

FATAL ATTRACTION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF WESTERN MALE CLIENTS OF SEX WORKERS IN THAILAND

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Introduction

There are several socio-economic, political and ideological factors related with the growth of sex tourism in Southeast Asia. Particularly in Thailand, the proliferation of forms of prostitution is mainly rooted in the Vietnam War with a massive arrival of US military officers who often used their Rest and Relaxation leave on prostitution and alcohol in this country. At the conclusion of the war, it was necessary for Thailand to continue the sex market to avoid economic crisis. Tourism is more than a 4 billion dollar a year business in Thailand, with 70-90% of the travelers being male and traveling alone. The sex industry has surpassed rice exports and become an essential economic pillar of Thailand. In this way, sex tourism has become a means of survival for many Thais (Bishop & Robinson, 1999). At present, a wide network composed by governments, international travel companies, hoteliers, local business people, among others, has economic interests in maintaining the flow of sex tourists. The legitimization of sex tourism as an opportunity to improve the macro and micro economies is against of most of the essential human rights.

The women who work in the sex industry in Thailand are often trafficked or forced into sex work through deceit, violence and/or poverty (Rushing, 2004; Watanabe, 1999). Thai women and girls involved in the sex work – who are predominantly young, uneducated, poor, and from rural areas - are often exposed to high risk situations that frequently cause health negative consequences in them, such as acquiring ITS and HIV/AIDS.

While Thai men make up the majority of the clientele, Western men, from the U.S. and Europe create a higher demand for sex tourism (Rushing, 2004; Adams, 1987). Clearly there would not be a sex industry without the demand, however, the demand (client) side of the sex industry has had limited research. The focus has principally been on sex

workers rather than on the clients (Monto, 2001). According to the literature, there are two main reasons because the lack of attention of the demand side. The first one is related to myths about why men seek sex workers that are based on gender issues, such as: it is natural male's behavior, women are the main responsible of the phenomenon, men are giving women the means to make a living in a society where they would exist in utter poverty, among others. The second one is about the methodological problems to approach men. However, in a study conducted in Senegal, Gomes do Espiritito Santo and Etheredge (2002) point out that in their research with male clients of sex workers, 1,080 clients were successfully interviewed, confirming that accessibility of male clients is possible and that men are willing to speak about some aspects of their sex lives.

Commercial sex between men and women is identified as one of the major drivers of STI and HIV/AIDS in many Asian countries. Understanding male client's perspectives and practices is crucial to stemming the tide of trafficking and to the prevention of HIV/AIDS. Prevention initiatives have commonly overlooked HIV/AIDS awareness with this group, instead placing more emphasis on empowering sex workers to control sexual negotiations with their clients. As a result, the burden for behavior change has been placed upon the sex worker who may have limited power and effect (Cranfield, 1995). While male clients comprise a core group for HIV transmission, the characteristics of this group is almost unknown. "They are an important group, however, since they play a role as vectors for HIV transmission, linking female sex workers (with high HIV seroprevalence) to the general population of women (wives, girlfriends), assumed to have a lower prevalence" (Gomes do Espirito Santo & Etheredge, 2002). Therefore, attempts to reduce the transmission of HIV/STDs and the demand for sex work in the male client population may have a better effect (Gomes do Espirito Santo & Etheredge, 2002). The male demand is one of the primary factors in the expansion of the sex tourism. Therefore, through interviewing male clients of female sex workers in Thailand, an increased insight into the beliefs and practices will assist in policy making and effective programs to prevent trafficking of women and girls into the sex trade and slow the spread of HIV/AIDS.

This study aimed to better understand the perceptions, beliefs and practices of Western men who demand sex workers in Thailand. The study investigated the processes that led men to make the decision to travel to Thailand for sex, to employ sex workers and their

practices with the sex workers. The findings of the research will be used to inform interventions that aim to reduce the demand for sex work and potentially reduce risks to sex workers.

Methodology

The study took place in sex work venues in Bangkok and Koh Samui, Thailand. The sex work venues in Thailand are commonly: go-go bars, discos and beach sites. In Bangkok there are several areas where Western men go to seek out sex workers. (For example the most popular sex tourism sites are Patpong Road, Nana Plaza and Soi Cowboy.) These locations have been chosen due to the high concentration of sex workers and Western men seeking sex. Each of the sex tourist venues in Thailand commonly employ between 20 to 40 young women, depending on the size of the establishment. The women working at the bars, discos, beach areas, etc. are generally young. These women migrate or, more commonly, are purchased from surrounding poorer provinces and countries in order to work in the cities. As many young women migrants arrive in the city searching for seasonal work, they are often lured or tricked into the sex trade. This state of vulnerability often leaves women prey to exploitation and this often obstruct their capacity to make healthy choices.

