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Women, Prostitution And Media:
A Case Of Thailand

By

Pasuk Phongpaichit
Women, Prostitution and Media: A Case of Thailand

Pasuk Phongpaichit

One of the classic themes in the process of capitalist development is proletarianisation - the recruitment into a modern labour force. Initially the term was used to describe recruitment into the workforce of factory industry. Later it was also used to describe the transformation of rural society as it came to be ruled by the logic of a wider market.

Nowadays many people in the countries of SE Asia are being integrated into the modern capitalist economy through neither the factory nor the capitalist farm, but through the service sector. In countries such as Thailand and the Philippines, the service sector has expanded rapidly in recent years, and its share of the total labour force has substantially increased. In the process of growth of the older economies, the service sector was a late-comer. It grew after industry had matured. In many newly developing countries, the service sector is at the forefront. Many people experience their first 'modern', 'urban' 'proletarianised' job in the service sector.

In Thailand and many other SE Asian countries, service sector growth has come in the non-government rather than the government sector.

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Growth has come from many activities (especially personal services of all kinds) among which the sexual service industry is prominent.

In Thailand the sexual service industry is remarkable for its size, its variety, and its openness. There are no accurate estimates of the numbers involved and the usually quoted figures between 250,000 and 500,000 girls are little more than informed guesses. However no-one denies that it is strikingly large and startlingly varied. Like any relatively mature industry (it has been well established in its modern form for two decades) it shows a high degree of product differentiation and market segmentation. The spectrum runs from hard-core prostitutes, through a middle range of hired wives and escort services, to a multiplicity of 'soft' forms such as massage girls, bar-girls, coffee-shop girls, night-club singers, chorus-line dancers, coffee-shop hostesses and barber shop hostesses. And the product is not always female. The male sub-sector has also grown fast. The market is both internal and external. The local market ranges from ritzy cocktail lounges to sleazy whorehouses. The external market extends from Europe, through the middle east, neighbouring countries like Malaysia, and out to Japan.

The openness is also initially startling. Massage-parlours and short-time hotels jostle with office-blocks and government departments throughout the centre of Bangkok. Against this kind of architectural background the sexual service industry could hardly be taboo as a subject of discussion and comment.

The recruitment process is also very varied. At one end there is a 'slave' recruitment process in which agents scour villages in the
poorer parts of the countryside and effectively buy prospective girls usually very young from their parents. For other girls the prospects of success and are quickly tricked into the trade. Many more seem to drift in through a mixture of naivety and desperation - often trailing a recent history of bad marriage, recent childbirth (= financial obligation), or disappointment in other sectors of the job market.

For most of those involved there are two key arguments. First, they earn more (or claim to, or think they have the potential to) in the sexual service industry than they could if they stayed back in the countryside, or if they worked in any of the other occupations (construction work, housemaid, textile workers, waitressing etc.) open to females with low education and little urban experience. Second, they feel a responsibility to their parents to earn and remit money as an act of gratitude. This latter argument is an important element in the wider society's rationalisation of the existence of the sexual service industry.

This argument also points to a paradox at the heart of Thailand's sexual service industry. The sexual trade thrives because of the feeling on the part of many of the girls involved that they have a responsibility to play an independent economic role in the economic life of their families. This often blatantly entrepreneurial drive leads to such sad results because of the overriding economic context. Development has skewed the distribution of income between town and country. The overdeveloped metropolis is a market for the ambitious (and the unlucky) from the underdeveloped rural areas.

On the demand side (users of the services) Thailand inherits a culture which allows males to indulge and to maintain a double standard
in their sexual behaviour. This together with the skewed distribution of income permit a large and growing demand for the services, which enriches many agents, investors in massage parlours, brothels and other related enterprises.

In a larger context of the overall economy and polity, the sexual trade has a prominent role in the earning of foreign exchange through tourism. The contribution that tourism makes to the balance of payments means that the government cannot take an unbiased view of an industry which contributes to tourism. Thus, when a year or two ago the news about the spread of 'super-gonorrhea' in the South bordering Malaysia, caused a decline in the number of male tourists across the border to Thailand, the Ministry of Public Health was quickly instructed to make an announcement in order to assure foreign tourists that the matter was not as serious as it was made out to be and that things were under control. In this respect the sexual industry has also thrived because the government has not really tried to do much to stop it expanding.

The modern media have played a key role in building up the sexual service industry. The press and, more especially, television have helped to disseminate images of the city as a place where fun can be had and fortunes can be made. More specifically, the media can be used for barely disguised advertising of the sexual services trade (bars, massage parlours and escort services are regular advertisers in the press).
There is no barrier against reportage or comment about the sexual services industry in the day-to-day media. Brothel-raids make a regular appearance on the front page. And human interest stories about participants or ex-participants in the trade are regular feature items.

But press treatment is mainly sensational. The sexual services trade made headlines in late '84 when two girls were burned to death in a fire in Phuket (a seaside resort) because they had been chained up in the brothel which caught fire. The press interest, however, was short-lived, and died down long before it became a matter of arresting or convicting anybody.

The Phuket incident did have one unusual result. A prominent academic, theatre producer and social activist was moved to make a video-film which used the Phuket tragedy as the entry point for a discussion of the sexual service industry. The video used newsreel of the fire, a fictional dramatisation, and some documentary footage shot around whorehouses in Bangkok. Thematically, it focussed on forced recruitment of very young girls into the trade, and it placed the responsibility at the feet of parents who allowed, encouraged, or sold their children to enter the trade. The video was shown on Bangkok T.V., but created little subsequent effect.

In popular fiction and television drama there have been some genuine attempts to portray those involved in the sexual service industry in human terms. Some early stories portrayed the women as
victims of bad fate or karma, who should be pitied and given proper understanding rather than being condemned as evil persons. More recent attempts are varied and the writers pay more attention to the larger social and economic context constraining the women and forcing them to enter into prostitution. There has also been more writing exposing the evil side of society, men, pimps and the falseness of culture and customs which are against the liberation of women from all kinds of cultural bondage. This second group of writing does create same awareness among the readers of the evil side of society and some people who force or push the women into prostitution.

A popular fiction story (which was also dramatised as a television series) dealt with the difficulties faced by a sexual service girl attempting (successfully) to make the transition to an acceptable middle-class lifestyle. Another popular T.V. series portrayed a story of alluring success — in which the girl comes to the city, with nothing more than good looks and ambition and is rewarded with all that a good marriage can buy. In this story the girl was actually put into a brothel, but was clever enough to avoid the unfortunate fate, until a charming prince came along to rescue her.

The openness of the sexual services trade in Thailand is paralleled by a basically open treatment in the media. Press-coverage is sparadic, sensational and short-lived, but these are characteristics of press treatment in general, not just of this particular industry. Moreover the attitude of the press towards the trade is unobjectionable.
One could hope for some real campaigning journalism on the subject, but the concept of campaigning journalism is barely understood in Thailand at the present time.

In popular fiction and the immensely popular medium of T.V. dramas, the treatment of the sexual service industry has generally been remarkably open, intelligent, humanistic and rightminded. Yet it is difficult to escape the fact that the popular media as a whole present an image of the city which helps to encourage girls to seek fun and fortune away from the village.

Would it help, then, if these popular media were more effective in showing the bad side of the trade in the hope that this would discourage potential recruits? Possibly, but this kind of aversion therapy would have to be very cleverly and convincingly applied. It will not be easy to persuade girls who want to believe that the city streets are paved with gold that they are actually paved with mud.

The media can do little to change conditions which are at the root of the problem—namely, the existence of a demand, and the price factor which helps stimulate demand and which itself is rooted in skewed development.