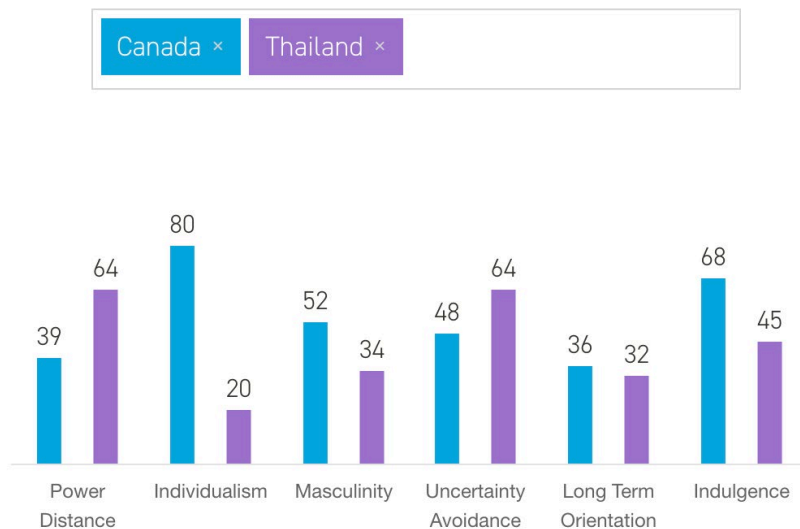
APPENDIX

Figure 1.



The percentage of men who have paid for sex at least once. (“Percentage of men”, n.d.).

Figure 2.



Hofstede’s cultural comparison on Canada versus Thailand values. (“Country Comparison”, n.d.)

Figure 3. Interview

Through a set-up from a local Thai friend, I had an interview with a local sex worker, Prae. We met before she went to work at a go-go bar in Bangkok's red light district. For privacy reasons, the bar name is omitted. Prae spoke both English and Thai to us, so this interview is partly translated and corrected for proper English. Irrelevant conversation has been omitted, thus, the transcript includes only the questions used for research purposes. Transcript:

Daniella (D): How often do you work at the bar?

Prae (P): Every day. I start around 6 or 7pm and off usually around 4am. If I am lucky I make enough money to leave an hour or two early, but the owner does not like that when you leave early.

D: When did you start working there?

P: I was 14 when I felt pressure to start working. I was at home with my family after I stopped going to school when I was 10. My family needed help at home to take care of my brothers and sisters, but we were poor. I needed to help my family, it is my duty. So, I went out to look for a job. I had a friend working at the bar who told me she could get me a job. All I needed was to buy makeup and sexy clothing and could begin making much more money. I think she was paid by the owner to recruit, but I needed the money very bad.

D: Did you have to pay to start working?

P: No, not to start, but once I began making money, I pay a percentage to the owner for every baht I make.

D: Can I ask how much services start at for most workers?

P: Sure. It is around 1000 – 2000 baht depending on where you work and how much you need money.

D: How do the police treat you?

P: They are not nice. When the bar has to pay them off, much of it comes out of our pockets. They come in every month, and mess up everything. I think they do it because they do not like us. But, they benefit from us being here. They are corrupt. Police see our girls and then turn around and start abusing. They are hypocrites.

D: Do you like working there?

P: I like the other girls and have made good friends here, but I do not enjoy the work. But, I do like the money. Sometimes I meet a nice man and he comes to visit me many times. But, one day he does not come back after he says he will. Many of us have heartbreak here, even though you may not think. But no, I do not like the work, but it pays better than any other option.

D: What are the conditions like?

P: It depends – we have rooms in the back of the bar, or a man will take you to a hotel. I have seen some very bad ones, but farangs (Western men) can be rich. There are many beautiful hotels I have been to. I especially like sleeping in the comfortable beds or taking a nice bath after. But I often leave after sex unless I am paid more.

D: Are there rules of the bar?

P: Yes, but it depends if the owner enforces them or not. For example, we cannot say no to any farang. But, if they get violent in any way, they will be thrown out. Farangs are rich. They will spend money at the bar, so we must not turn them down. Sadly, we cannot say no to any of the owner's friends either, and some of them do get aggressive, but nothing is done about them. I have never been hurt bad, but some other workers have.

D: Do you have a plan for the future?

P: Not sure, not sure... I want to leave this work in the future, but I don't know what I would do. I have no proper schooling. Maybe I will marry a farang and live a nicer life. Not sure. But not this forever.

(Personal communications, November 22, 2018)