This study use qualitative methodology (participant observation and in-depth interviews) to understand the world of sex tourism from the male perspective following an interpretational approach. This approach answers the questions involving a deep explanation of why people act as they do. With the use of qualitative methods it was possible to take into account key aspects of the perception of individuals about this phenomenon. In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 Western men between the ages of 22 to 55 years old who employ female sex workers.¹ This research was conducted from March 2005 through May 2005.

The interview began by collecting basic demographic data such as age, education, and occupation. The interview guideline then focused on various themes. The themes

¹ Five British, two Americans, one Austrian, one Australian, one Dutch, one Danish, one Swedish, one German, one Italian.

centred around: the decision to travel to Thailand; the decision to use a female sex worker in Thailand; the process involved in hiring a sex worker; the sexual interaction; attitudes and beliefs towards sex work and the sex industry.

Ethical considerations associated with this study included the sensitive nature of interviewing participants about employing a sex worker (an illegal act) and the sexual interaction. Therefore, the researcher and assistant took precautions to ensure the data collected was anonymous, and to respect the rights of all participants. The interviews were kept strictly confidential and permission was always sought from local managers before commencing work in a specific location.

Results

There were identified several components associated with the demand of services of sex workers. Nevertheless, all of these components and factors have their roots in two main socio-cultural issues: the fulfillment of masculine conservative roles and the contextual local norms that promote the employ of Asian sex workers.

The fulfillment of masculine conservative roles

The main roots of seeking out sex workers are based in gender dimensions. The socio-cultural dominant gender system is the one that represents the structural domination of women by men. This “patriarchal” culture is reflected in the conservative norms, values and behaviors of men who seek for sex workers. They go to Thailand to employ sex workers in order to fulfill a conventional masculinity identity, i.e. to establish a relationship with a Thai sex worker becomes for many of these men part of their sense of masculinity because they are able to interact with these women in an extremely unequal relationships and they demonstrate their “virility” through sexual exploits with several women as well.

In particular, the fulfillment of masculine roles by these men are reflected in three main aspects: a) to experience sexual male “fantasies” such as: having sex with more than one partner at the same time, having total physical power over the body’s of their sex

partner, go with different girls every night, experiment sexual practices that they would normally define as “depraved” things, etc.; b) to construct a powerful image of themselves as “attractive” heterosexual men; c) to exert total control over women, several times through the use of violence. In most of the cases, these men do not have the opportunity to fulfill these roles in their own countries.

a) “Fantasies”

It was commonly cited by men interviewed that they traveled to Thailand as they had heard from a friend, viewed a website or previously experienced the ‘fantasy’ of being with Thai.²

The dream of all men is to be with a Thai girl. I mean, I don't want any girlfriend, I prefer to have different girls everyday. Yesterday I had two girls at the same time, it was fantastic! In the last 8 months I didn't have any sex in my country and here I have sex everyday. I know that this is not 'real' life but I like to come here and live this and then back to 'real' life in Holland.

(Dutch 48 years)

You can get whatever you want here. I have been with 3 women at the same time and I have a friend who has been with 5 at the same time. That is amazing because I can't do that in my country.

(British 44 years)

In addition, the idea of Asian women as “exotic” and “erotic” is a motivating factor to come to Thailand. This “exoticisation” of Thai women is a reflection of an operation of power relations based on ethnical discrimination. As part of this racism these men identify Thai women as submissive and sexually pleasing by “nature”. Definitely women are not be viewed as equal to men.

² Actually, the reality is that many of these young women in fact are not Thai. Many of the women are trafficked from hill-tribes and surrounding poorer countries such as Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia.

b) Construct a powerful image of themselves

Frequently, clients interviewed expressed that in their home country they were unable to access women easily, however in Thailand, women were extremely accessible and (according to client perceptions) found them sexually desirable. This fulfilled their need to feel accepted even if the feeling was a result of an economic transaction. This is demonstrated in the following quote:

Thai women are the best – very friendly, cheap, good looking, small bodies and because they are young, you can get a girl who is 18 years old and you cannot get that very easily in the UK. Women in the UK are shit – in the UK you have to invite her for wine and dinner. In Thailand, it's just 10 minutes and you get a girl.

