

Sex Workers and Cultural Policy: Mapping the Issues and Actors in Thailand

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Abstract

This article deals with the deeply controversial side of cultural tourism in mapping the position of the sex industry. In doing so, it places sex tourism in two epistemic contexts: one context expands the notion of cultural policies, the other notes the implicit and explicit origins and effects of cultural policies affecting sex work, although these positions are not mutually exclusive. Sex tourism, we argue, poses a particular challenge to the understandings embedded in these contexts. The sex industry points us to the limits of cultural policies, both in terms of expanding the scope of cultural industries and also in documenting their effects. So far, while we expand the list of cultural industries, the sex industry remains as the industry that must not speak its name. Officials do not want to name it; neither do they do much to stop it. Naming and mapping sex tourism is then a useful place to start. For empirical substantiation, Thailand is our case study. We document the cultural and economic importance of sex work. In doing so, we also remain sensitive to the context of racism, stigma, trafficking, and HIV/AIDS issues that intersect sex work.

KEY WORDS: cultural policy, sex workers, trafficking, tourism, Thailand

Introduction

Globalization—or the interconnectedness of people, ideas, and products—can no longer be compartmentalized into economic, political, and cultural spheres. Just as we ascertain the consequences of globalization, we are reminded that it impacts just about every sphere of human activity. This article examines the links between globalization and sex work from the perspective of national and international cultural policies impacting tourism. Many developing countries are increasingly prioritizing their tourism assets to take advantage of globalization processes to generate economic growth. These policies highlight, promote and maintain cultural assets, be it through cultural heritage preservation or boosting local cultural industries such as film, television, or the performing arts. However, many issue areas lie at the margins of cultural tourism policy: we argue that sex work is one of them. While a few countries have legalized sex work, most treat it as an industry that must not speak its name, even though unofficially it is neither discouraged nor acknowledged. An exception is Greece, which in September 2006 argued to the European Union that its budget deficit as percentage of national income was less than previously assumed. Greece's claim was based on expanding its national income to include sex work ("Oldest profession," 2006).

Tourism is now one of the main sources of export revenues and hard currency for several developing countries. In 2004, the total number of international tourist arrivals was 763 million accounting for \$623 billion receipts (World Tourism Organization, 2005). Although the developing world accounted for less than 20 percent of the arrivals and receipts, international organizations such as the World Trade

Organization, UNESCO, UNCTAD, WIPO, and World Tourism Organization are working with the developing world to promote cultural policies—often linked to cultural industries such as tourism—in some form or another.¹ Most of these policies are those seeking promotion and growth. Cautions, however, are regularly reported and include environmental effects, security concerns, and impact of natural disasters, such as the 2004 tsunami. Increasingly, attention is also being paid to sex trafficking and sexual exploitation of children.

This article deals with a deeply controversial side of cultural policies and tourism in mapping the position of the sex industry.² In doing so, it places sex tourism in two contexts important for understanding contemporary cultural policies: one expands the notion of cultural policies and the other notes their origins and effects, although these positions are not mutually exclusive. Sex tourism, we argue, poses a particular challenge to the understandings embedded in these contexts. The international tourist in Bangkok who pays for sex to a Thai sex worker speaks to the economic value of sex work as well 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.³ As more and more industries are understood as cultural industries, and their effects documented, where do we place the sex industry?⁴ The sex industry, therefore, points us to the limits of cultural policies both in terms of expanding the scope of cultural industries and in documenting their effects. So far, while we expand the list of cultural industries, the sex industry remains the cultural activity that must not be explicitly acknowledged. Officials do not want to name it; neither do they do much to stop it. A recent article on the sex trade in Thailand sums it aptly: “The rulers of the land of the free (as ‘Thailand’ literally means) have always been of two minds about the fact that their country’s great source of tourist revenue (the ‘one night in Bangkok’ mystique) is also its great source of shame” (Iyer, 2005). Naming and mapping sex tourism is then a useful place to start.

Culture, Economics, and Globalization

Culture and economics have a symbiotic but conflicted relationship that gets multiplied several fold when we think of sex tourism in the context of globalization. Most textbooks in cultural economics, therefore, begin with discussions of valuation and the scope of cultural industries. Valuation of sex work, however, is hard. It involves mapping not just the economic but also the human rights aspects.

The valuation of cultural products, be they goods such as a painting or services such as a dance performance, cannot just be understood in market terms unable to deal with aspects of cultural goods not covered by market valuation. Throsby (2001, p. 28) disaggregates cultural value into several components: aesthetic, spiritual, social (connecting with others), historical, symbolic, and authentic (value for originality or uniqueness). Valuation of so many components is hard, but nevertheless executed intuitively by beholders/consumers. In evaluating the economic and other values of cultural goods and services, cultural theorists are beginning to emphasize the discursive and historical contexts in both understanding and evaluating such valuations (Klamer, 2004, pp. 143–144). Understanding such valuation also requires a variety of methods. Throsby himself provides a list of valuation methods that include anthropological thick description, surveys, content analysis, and expert

evaluation: this article puts to use the method that Throsby notes may be a useful beginning—mapping. “A first stage may be a straightforward contextual analysis of the object of study, involving physical, geographical, social, anthropological and any other types of mapping to establish an overall framework which will inform the assessment of each of the elements of cultural value” (Throsby, 2001, p. 29).

Regardless of the specificities of valuation, sex tourism clearly fits into the expanding notion of cultural industries, which include well-known ones such as the performing arts, cultural goods such music and film, and now tourism.⁵ The latter is sometimes viewed as an encompassing category for a host of cultural industries that underlie it. The tourist in Bangkok who transacts for sex may also visit Bangkok’s many cultural heritage sites, attend a performance of the Thai dance *Khon*, and go for a dinner cruise on the Chao Phraya River.

