Sex Tourism: Its Social Impact on Thailand

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Statement of Intent

Thailand is one of the most famous global tourist destinations in the world. In addition to attracting tourists interested in its natural and cultural treasures, Thailand's thriving sex tourism industry attracts thousands of sex tourists from different corners of the world. Knowing that prostitution is definitely not an ideal occupation, I was curious to know why Thai women are willing to sell their bodies to serve sex tourists. I also wanted to know why sex tourists see Thailand as their sex paradise and study the attitude of the Thai government towards sex tourism. Key questions that I hoped to shed light on included: why sex tourism prevails in Thailand, how it contributes to social problems in the Thai society and what the possible effects of sex tourism on Thailand’s tourism industry are.

Introduction

Thailand, officially the Kingdom of Thailand, is located in Southeast Asia (Tourism Authority of Thailand [TAT], 2007). It is a developing country, a land of rich and diverse cultures, beautiful white sand beaches, remarkable historical sites, and friendly people. These characteristics have attracted millions of international tourists to Thailand annually and have helped to make it one of the most famous international tourist destinations in the world (Koasa-ard, 1994). Tourism is a major foreign currency earner for Thailand. In 2007, the country attracted over 14 million international visitors and earned an estimated US$16,003 million (TAT, 2007). Part of the revenue generated by tourism in Thailand is from sex tourism. The nation earned nearly US$26.2 billion in 1996 from five million international sex tourists, or “thirteen times more than Thailand earned by building and exporting computers” (Leuchtag, 2003). However, Thailand pays a high price for its booming sex tourism industry, which contributes to numerous social problems such as AIDS and criminal activity. And, unlike the economic impact of sex tourism in Thailand, which can be more easily calculated, the social impact is immense, complex, has a number of far reaching consequences.
History of prostitution in Thailand

Though not an official part of Thailand’s tourism sector, Thailand’s thriving tourism industry includes tourism-orientated prostitution (Prideaux, Agrusa, Donlon, Curran, 2004). Citing the World Tourism Organization's definition, Answers.com defines sex tourism as “trips organized from within the tourism sector, or from outside this sector but using its structures and networks, with the primary purpose of effecting a commercial sexual relationship by the tourist with residents at the destination” (http://www.answers.com).

To understand sex tourism in Thailand, one first has to know about its history. Mettarikanond found that prostitution was lawful and taxed from 1350 to 1767 (cited in Lim, 1998, p. 130). Skinner noted that prostitution thrived with the influx of male Chinese migrants to Thailand from 1782 to 1809. The establishments were mainly located in Sampeng, a Chinese neighborhood in Bangkok. Sampeng remained the most famous location for prostitution in Thailand from 1852 to 1868 (cited in Lim, 1998, p. 130). Mettarikanond has also argued that during Thai economy boom from 1868 to 1910, prostitution expanded and operated in many provinces (cited in Lim, 1998, 130). Lim (1998) described “the development of prostitution during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Thailand was linked to the large-scale immigration of Chinese workers and to the institution of slavery” (131).

The development of prostitution in Thailand since 1960s has been relates to the Vietnam War and two acts: the Prostitution Suppression Act of 1960, which made prostitution illegal, and the Entertainment Places Act of 1996, which regulated all entertainment establishments “which have women to attend male customers” (Seabrook, 2001, p. 7). During the Vietnam War, the Thai government and the United States reached an agreement making Thailand the rest and recreation (R&R) center for the US military. By 1970, the US soldiers spent over US$20 million in Thailand (Seabrook, 2001, 7). Prideaux et al., (2004) have found that after the Vietnam War, Thailand’s sex tourism expanded to other markets, for instance, the Europe and Japan. Although prostitution in Thailand has been technically illegal since 1960, it did not prevent Bangkok and Pattaya from becoming sex tourists’ paradises (Women’s International Network News, 2003).

Why sex tourism flourishes in Thailand

A number of scholars and researchers (Prideaux et al., 2004, Seabrook, 2001, Lim, 1998, Skrobanek et al., 1997) have studied the factors that have contributed to the Thailand’s flourishing sex tourism. Sex tourism
in Thailand has strong social and economic bases. Social factors include social structure, gender roles, the social construction of sexual behavior, and poverty. Economic factors include the economic development and growth in Thailand over the last three decades, as well as the fact of increasing demand from Thai men and international sex tourists. Corruption and support from government and politicians, as well as Thailand’s thriving tourism industry have also contributed to the growth of sex tourism.