(British 44 yrs)

In this environment, men with money have the power. These men clearly identify themselves as being more powerful than the Thai sex workers. As a result, money can also purchase social and sexual acceptability. The men interviewed in this study appeared to have a sense of insecurity in their home country. It appeared through their interviews and participant observation that they do not have the skills or social aptitude to feel accepted but in Thailand, they have found a place where they can purchase women and camaraderie. Thailand is cheap, and many of the men interviewed were working class men and could not afford sex workers in their own countries.

Norwegian women... forget it, they are difficult. Here is much easier to get women.

(Norwegian 30 years)

Well, you know, all of us come to Thailand because it is easy to get a girl. Most of the guys who come here are ugly and old and here they can get any girl

(British 35 years)

It is easy to get a job and a woman in Thailand even if you are not 'qualified'

(Australian 38 years)

c) Exertion of Total Control

The desire for inequality in relationships stated by the men interviewed is demonstrated in the following quotes:

“In Norway and in many countries women are equal to men, but these women (Thai sex workers) are not – they do whatever you want!”

(Norwegian 30 years)

If men pay for sex it creates and/or perpetuates the unequal role that they seek (or need). However, through the payment of sex, boundaries maintained in their home country are crossed in Thailand. As a result of payment and of viewing sex workers as unequal, actions such as physical and mental abuse are justified. If you pay - a dream (no matter how detrimental to the women you pay) can become a reality.

In this way, men objectify and de-humanize the women they are employing for sex. In their home countries it appears that they cannot have the relationships they believe they deserve as men, and as a result are suffering the transformation of roles. Possibly in their own family origin, during their childhood, they learned extreme patriarchal norms that they cannot experience or fulfill nowadays in their realities.

Also, men expressed the fulfillment of their masculine hierarchy commonly in two ways – physical body type of women and the use of violence over women. About the body type: when clients were asked why they chose Thailand to access women, they frequently reported it was due to the fact that Thai women have small bodies, are submissive and inexpensive. It can be seen as a gender norm for men to be with women of smaller stature than themselves; however women in Thailand are significantly smaller than an average Western male. In this way men may be fulfilling a gender role of dominance over a female.

Girls are cheap, friendly, nice and easy to get. I really like small bodies. It is a paradise in Thailand and I am usually nice (non-violent) with them

(Austrian 26 years)

Violence is often reported among sex workers in Thailand and within this study, several interviewees also cited the use of violence or witnessing the use of violence against sex workers. In relationships of this extremely unequal nature, sex workers are often unable to protect themselves from violent episodes, from degradation and from unprotected sex leading to risk for HIV acquisition.

Violence and mistreatment of sex workers by male clients was repeatedly observed. Men were often seen publicly degrading the young woman they had 'hired'. In Thailand, the environment lends itself to open displays of abuse, which appears to be a norm among men who employ sex workers. As stated by a client earlier, the women in Thailand are not equal, thus men who pay for their services also feel privileged to mistreat the young women. Consequently, the young women feel powerless and cannot control risky situations. In these instances, men, whether fulfilling a sexual fantasy or exerting dominance and control over another, have a common understanding that they have the ultimate power.

Actually I don't like the guys who are violent against the girls. For example, the other day I saw a man hitting a girl in the bar in front of all of us. You see that quite often.
(Norwegian 30 years)

Most of the guys are not violent (extreme), only occasionally. But women never talk about these situations. If it happens everybody keeps quiet... Men also like to joke around with the girls when they call them useless or things like that, but that's not big deal
(British 35 years)

She (Thai sex worker) is my friend and I was a little bit concerned about her nipple because the other day a guy at the bar twisted her pierce (in her nipple) until it bleed
(British 45 years)

Contextual local norms that promote the employ of Asian sex workers

In Thailand, the buying and selling of sex has become a social norm. The environment created at these venues creates a social acceptability by others engaging in the same behaviour. In this way, peer groups, friends and networks are formed in which men feel safe to share in what may otherwise be considered an illegal and/or deviant activity in their home country. Clients interviewed often bragged about their behaviour and frequently compared stories of their exploits. They were accepted by others men and in this way fulfilled a need for masculine identification. For example, one man boasted that he was a 'pioneer'. He was the first of his friends to come to Thailand, eight years earlier and persuaded his friends to come and 'get some girls'. Now he is proud to bring his son to Thailand for sex. (British 55 years)

Norms practiced in the sex industry environment in Thailand such as purchasing of young women, abuse, nightly drinking, etc. are not norms found within the home countries of the clients. This freedom from restrictive norms enforced in many Western countries lends an added sense of power sought by these men. In addition, in many of their home countries sex work is socially inappropriate, condemned or illegal – Thailand is their paradise. In Thailand, they have the power, financially or otherwise, in this way they can fulfil the need to exert power and control in the most important dimension, which is sexuality. In Thailand, sex is abundant and inexpensive.