In mapping the sex industry, however, several interconnected linkages become important in instructing us on the difficulties of valuation and placing it in the political economy of cultural policies. First, as noted, the sex tourist may view himself or herself as a cultural tourist responding to a portfolio of choices that include sex. Second, the location of sex industries is important and, at least in terms of the international tourist, often points to global cities such as Amsterdam, Paris, and Bangkok. Cultural policy literature has recently accorded importance to the rise of creative industries—that are broader than but do intersect with cultural industries—in particular locations.⁶ Florida (2004) speaks to the three factors that give rise to such creative industries—talent, tolerance, and technology. The fit of sexual politics with Florida’s 3-Ts has already attracted attention on one particular count: Florida uses the “Bohemian index,” including tolerance of gay life, as a way of measuring tolerance. Florida’s intention is to show that relatively tolerant societies generate high rates of economic growth as well. What can we make of explicit or implicit “tolerance” of sex workers in official policies? Adding the layer of human rights and sex trafficking adds another layer of complication, which may very well negate the image of tolerance. Brennan’s (2004) problematization of such locations in poor regions also instructs us on the limits of Florida’s analysis by noting that “the sex trade becomes a focal point of a place, and the social and economic relations of that place are filtered through the nightly (and daily) selling of sex to foreigners. In contrast, the sex trade in red-light districts in the developed world – such as Frankfurt, Rome, or New York – by no means defines social and economic life outside these districts” (p. 16). In the town of Sousa in the Dominican Republic, in Brennan’s description, and Bangkok of the earlier quote, sex tourism is a major source of revenue for the local economy but raises questions and problems that need, first and foremost, acknowledgment and, subsequently, a deep understanding.

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. Much has been written on the Orientalist nature of the “White Man’s” journey to imagined “exotic” places. In Said’s (1978) *Orientalism*, the East—now often seen as the entire developing world—is assigned an inferior position and in need of the “White Man’s burden”—the task of civilization. Said also argues that the fantasy of domination is played out in sexual terms. With regards to Flaubert, Said notes “the associations between the Orient and sex is remarkably persistent. The

Middle East is resistant, as any virgin would be, but the male scholar wins the prize by bursting open, penetrating through the Gordian knot despite ‘the taxing task’” (p. 309). As Felski (1995) notes: “For white women as for white men, it seems that the exotic is intimately linked to the erotic, as racial and cultural difference is woven in to the very heart of sexual fantasy” (p. 138). Here, all travel becomes a sexual fantasy that includes domination.

In the mapping that follows of Bangkok’s sex workers, we remain mindful of the Orientalizing imaginaries in valuation of sex work among “the whites.” However, our mindfulness is also complicated by domestic and non-Caucasian sex tourists, unless they can all be dismissed as nonwhite Whites who have also assimilated or internalized the Orientalizing imaginary in their thinking. Second, while underscoring the importance of sex work to the economy, we also note the special context of HIV/AIDS, trafficking, and human rights issues that cannot be overlooked. Our task here ultimately is to provide a mapping of sex tourism in cultural policy terms. If we remain indeterminate in our conclusion, it is because our mapping does not allow us to come up with resounding arguments without sounding judgmental. However, in as much as sex work is tolerated in places where it proliferates and seen as generating revenues, implicit or tacit cultural policies are already in place. We start by mapping them.

Sex Workers in Thailand

There is no shortage of references to the sex industry in Thailand. In 1993, the Thai government reproached the London-based publisher of the *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture* for describing Bangkok as a city “where there are a lot of prostitutes”, because the entry would “project a negative image of Thailand . . . [and] erode the good moral standards of Thais” (Vanaspong, 2002, p. 139). Nevertheless, Thailand’s reputation as a hot spot for sex tourism has persisted, and the country has been in the headlines whenever issues such as human trafficking and sexual exploitation of children make the news. The purpose of this article is to situate the Thai commercial sex industry within a larger economic, political, and social context in order to better understand the diverse perspectives of sex workers and how those perspectives need to be accounted for in the policy-making process.

The mapping of these perspectives falls into four categories of issues. First, we will examine the political economy of the sex industry. What role does the sex industry play in the Thai economy? We note the demand and supply for sex workers. Second, we turn to the difficulty of understanding the sex industry in terms of cultural policies. What are the formal and informal state policies with regard to sex work? Third, the human rights and moral questions raised by sex work are discussed thereafter. What are the differences between sex workers and victims of human trafficking? What assumptions are made by various nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) who are trying to help women in the commercial sex industry? Finally, and this relates to the difficulties of a special challenge, this article will look at the spread of HIV/AIDS and its prevention. How do perceptions concerning sex work impact the development of HIV/AIDS prevention programs? What strategies have sex workers successfully employed to help prevent the spread

of HIV/AIDS? An analysis of the political, economic, human rights, moral, and health factors that shape the commercial sex industry in Thailand will reveal the roles of different actors on the local, state, and international levels that influence and participate in decision-making processes. We will argue that treating the commercial sex industry as a cultural industry requires not just an explicit cultural policy perspective but also, and more importantly, a human rights perspective that accounts for the economic and social aspects of sex work without equating it with trafficking or coerced labor. The former recognition will allow sex work to name itself as a cultural industry, deeply intertwined with tourism, while a human rights perspective will allow for a discussion of problems peculiar to this type of work.

The Cultural Economy of Sex Work

Although the Thai government took issue with Bangkok being characterized as a place with a lot of prostitutes, the reality is that commercial sex work is a well-known industry in Thailand that serves both local and international clients. While the supply factors, as one might expect, are rooted in poverty, demand is much more complicated and must account for transnational fantasies, corruption, and international encounters.