Social structure and gender roles

In Thailand, many daughters are brought up to believe that they are obligated to provide money to their families and to repay their parents. Potter observed that women from the lower socio-economic classes, particularly those in rural areas, have always taken up a supportive role in relation to their families financially. Many Thai societies are matrilineal, especially in the North, with the youngest daughter inheriting the family’s assets (cited in Lim, 1998, 132). Despite this, Thai women have extremely low social status. Seabrook (2001) found that “women’s status in Thailand has been traditionally low. Until this century, men could legally give away or sell their wives and daughters” (79).

Unlike their lower-class counterparts, women from the upper-class do not have obligations to support their families economically, but are focused on pleasing their husbands (see Santasombat). In addition, polygamy is common for upper-class Thai men (Lim, 1998, 132). All of this means that upper-class Thai men are economically independent and expect to be served by women.

Social construction of sexual behavior between two genders

Social expectations for sexual behavior between men and women has been documented in many studies. Havanon et al., have argued that “the view that men are sexual predators, and that their sexual appetites must be satisfied if the virtue of ‘good’ women is to be protected, is also common in Thai society” (cited in Lim, 1998, p. 133). Seabrook (2001) also supported this argument and described “Thai society believe[ing] that boys are mischievous, [and] men naturally promiscuous. Men need sex, but good women (this usually means the well-to-do) are expected to remain virgins until marriage. Prostitution is the only mechanism that can satisfy these asymmetrical arrangements” (79).

As a result of such social constructions, prostitution is accepted socially in Thailand. Rattanawannathip explained that many teachers in Thailand, women in particular, believe that prostitution is essential, since prostitution provides men a way for sexual relief, thereby protecting women from being raped (Lim, 1998, 12).
Poverty

Without a doubt, the majority of women who enter the sex industry in Thailand, especially those from rural areas, do so because of economic necessity. Thailand’s gross national income (GNI) per capita was only US$2,750 in 2006 (http://news.bbc.co.uk). The income gap between urban and rural residents is also large. According to Hutaserani, the rural to urban poverty ratio was 5:1 in the 1980s compared to 3:1 in the 1970s (Lim, 1998, 134). However, the ratio has been related to the Thailand’s economic reforms of the last three decades, which shifted the economy from agricultural to industrial.

Leuchtag (2003) has reported that a Thai girl in a rural area has been sold into prostitution for as much as US$2,000, an amount that is at least an annual income for a family. In a report by Marie Claire magazine (2005), Kenneth Franzblau, a consultant on trafficking and sex-tourism issues for the human rights group Equality pointed out, “to some of the prostitutes, having sex for money seems better than what they’d be doing in their villages – such as working 15-hour factory shifts for an unliveable $5 per day.” Although prostitution is not an ideal occupation, financial hardship and limited career choices for women force many to become prostitutes.

Economic development

Pongsapich noted that Thailand’s economy has been transformed from agricultural to industrial in the last 30 years because of its National Social and Economic Development Plans. As a result, priority has been given to the industrial sector, particularly those industrial export-oriented businesses (Skrobanek, Boonpakdi, Janthakeero, 1997, 22-3). Heyzer has argued that the development priorities have negatively impacted people from agricultural sector. Consequently, many of them, including women, have migrated to big cities to earn a better living (Skrobanek et al., 1997, 23). And, due to a lack of education and skills, women from rural areas can often only obtain low-paying jobs that barely cover the high living expenses in cities (Lim, 1998, 135).

Studies have shown that women make more money in the sex industry compared to other forms of unskilled labor. Meyer (2006) interviewed two sex workers in Bangkok. A 42-year-old masseuse, who worked in a four-star hotel, revealed that “sex is a means of survival in Bangkok.” She earns only US$2.5 for a massage. However, if she has sex with customers, she could earn up to US$160 per session. The other female, a 20-year-old who has worked six years in a bar and sends most of her monthly salary of US$200 to her parents, reported she could make US$200 a night if she finds a “date.”
Demand from Thai men and international sex tourists

Since the social construction of sexual behavior in Thailand does not condemn prostitution, it is understandable that “a majority of the clients of prostitutes are Thai men” (Seabrook, 2001, 79). Polygamy is widely practiced by the upper-class Thai men; however, Lim (1998) observed that having a mia noi (mistress) also prevails for some middle-class men, particularly in urban areas. These men often spend money on prostitution. A report indicated that even in poor areas, men never stop purchasing prostitutes regularly (ILO, 1998).