A common comment mentioned by clients for travelling to Thailand for sex was the ease of attaining sex. This could be summed up by a statement from one of the clients:

Very easy, very cheap.

(Dutch 48 years)

Even men interviewed who travelled to Thailand with no intention of paying for sex often became involved in the sex scene as:

It is so easy, you take it.

(British 44 years)

There are so many women, even if I go to a bar that doesn't have women I can still get one. I didn't come here for sex but it is difficult not to become involved. I tried to avoid 'lady bars' but they still find you.

(Swedish 35 years)

With a continuous supply of sex workers (often trafficked into sex work) male clients can easily access sex and for little money. Even those men who stated they did not travel to Thailand for sex eventually became involved due to the environment and the 'ease of attaining sex'.

In many ways, the government of Thailand, promotes or at minimum allows for the fulfilment of this 'dream'. Thailand is a Mecca for men seeking to employ sex workers. Select areas in Bangkok and cities throughout Thailand are set up for the sole purpose of the sex industry. The ease at which men can access and attain sex with young women is significant. In many Western countries it is difficult or illegal to access sex workers, however within this context young women are supplied, from Thailand or surrounding countries, at a constant rate and are promoted as part of the paradise of Thailand.

Discussion

The data show that men purposely travelled to Thailand for engaging in sex with sex workers. Men often cited that Thailand was a paradise as 'the girls' were "very cheap and very easy". In addition, men could fulfil sexual fantasies (such as sex with women with small bodies, sex with young women and sex with many women). Men could also behave in a manner which would be considered 'deviant' in their home countries, with no consequences, only rewards. While this view was expressed by many of the clients, others felt that the women only wanted money "like all women in the world" (Austrian 26 years). However, with a steady and abundant supply of young, friendly, submissive women with small bodies, men were able to easily and cheaply fulfil masculine roles which may not be as easily fulfilled in their home country. However, very few considered the cost to the young woman whom they were purchasing.

Although many of the sex workers are trafficked from the Hill Tribes in Northern Thailand and surrounding poorer countries such as Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia, the clients stated that the sex workers enjoy their job and enjoy providing sex for men. The perceptions of clients interviewed were that the women are very friendly and are happy to be with them. Sex workers often use laughing and flirting as a coping mechanism and to attract clients in order to remain in good graces with their manager. Sex workers commonly sit with men and are seen massaging their clients. This is often interpreted by the clients as enjoyment of sex work and her desire for him, when in fact it is more frequently a coping mechanism and part of her job.

Due to the fact that there is a large and steady supply of young women in the sex industry in Thailand, sex workers are not humanized by clients – but objectified. Therefore, mistreatment and violent actions are justified by clients and peers within the same environment. In this way, clients appear to identify with other men, which is part of a shared social norm of being with sex workers in Thailand. Clients feel they are not condemned for their actions, to the contrary clients are often praised (by peers) for their actions. These men have found a paradise in which they are sexually ‘desired’ and socially accepted. The clients interviewed often cited that this was not the case in the home countries, thus in Thailand, dreams do become a reality.

While male clients appeared to objectify sex workers, some male clients also developed relationships with sex workers. Many reported to have one or two ‘girlfriends’ – which commonly means these young women were their regular (but not exclusive) sex partner and often did not charge for sexual services but were paid through clothing, food, etc. However, many of these men also reported being married and having more than one girlfriend but may have viewed themselves as different from a sex tourist as they generally spent longer amounts of time in Thailand. Although these men may see themselves as different, in fact there is very little difference as each is paying to fulfil a need.

Male Western clients of sex workers in Thailand are commonly seeking extremely unequal relationships in which they are able to fulfil masculine hierarchal roles. In many instances, these men are not able to fulfil these roles in their home countries, however in Thailand they have found a place where these roles can be satisfied with little effort or

cost (monetarily or personally). In this way, the socio-cultural context plays a crucial role in the encouragement of this problem.

According to UNAIDS, Thailand has the second highest rate of adult HIV prevalence in Asia and the Pacific. At present, several efforts have been carried out by international and local organizations to promote the use of condoms to protect sex workers and their clients against HIV/AIDS. However, more efforts must be developed focusing on men from a gender and human rights perspective. Prostitution must not be conceptualized as an opportunity to enforce the economy of the individuals and the society. Governments play a crucial role in these tasks.

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