There are various estimates of how many people are engaged in the commercial sex industry—in brothels, independent sex work, and through the many venues that enable indirect sex work. The numbers vary anywhere from 60,000 to 75,000 (a 1992 figure from the Communicable Diseases Control Department [CDCD] of the Public Health Ministry of Bangkok), to 400,000, according to the Foundation for Women (Skrobanek, 2003). A 1997 figure from the Thai Ministry of Public Health put it at 64,886, of which 90 percent were Burmese (Lim, 1998). Based on a study directed by the faculty of the Institute for Population Studies of Chulalongkorn University that mapped the various types of establishments dealing in commercial sex (Sittitrai et al., 1993), Steinfatt (2002) suggests that the CDCD method undercounted the number of sex workers by a consistent factor of 50 percent. Thus, a more reliable figure is an estimated 120,000–150,000 sex workers in all establishments throughout Thailand, working at one point in time, as of June 1992. This estimate is now more than ten years old, and the figures of how many people actually work in the Thai sex industry continue to vary widely. Even the estimated population of Bangkok varies considerably. The Tourism Authority of Thailand's website, the official website of the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, estimates Bangkok's population to be seven million on one page and ten million on another (TourismThailand.org). Although up-to-date, reliable data may not be readily available, commercial sex remains a significant industry in Thailand, and a small sector of that industry is dedicated to serving foreign tourists.

Many sex workers in Thailand do not work in brothels, but in indirect sex work in places such as karaoke bars, massage parlors, dance clubs, and go-go bars. These businesses offer entertainment, drinks, and other services besides sex. Therefore, women working at bars and serving drinks may get some income from that work and earn additional income for sex work. "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" (Bishop

& Robinson, 1998, p. 7). Some of the venues for indirect sex work explicitly target white foreign, or *farang*, men as well as men from Japan, Malaysia, India, China, and other parts of the world. Sex tourism is one sector of the overall commercial sex industry in Thailand that receives a good deal of attention worldwide, although it should be noted that Thai men make up the majority of the clients in the Thai commercial sex industry. "While foreign-oriented bars are not typical of sex work in Thailand because they comprise only a small portion of the industry, they are its most visible portion to foreigners" (Steinfatt, 2002, p. 29). As such, cultural policies concerning tourism and entertainment establishments are directly related to the bars that attract foreign visitors, whether they be businessmen, military personnel, expatriates, or tourists.

It is essential to look more carefully at sex workers themselves and why they enter the industry. Most of the women engaged in sex work are motivated by money and the concept of duty. Not all of these women face extreme economic hardship, but sex work can help increase the standard of living for themselves and their families. "Money was the motive, but workers saw it as their responsibility to provide that money to their families" (Steinfatt, 2002, p. 53). Parents have spent money bringing up the daughter, and it is often seen as her duty to repay the debt (Muecke, 1992). Bishop and Robinson (1998) explain that the earnings of one daughter in Bangkok can support an entire family in the countryside, and many rural villages are made up of such families. Starting with a figure of 200,000 sex workers, Boonchalaski and Guest (1998, p. 33) estimate that 1.2 million people are connected to the sex industry, which includes two staff members for every sex worker in the various establishments and four family members who benefit from each worker's remittances. Furthermore, they note that several hotels and restaurants benefit from the sex industry as well. They also report a survey that noted average remittances from a sex worker to be \$150 per month. Lim (1998, p. 12) notes that \$300 million annually was remitted by Thai sex workers to their families. Lim also reports that the Thai underground economy amounts to between \$33 to 44 billion per year, of which sex work accounts for two-thirds. The underground economy itself amounts to 15–18 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP); in other words, sex work accounts for 10–12 percent of Thai GDP (last calculation made by the authors).

Steinfatt's (2002) study of Thailand's commercial sex industry provides income figures that show how sex work compares with other professions. He differentiates between the kinds of sex workers in foreign-oriented bars because different women serve different roles (dancing, hostessing) and their wages vary accordingly. The median monthly income for sex workers in these various roles ranged from 5,825 to 7,950 baht, and the typical Thai salary was about 6,000 baht per month. About half of the bar makers make considerably more money; a few earn up to 58,100 baht per month (p. 151). Compare these salaries with newly hired electronic and computer technicians who start at 12,000 baht per month. Steinfatt (p. 155) found that the top 10 percent of bar workers in his study are among the top wage earners in Thailand, making more money than some professionals in fields such as engineering and medicine. It should be noted, however, that commercial sex workers have a much shorter working life span than many other professions.

Urban–rural divides and modernization are often cited as key factors leading to sex work (Bishop & Robinson, 1998). As Thailand climbed the economic ladder to

become a newly industrializing economy, vast disparities grew between its urban and rural areas. This phenomenon, termed dualistic development, in itself is not different from the lopsided growth experiments in other parts of the developing world. What is now becoming clear are the various ways in which immigrant labor from rural areas was absorbed into the urban milieus of the developing world. In other parts of the world, rural migrants found themselves confronted or involved with urban traps that included various forms of extortion, exploitation, degrading poverty, life on the street, violence, crime, and infrastructural collapse. In Thailand, the sex industry grew, which while providing for incomes also, as documented further, catalogued exploitation and further strained a weak infrastructure, especially in public health.

The potential for women to make enough money to support their families attracts many women to the commercial sex industry; 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. Brennan's (2004) analysis is succinct: "Sexscapes link the practices of sex work to the forces of globalized economy" (p. 16). Brennan's use of the term sexscape builds on Appadurai's (2000) notion of "scapes" or globalized interconnections, real and imagined.

It is often noted that the sex industry in Thailand is rather different from the sex industry in the West. Thai women are described as tender and nurturing, offering companionship to their clients, not just sex. "Men feel particularly cherished by what they experience as the compliance, eagerness to please and considerateness of Thai women" (Seabrook, 2001, p. 3). Western sex workers, in contrast, are viewed as more mechanistic and functional. The image of the Thai sex worker as a subservient caretaker and exotic beauty point to the Orientalist and racist undertones of Thailand's commercial sex industry. In Davidson's (1998) study of prostitution, sex tourists interviewed "reproduced the classic racist opposition between the 'primitive', who exists in some 'state of nature', and the 'civilized', constrained by powerful legal and moral codes, in their (mis)understandings of their host cultures" (p. 178).