The majority of international tourists in Thailand are men from developed countries. According to Oppermann (1998), men were dominant in visitor statistics of 1993, which showed that “64% of the 5,760,537 tourist arrivals were male; 46% were repeaters” (p. 60). In 1996, close to 5 million sex tourists traveled in Thailand from Western Europe, the United States, Australia and Japan (Leuchtag, 2003).

Why is there an influx of sex tourists in Thailand? Several different reasons explain this phenomenon. First, sex tourists are magnetized by Thailand’s image as an erotic destination promoted by Internet travel agencies, as well as by its image as an exotic and culturally rich destination promoted by Thai tourism officials (Prideaux et al., 2004). Secondly, Thailand provides cheap prostitution, which costs from US$4 (Leuchtag, 2003) to US$15 (Marie Claire Magazine, 2005). Sex tourists are also able to choose different types of prostitutes by gender—female, male, transsexual, as well as by age—adults, teenagers, children—in different types of establishments—bars, nightclubs, brothels, massage parlors, hotels, escort agencies, etc. (O’Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor, 1996).

More importantly, many sex tourists believe that compared to their western counterparts, Thai prostitutes are tender and more willing to accommodate their clients. “Men feel particularly cherished by what they experience as the compliance, eagerness to please and considerateness of Thai woman” (Seabrook, 2001, 3). In contrast, prostitutes from the West “are viewed as more mechanistic and functional” (Singh and Hart, 2007).

Corruption and support from government and politicians

Thai government officials and politicians are also an integral part of Thailand’s thriving sex industry. Many government bureaucrats, local politicians, business and professional men are members or owners of sex establishments. Also, many policemen are customers and protectors of brothels. Police, therefore, get a certain percentage of profits from sex establishments (Leuchtag, 2003). The profits from the sex industry motivate the Thai government and politicians to support this sector. Tunsarawuth reported that a study conducted by Chulalongkorn University’s Political Economy Centre on the illegal economy in Thailand from 1993 to 1995 has
estimated that the annual income from prostitution was between US$22.5 to 27 billion or “about 10 to 14 percent of the GDP” (Lim, 1998, 1).

According to Prideaux et al., (2004), many researchers such as “del Rosario 1994, Lee, 1991; Richter, 1989 have observed that political leaders have supported tourism-oriented prostitution” for its range of economic benefits. Politicians and government officials not only receive illegal bribes and kickbacks from the sex industry, but the government also earns taxes and licensing fees from different sex establishments (ILO, 1998).

What are the social consequences?

Sex tourism brings revenue to the Thai economy but, at the same time, the Thai government pays a high price for the sex trade as it contributes to numerous social problems, including the exploitation and sexual abuse of women and children, the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS, the illegal trafficking of women and children, and the discrimination against and abuse of sex workers.

Exploitation and sexual abuse of women and children

Although statistics related to the number of sex workers in Thailand varies widely, it is clear that exploitation of women and children in the sex industry is a serious problem in Thailand. A 1997 study by the Ministry of Public Health of Thailand estimated that there were 64,886 sex workers in 7,759 sex establishments (ILO, 1998). Leuchtag (2003) estimated that there were 500,000 to one million prostitutes in Thailand. Baldwin (2004) projected that there were up to 200,000 child prostitutes in Thailand. Many sex workers work in degraded conditions. Pusurinkham (n.d.) described that sex tourists from developed countries pay only US$4-5 to the children for sex; however, they were left with a very small amount of money after the pimp took his share. She also indicated that “girls as young as 10-12 years old service men in the sex industry. Many of the girls typically have sex with ten to fifteen men every day, and sometimes as many as 20 to 30” (Pusurinkham, n.d.).

Women who work in open brothels are entitled to certain freedoms, such as being able to shop alone. The owners provide food and accommodation, but their earnings are taken away by the owners. Open brothels also sell women’s virginity to customers, and in certain cases will take commissions up to 60% (Skrobanek et al., 1997, 58).

Sexual abuse of women and children has been documented. Skrobanek et al., (1997) found that “some brothels prefer to buy very young women and wait a few years before introducing them to prostitution. The girl may be raped by the owner or sold to a customer for 5,000-8,000 baht (US$208-330)” (pp. 57- 8). Leuchtag (2003) found that a girl was raped by her pimp before being sold to a customer.
The spread of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS

Thailand has a reputation for having a high rate of AIDS (Koasard, 1994). However, the Thai government does not want to admit it. Prideaux et al., (2004) have pointed out that customers are at high risk of being infected with the sexually transmitted diseases (STD) and HIV/AIDS due to the uncontrolled sex industry in Thailand. A report by UNAIDS (2008), the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS, estimated that 610,000 of Thailand’s 63.8 million population were infected with HIV at the end of 2007. The same report estimated that adult HIV prevalence was 1.4% and estimated AIDS deaths in 2007 was 31,000.