Brennan (2004) and Seabrook (2001) note that Western clients who idealize "exotic" or "Oriental" women rarely see themselves as racist. They argue that overtly racist responses do not surface until the Western client becomes angry with a woman who explains her need to support her family. The client may feel as though he has been cheated or betrayed because the sex worker is concerned with more than their one-to-one relationship. In essence, there is little understanding that the family is the only source of social security for Thais, and that the sex worker's world does not revolve around her client (Seabrook, 2001). Davidson (1998) concludes that white Western tourists perceive their own whiteness as giving them status which makes them sexually desirable to "Third World" women and girls. It is in this sense that Brennan (2004) refers to the proliferation of sex tourist destinations in the developing world as sexscapes, where sex tourists can live out their racialized sexual fantasies that "often arise out of associations between nationality and race which are rooted in colonial racist discourses,

and, more recently, are fueled by media depictions and Internet discussions and photos” (p. 33).

Another factor of importance in demand (or pull factors for female labor) that must be mentioned is the role of beach resorts in Thailand since the 1950s as rest and recuperation (R&R) for soldiers involved in the Vietnam War.⁷ Bishop and Ryan (1998, p. 31) note that the *New Yorker's* “Letter from Bangkok,” while not explicitly mentioning sex work, referred to it indirectly. They quote a 1967 letter: “Bangkok has become the liveliest, the loudest, and probably the most licentious city in Southeast Asia. New restaurants, bars, night clubs, and so-called ‘massage parlors’ are opening every week” (p. 35). Seabrook (2001, p. 70) estimates that by 1970, U.S. soldiers were spending close to \$20 million during R&R in Thailand.

The sexscape, with its racist fantasies and the role of military personnel, is portrayed in the musical *Miss Saigon*, a late 20th century retelling of the Madame Butterfly/Miss Crysanthemum sex fantasy involving “Oriental” women. In *Miss Saigon*, the American GI gets separated from his Vietnamese sex worker mistress who eventually finds her way to Bangkok. Years later, the GI Chris returns with his Caucasian American wife, only to reclaim his son from Miss Saigon who shoots herself in her Bangkok brothel.

Sex tourism in Thailand does perpetuate Orientalist and racist stereotypes, but that does not necessarily mean that commercial sex workers are unaware of these stereotypes.⁸ However, they are more concerned with their ability to provide for their families. As noted earlier, the impact of sex work on the Thai economy is significant and many Thais are economically dependent on the commercial sex industry. Millions of people in all areas of the service sector derive a significant portion of their income from expenditures of those supported by the sex sector. Steinfatt (2002) argues that the rich and the middle class would have little to lose from the removal of commercial sex from the Thai economy, but that such a removal would have an enormous impact on the poor.

Institutional Promotion of Sex Work

Before 1960, prostitution was legal in Thailand. The Contagious Disease Act of 1908 required brothels and prostitutes to register and pay specific fees to the government (Ghosh, 2002). Under the Prostitution Suppression Act of 1960, prostitution is now illegal in Thailand. However, the Entertainment Places Act passed six years later regulated nightclubs, dance halls, bars, massage parlors, baths, and places “which have women to attend male customers” (Seabrook, 2001, p. 7). This 1966 Act set the stage for an agreement with the U.S. military to allow American soldiers stationed in Vietnam to come to Thailand for rest and recreation. By 1970, U.S. military personnel spending in Thailand exceeded 20 million dollars (Seabrook, 2001). Officially, sex work is illegal in Thailand, but the Entertainment Places Act in effect legalized the existence of places that promoted commercial sex (Ghosh, 2002). The illegality of prostitution and the state’s tacit approval of the commercial sex industry highlight a gap between explicit and implicit policies in Thailand.

For male foreigners interested in visiting Thailand, there are countless tourist agencies and websites that provide photographs of attractive women who will act as escorts or girlfriends. Hotels have contract arrangements with escort services, and

they enforce certain standards of behavior and appearance for the escorts. In more provincial hotels, arrangements between customers and women are made through coffee shops, nightclubs, or karaoke bars. Just as soldiers came to Thailand for “rest and recreation” during the Vietnam War, many firms and industries with large single-male workforces provide holidays in Thailand (Hamilton, 1997). Vanaspong (2002) explains that prostitution draws in millions of dollars every year and has become an integral part of Thailand’s image around the world: “Tourists and expatriate men are inundated with information about where to buy women, cheap gems and Thai silk. It becomes part of the shopping trip” (p. 140).

A quick Internet search using the words “Thailand escort” in Google brought up approximately 2,870,000 results.⁹ For example, the “About Thailand Info” (n.d.) website includes an “Entertainment and Sports in Thailand” page, with links to “Nightlife” and “Escorts and Guides” that list website links for the kinds of adult entertainment, escort, and sex services available to foreign visitors. The “Escort and Guides” page includes links to 20 different websites for female escort/sex services. One of these links is for Bangkok Intimate (n.d.), a site featuring women who work only part time as escorts and whose primary occupations are as students, office girls, shop assistants, and waitresses. The seemingly endless number of websites such as these indicate the significant number of businesses involved in sex tourism. These websites are not targeting Thai men, but foreign men who may visit Thailand as sex tourists.

While the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) (n.d.) website does not refer specifically to the entertainment establishments that cater to foreign tourists, such as Bangkok’s famous Patpong area, neither does TAT take serious steps to deter sex tourism. There is thus no official acknowledgment that the lucrative tourist industry is linked to sex workers, although oblique references can be found. In their review of a number of Thai government publications regarding tourism, Bishop and Robinson (1998) conclude that “tourism is generally held in high esteem by the government” (p. 68). The TAT press packet for the very successful Visit Thailand Year in 1987 included references to Thailand’s “almost legendary nightlife” and “classical Siamese dancing’s absorbing sensuality” (p. 74). That year sparked a major upsurge in tourism to Southeast Asia, and tourism was equated with national prosperity and economic success. In 1992 came Women’s Visit Thailand Year, an effort to counter the country’s reputation as a sex market. This effort was mostly symbolic in that TAT seemed primarily concerned with Thailand’s image and the reputation of Thai women, and less focused on how that image actually impacted the everyday lives of Thai women (Bishop & Robinson). In 1995, the TAT brochures were a little less direct, but the references to commercial sex were still present: “nightlife undergoes the natural progression from lively to livelier to liveliest, tapering off in the small hours” (p. 74). In many Thai tourism promotional materials, whether they be websites or brochures, “nightlife” is simply a euphemism for commercial sex.

Recognizing the economic implications of sex work for poor families, the Population and Community Development Association (PDA),¹⁰ Thailand’s largest private NGO, has developed a Prostitution Prevention Credit Fund. This fund provides a family with a loan of more money than they would receive by sending their daughter to work in the commercial sex industry. The collateral for the loan is that the daughter remains in school. This program acknowledges the financial hard-

ships that families face and provides an alternative to sex work. However, such programs are few and far between and have not yet had a measurable impact.

Organizations such as Education Means Protection Of Women Engaged in Re-creation (EMPOWER) demonstrate that sex workers are not simply passive victims in an unjust system, but strong women who are providing for their families and supporting one another. EMPOWER¹¹ is a NGO of sex workers that supports sex workers rights and provides services such as language and computer training, counseling, and health education. “They know their stories are sad, even harrowing. But they are dignified, capable and, although vulnerable, they are neither passive nor helpless” (Seabrook, 2001, p. 90). At the EMPOWER center in Chiang Mai, on display was a t-shirt with an image of a sewing machine in a circle with a line through it. The T-shirt read “We don’t need sewing machines. We need human rights.” The T-shirt gives voice to a perspective that is often lost in discussions about the commercial sex industry.

Morality and Human Rights in the Commercial Sex Industry

Any discussion of the commercial sex industry in Thailand raises questions regarding the morality of sex work and the human rights abuses that sex workers suffer. The news reports of families selling their daughters for material possessions and children being kidnapped to work in brothels fuel moral outrage. Sometimes such situations are viewed with pity—“Look at how desperate people are that they would be willing to sacrifice their children!” Other times the stories are viewed with contempt—“How could a parent sell a child for a television set?” Most of these accounts, whether pitiful or contemptuous, are overly simplistic and devoid of economic, social, and cultural context. The commercial sex industry usually receives a lot of media attention when issues of child exploitation and human trafficking are being discussed, but not all sex workers are children, nor are they all victims of trafficking. Hamilton (1997) points out that “there is a very wide range of activities and conditions which are lumped together as ‘prostitution’ in Thailand, obscuring the significant differences for sex workers and clients” (p. 146). In order to better understand the sex industry, these distinctions need to be clarified and explained.

Not all sex workers are children. This statement is simple enough, but consider how often reports about the sex industry in developing countries focus on the prostitution of children. There is no doubt that children are forced into sex work and suffer at the hands of human traffickers and pedophiles. Such children may be abused in places such as Pattaya, a beach resort town near Bangkok, which has become a destination for pedophiles from around the world. Organizations such as Fight Against Child Exploitation have taken the lead in prosecuting pedophiles even after they return to their home countries. Although much attention is paid to young girls forced or coerced into sex work, many of the children in prostitution are boys. American journalist Nicholas Kristof highlighted the issue of child prostitution in Southeast Asia in his *New York Times* column by telling the story of two teenage girls in Cambodia whose freedom he actually purchased (January 31, 2004). His articles horrified many readers who wanted to know where they could send money to help such children, but Kristof acknowledged that buying children out of sex slavery would not solve the problem. While children are victims of human

rights abuses in the commercial sex industry, many sex workers are adults, not children, who are not necessarily “forced” into sex work.

Many women who work in the commercial sex industry are not kidnapped and enslaved, but end up in the industry by being sold into indentured servitude. Families are offered loans that their daughters can pay off by working in the city. Many times the families are misled about what kind of work their daughters will be doing, and the girls/women end up in a situation of forced labor or slavery.¹² The women who work in foreign-oriented bars that serve sex tourists, however, are generally not victims of trafficking, nor are they sold by their parents. Steinfatt (2002) found that many women working in sex tourist bars “followed a sibling, mother, aunt, or grandmother into bar work by choice” (p. 50). Indentured servitude exists to a greater extent in brothels and other businesses that serve Thai clients, but less so in Western foreign-oriented bars.

Of course, choice is a complex concept when examining the context in which choices are made. That 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. Davidson (1998) describes prostitution as a “social practice embedded in a particular set of social relations which produce a series of variable and interlocking constraints upon action” (p. 18). While the economic motivation for entering the commercial sex industry can be seen as attractive, there are a number of reasons women choose not to enter the industry. The loss of status and self-respect in the context of one’s community may not be worth the money-earning potential of commercial sex. Women take into account the risks of arrest, fines, incarceration, abuse, and disease. Yet those who choose to work in the commercial sex industry develop a shared view among workers after just one to three months on the job. This view is based on interpersonal communication among sex workers more than on any firsthand experience with the potential dangers, and it allows the worker to filter perceptions of these risks through the belief system shared by the workers at the bar (Steinfatt, 2002).

Having touched on some of the choices and constraints that women make with regard to participation in commercial sex, it is important to acknowledge that trafficking of adults, not just children, is a major problem. As human trafficking has taken center stage in the fields of human rights and international development, many myths about the practice have been perpetuated. David Feingold, the international coordinator for HIV/AIDS and Trafficking Projects for UNESCO Bangkok, dispels many of these myths in an effort to educate activists, researchers, and development practitioners about human trafficking. One such myth is that most trafficking victims are trafficked into the sex industry. In fact, labor trafficking is more widespread than sex trafficking because the international market for labor is much greater than that for sex (Feingold, 2005). Labor trafficking involves women, children, and men in forced labor in domestic work, street begging, factories, and deep-sea commercial fishing boats, among others. A recent study by the International Labor Organization (2005) found that of the estimated 9.5 million victims of forced labor in Asia, less than 10 percent were trafficked for commercial sex. Feingold (2005) notes that “the focus on the sex industry may galvanize action through moral outrage, but it can also cloud reason” (p. 27).

This moral outrage often leads to equating commercial sex work with human trafficking, even when there is much evidence to the contrary. Thailand is both a source country for human trafficking (people are trafficked from Thailand to other countries) and a destination country for victims of trafficking (people from poor, neighboring countries such as Myanmar and Laos are trafficked into Thailand). As such, the antitrafficking movement in Thailand is quite significant and involves a diversity of local, national, and international NGOs. For example, in the initial development of the antitrafficking movement, EMPOWER joined forces with other organizations to fight human trafficking, but as the entire commercial sex industry was lumped into the category of trafficking, they pulled out. Sex workers from neighboring countries such as Myanmar do not want to be “saved” from a life of prostitution because the alternatives in their home country are so terrible. Many have entered Thailand illegally and fear deportation. At the EMPOWER center in Chiang Mai, there are hand-painted signs listing the “effects of rescue,” or reasons why sex workers do not want to be rescued:

- We lose our savings and our belongings.
- We are locked up.
- We are interrogated by many people.
- They force us to be witnesses.
- We are held until the court case.
- We are held till deportation.
- We are forced re-training.
- We are not given compensation by anybody.
- Our family must borrow money to survive while we wait.
- Our family is in a panic.
- We are anxious for our family.
- Strangers visit our village telling people about us.
- The village and the soldiers cause our family problems.
- Our family has to pay ‘fines’ or bribes to the soldiers.
- We are sent home.
- Military abuses and no work continues at home.
- My family has a debt.
- We must find a way back to Thailand to start again.

Thus, it is essential to recognize the diverse circumstances under which women participate in the commercial sex industry and what might happen to them if they leave this line of work.

The U.S. government takes the position that sex work and human trafficking are inextricably linked, as indicated in the Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report (U.S. Department of State, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2005): “Where prostitution is legalized or tolerated, there is a greater demand for human trafficking victims and nearly always an increase in the number of women and children trafficked into commercial sex slavery.” Feingold (2005) points out the holes in this logic by noting that the Netherlands, Australia, and Germany—all countries with legalized prostitution—actually receive high marks in the TIP report. The overgeneralizations about sex work and trafficking have less to do with the experiences of sex workers and trafficking victims themselves, and more to do with the politics of morality.

A U.S.-based NGO called the International Justice Mission (IJM) has received much media attention for their rescue efforts in places such as Thailand. IJM is a Christian human rights organization that “rescues victims of violence, sexual exploitation, slavery, and oppression” (<http://www.ijm.org>). Although IJM is famous for their brothel raids and rescues, many local NGOs in Thailand question IJM’s tactics and the effects of their rescue missions. As the EMPOWER signs explained, being rescued is not necessarily a good thing, and organizations such as IJM may not be accounting for the needs of the people they are trying to help, nor the risk of re-trafficking after a rescue mission. Sanphasit Koompraphant (2005), director of the Center for the Protection of Children’s Rights Foundation, explains the need to work with victims before rescuing them and criticizes IJM’s raids that do not involve cooperation with victims. The Bush administration’s funding of faith-based initiatives has benefited organizations such as IJM, whose mission (as listed on the IJM [n.d.] website) is based on a Christian interpretation of the “Word of God as it calls us to love and to seek justice.”

Justice is defined differently, depending on the social and cultural context, and the worldview of organizations such as IJM does not necessarily align with those of local NGOs and sex workers themselves. Some argue that prostitution should remain illegal because it goes against the standards of human decency, threatens women’s rights, or commodifies the female body. Others assert that the legalization of prostitution might help to secure women’s rights by applying labor and social security laws to the commercial sex industry and enabling women to organize without fear of prosecution. This article does not propose a specific policy recommendation with regard to the legalization of prostitution, and it acknowledges the constraints that force people into this kind of work as well as the horrific challenges of human trafficking and HIV/AIDS. Still, the authors view sex work as work. “To deny this is to deny economic and social power to the millions of women worldwide who feed their children, their families, and their associated economic communities with the proceeds of their work, which is sex work” (Steinfatt, 2002, p. 342). Nevertheless, we agree that a tighter enforcement of domestic and international trafficking laws is an absolute necessity.¹³

Commercial Sex and the Fight against HIV/AIDS

An addition to the media focus on child prostitution and human trafficking as they relate to the commercial sex industry is the coverage of HIV/AIDS and its spread

around the world. Sex work involves a number of health risks, the latest and potentially deadliest being AIDS. The number of new HIV infections in Thailand has gone down from 140,000 in 1991 to 21,000 in 2003 (AVERT, 2005). Much of Thailand's success in vastly reducing the number of new HIV infections is because of the open efforts to address high-risk behavior such as commercial sex (UNAIDS, 2004) Jenkins (2004) claims that “[g]iven an evolving sexual consumerism globally, it seems far more culturally appropriate to improve the rights of sex workers to organize themselves as a labor pool and to help them improve their capacity to assure their own safety” (p. 271).

Bishop and Robinson (1998) point out that the only way that sex tourism is addressed in government reports concerning the tourism industry is through the threat presented by AIDS. “The problem will be addressed so long as such addressing does not impede the flow of tourists and their foreign currency” (p. 69). While Thai policies have dealt directly with HIV/AIDS prevention in the commercial sex industry, it is significant to note that one of the motivations behind these efforts is to prevent a potential negative impact on tourism. While tourists feared becoming infected with the virus, Thai policy makers are worried that the virus would hurt a key part of the Thai economy, the tourism industry.

Programs that aim to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS differ widely depending on the assumptions made about sex workers and the commercial sex industry. Assumptions that sex workers are victims and need to be saved from an industry that poses grave risks to their health lead to programs to help women leave the sex industry. On the other hand, assuming that sex work is work means developing peer education programs to help sex workers understand safer sex practices and the health implications of not practicing safer sex. Rao and Walton's (2004) analysis of the HIV/AIDS intervention among sex workers in Sonagachi, Kolkata points to the effectiveness of health and development programs when they account for cultural context. Sonagachi is an old and well-established red-light district in the western Indian city of Kolkata. Rao explains that until the 1990s, interventions in Sonagachi focused on “rehabilitating” and “rescuing” sex workers by training them in other trades such as sewing. Just as the EMPOWER members in Thailand asserted that they do not need sewing machines, but human rights, Indian sex workers did not earn as much money tailoring as they did in sex work, and returned to the red-light district. In this case, the effective strategy was an intervention that treated sex workers with respect as people who practiced a profession with unique occupational hazards. A small group of sex workers were trained as peer educators, given green medical coats, and charged with training fellow sex workers about condom use and HIV prevention. As a result, HIV incidence in Sonagachi was about 6 percent in 1999, compared with 50 percent in other red-light areas in India that did not use a similar approach (p. 8).

In Thailand, the PDA in cooperation with the Thai government has been quite successful in promoting condom usage in efforts to reduce fertility and prevent HIV/AIDS. The Thai Ministry of Public Health's “100% Condom Campaign” in the early 1990s involved the distribution of free condoms in commercial sex establishments, sanctioning such establishments where condoms were not used consistently, and a media campaign that directly advised men to use condoms with sex workers (Steinfatt, 2002, p. 213). Mechai Viravaidya, founder of PDA, promoted a public

education campaign in which condoms were seen as common and everyday, rather than shameful or embarrassing. The business arm of the PDA includes a chain of restaurants and resorts called Cabbages and Condoms, because Viravaidya (2005) believes that condoms should be as commonly available and affordable as cabbages in the market. The result was that between 1989 and 1993, the use of condoms in commercial sex in Thailand increased from 14 to 94 percent and cases of the five major STDs declined by 79 percent in men (Hanenberg & Rojanapithayakorn, 1996).

It is sometimes suggested that the success of a campaign such as this one is made possible by the relative tolerance of the Thai Buddhist society. The Sangha Metta Project, for example, is an HIV/AIDS prevention and care program led by Buddhist monks and nuns. They are proponents of sex education in schools and even study the use of medicinal plants in treating AIDS-related illnesses ("A Buddhist approach . . .," 2004). This project is an example of religious tolerance, but there are still divergent interpretations of what Buddhism has to say about prostitution. Bishop and Robinson (1998) claim that "Buddhism explicitly prohibits the practice of prostitution; and Thai culture, operating within institutionalized Theravada Buddhism, most certainly stigmatizes sex workers" (p. 160). On the other hand, Steinfatt (2002) explains that "commercial sex is not condemned in Buddhist teachings, by way of its general lack of mention" (p. 87). One thing that people on both sides of this debate could probably agree on is that sex is not considered evil in Buddhism. Like many Eastern religious traditions, Buddhism is open to other religious views and, in practice, includes a combination of Buddhist teachings, animism, and Hinduism. As such, it is less dogmatic than some religions, and this may be why Buddhism is understood as tolerant and understanding, particularly with regard to issues involving sex.

Thailand may be a relatively tolerant country that can claim success in the 100% Condom Campaign, but there is no room for complacency in Thailand's fight against HIV/AIDS. Jenkins (2004) explains that the increase in casual sex with lower condom use than in commercial sex is a dangerous sign. Ophidian Films' *Trading Women* (2002) shows interviews with brothel owners and sex workers who encourage or indulge in unsafe sex practices and remain quite uninformed of the risks of HIV transmission. Another shift in Thailand's sexual culture is the appearance of brothels around roads and construction sites along bordering China, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia. There is a hierarchy within the commercial sex industry that seems to correspond with the prevalence of HIV/AIDS. Low-charge sex workers such as the ones near construction sites and others that service poor Thai men, laborers, and migrants face very different circumstances than high-charge sex workers who work in bars, nightclubs, and massage parlors. The high-charge sex workers tend to be more rigorously monitored and if they become affected, they are dismissed (Seabrook, 2001).

The global HIV/AIDS crisis has prompted development practitioners and public health advocates to address the needs of commercial sex workers by developing programs that recognize sex workers not as victims, but as advocates for their own health and safety. EMPOWER emphasizes health education and condom usage for all of its members. The Chiang Mai center had a large supply of condoms in different sizes and every member has to learn how to put a condom on a model kept

in the office. Examples such as the Sonagachi peer education program, the Sangha Metta Project, and the 100% Condom Campaign reveal that there is great potential to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS through health education, but the success of such programs requires treating sex work as work, and sex workers as fully capable human beings.

Conclusion

This article places the sex industry within the broad rubric of cultural industries and tourism policies. In doing so, we call attention to an industry that dare not speak its name even though it might account for nearly one-tenth of the gross national product of Thailand. While we document the demand and supply factors that affect the sex industry, it is important to note the context of globalization that affects this industry. First, tourism itself is both a cause and an affect of globalization. Even the choice of Bangkok as an R&R location for American soldiers during the Vietnam War can be understood in this context. Second, technological media such as the Internet and air travel to 'exotic' places underlie the growth of tourism and sex industries. Third, the racialized fantasies regarding "Oriental" sex workers are themselves to be understood in the context of global imaginaries.

In linking sex work to cultural policy and tourism, we remain mindful of the sensitive challenges posed by this work. Human trafficking, HIV/AIDS, racism, and dehumanization are, sadly, overwhelming challenges to be overcome. In providing an ethnography of the sex trade in Bangkok, Seabrook (2001) notes: "Some of the short-term tourists are extremely insensitive to the women, and have little imaginative understanding of the people whose lives touch theirs . . . Most say they come here 'for the pussy', 'fuck and forget 'em', 'because there's no complications', 'because the women are a good lay', 'they know how to make you feel like a man', 'they're professionals, even those who aren't'" (p. 36). While a case can be made to shut down sex work on the basis of dehumanization, we find that this would be a facile solution indeed. Charges of trafficking, dehumanization, and racism are made in the case of several industries. The answer lies in reform and monitoring of abusive practices, not in shutting down the industry altogether. We are, therefore, also careful in not equating all sex work with trafficking.

A useful place to start documenting the position of sex work is in naming it and then enunciating the explicit and implicit policies that affect sex work. Bishop and Robinson (1998, p. 4) write that sex industry is "a topic usually off limits to social discourse" in Thailand. By naming it, we are able to account for the laws that govern sex work, in particular the 1966 Entertainment Places Act that implicitly encouraged sex work even if it remained illegal. Furthermore, four government institutions, in particular, can be named as regulating or being cognizant of sex work: tourism officials who promote sex work in "codes" well understood inside and outside of Thailand; public health officials providing services and maintaining data on sex workers and sexual practices; Ministry of Interior Police that regulates places of entertainment; police officials who overlook sex work, mostly in return for sexual favors or bribes.

Most importantly, this article shows that whatever definition may be used to examine cultural industries, sex work cannot be excluded. Sex work is consistent

with Florida's (2004) conceptualization of creative work or Throsby's (2001, p. 112) definition of cultural industries encompassing creativity and symbolic meaning. Naming sex work as a cultural industry will lead to effective policies that both accord it status but also help to regulate its heinous fallouts from the perspectives of trafficking and public health.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Christina Arnold, executive director of Project Hope International, Mechai Viravaidya, chairman of Population and Community Development Association, and David Feingold, international director of UNESCO's Trafficking and HIV/AIDS project.

Notes

- 1 UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. UNCTAD: United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. WIPO: World Intellectual Property Organization.
- 2 It builds on an increasing body of scholarship that studies the links between tourism and sex work. See, for example, the works listed in the references at the end.
- 3 The importance of place and locality to sex trade is made by Brennan (2004).
- 4 Economists define industry as a related set of economic activities that are commercial in nature. Cultural studies scholars view these industries from an ideological perspective in which culture is commodified and sold to sustain capitalism (see Miller & Yudice, 2002; the classic reference is Adorno & Horkheimer, 1947).
- 5 Cultural policies literature generally places pure creativity at the core of cultural activities, with the outer concentric circles occupied by activities that serve other purposes and include heightened degrees of commercialism. In that sense, a painting might be placed more toward the core than architectural services that include creativity, other forms of utility, and commercial aspects. (See UNESCO 2005 for definitions of cultural activities; however, this document omits tourism.)
- 6 "If you are a scientist or engineer, an architect or designer, or writer, artist, or musician, or if you use your creativity as a key factor in your work in business, education, healthcare, law or some other profession, you are a member" (Florida, 2004, p. xxvii).
- 7 The rise of the sex industry and its connection with foreign military presence is now explored in several works (see Enloe, 2001).
- 8 On a broader level, Ma (1996) explores the ways in which the so-called "Oriental" women use their liaison with Western males to get themselves out of patriarchal societies. These intercultural relationships end in failure because of the difference in expectations between the Japanese (in Ma's book) and mostly American men.
- 9 Internet search conducted on November 19, 2005.
- 10 The Population and Community Development Association (PDA) was founded in 1974, and it operates in Bangkok, as well as 16 regional development centers and branch offices in rural Thailand. PDA is funded by the Cabbages and Condoms chain of restaurants and resorts. PDA was first active in promoting family planning in urban and rural areas of Thailand, and now it includes programs in integrated rural development, water resource development, local institution building, medical and health services, population control and AIDS care activities, income generation and occupational training, and forestry and environmental conservation.
- 11 EMPOWER was formerly known as Soon Pitak Sitti Ying Borikarn, which means center for the protection of rights of women in the entertainment sector, and the center was founded in 1985. Since 1994, it has been known as the Empower Foundation (Moonniti Song Sern Okard Puying, which means foundation to promote opportunity for women). EMPOWER has four centers in Thailand: Patpong (Bangkok), Chaing Mai, Mae Sai, and Phuket. Among the many services EMPOWER provides for its members is a non-formal education school (NFE) that is accredited by the Thai Ministry of Education. Sex workers can study primary and high school in the NFE programs.
- 12 An excellent evocative film that highlighted these and other conditions leading to indentured servitude is Ophidian Films' "Trading Women" (2002).

13 This view is forcefully argued by Kapstein (2006), who also shows that banning sex work in particular countries or boosting economic growth, to allow for other forms of employment, may not be appropriate responses. In the former scenario, sex workers may move underground or to other countries. In the latter scenario, the amount of economic growth needed to stem sex work may not be possible. We should also note that Kapstein seems to equate all kinds of sex work with slavery. We do not do so.

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