AIDS infection is a serious issue in Thailand. According to AVERT (2008), an international HIV and AIDS charity based in the UK, AIDS has become the main cause of death in Thailand. Studies supported that HIV prevalence in sex workers areas is increasing in areas such as Chang Mai and the north. Consequently, sex workers spread HIV/AIDS to their clients, spouses and children (AVERT, 2008). AVERT also reported that approximately 80% of HIV infections are from heterosexual sex.

Crime and violence: trafficking in women and children

As a money making industry, sex tourism attracts criminal groups such as drug dealers, gangsters and organized crime networks, all of which are involved in the trafficking of women and children (Lim, 1998, 20). There are two types of trafficking in Thailand: one-step trafficking in which women and children go directly from their villages to overseas destinations, and two-step trafficking in which women and children move from their villages to cities and then to foreign countries (Skrobanek et al., 1997, 29). Trafficking involves agencies and intermediaries. While some women and children are sold by their parents or families, others are lured by well-paying jobs, and some are kidnapped and forced to work in sex establishments (UNIFEM, 1996).

Although there is no current data of trafficked women and children into prostitution in Thailand, according to the Guide of New UN Trafficking Protocol in 2001, projected that “four million persons are moved illegally from one country to another and within countries each year, a large proportion of them women and girls being trafficked into prostitution” (Leuchtag, 2003). The sex industry is raising concern about morality and human rights in Thai society. People are questioning if parents have the rights to sell their children, and how they could sell their children for material possessions such as television sets (Singh and Hart, 2007).

Discrimination of sex workers

Ironically, sex workers are targets of discrimination even though
they sell their bodies to support their families. They are often blamed for the spread of STD and HIV/AIDS, rising crime and setting a bad model for peers and the youths. Skrobanek et al., (1997) interviewed a sex worker in Rim Mon village, who reported:

I feel inferior. I’m afraid friends will hate me for what I’m doing. My friends talk to me all right, but we are no longer as close as before. I’m different from them. I’m no longer a virgin. I’m afraid their parents will say things about me behind my back. They may think I’m trying to lead their daughters astray. Some of my friends invite me to their houses. I don’t want to go. (70)

Many prostitutes also confront a lack of sympathy and hostility when they return home because of sickness, particularly if people in their villages suspect that they are infected with AIDS. A teacher in Chiang Rai revealed that when prostitutes send money home, they are welcomed; however, when they are sick or have AIDS, they are dumped by their parents (Skrobanek et al., 1997, 70-1).

The possible effects of sex tourism on Thailand’s tourism industry

While it is indeed the case that sex tourism generates significant revenue for Thailand, its social impact could threaten Thailand’s entire tourism industry as a result of HIV/AIDS and crime. Although no statistics are available to show that HIV/AIDS directly causes a decline in international tourism, studies have linked HIV/AIDS to a decrease in the number of visitors. Da Silva (2002) suggested that a strong drop of tourists in 1987 in Thailand was probably due to an AIDS outbreak. Other researchers have also warned that reports of AIDS in Thailand could negatively affect the tourism industry. Prideaux et al., (2004) explained that HIV/AIDS and STDs discourage tourists from traveling to Thailand, especially the family segment. He also revealed that “in a worse-case scenario, Thailand may be given an adverse Travel Advisory notice, as occurred during the SARS scare in 2003” (Prideaux et al., 2004).

While there are few statistics linking a decrease in tourism with a higher incidence of HIV/AIDS, there is no doubt that crime discourages tourists from visiting a destination. In a BBC report, the Thai government noted a significant rise in violent crime, especially, sex crimes, including rape, which increased by 16% and gang rape, which increased by 70% in 2003 compared to 2002. As a result, the government introduced a bar curfew plan in March 2003 in order to reduce crime and prevent possible harm to the tourism industry (http://news.bbc.co.uk). Lim (1998) documented another BBC program that acknowledged Thailand as one of the most dangerous tourist destinations due to violence and the risk of contracting AIDS. To save its national reputation and to prevent any loss from tourism
investment, the Thai government protested the BBC program (SOURCE? 137).

**Conclusion**

Sex tourism in Thailand is a lucrative business and a by-product of the tourism industry. Rapid industrialization and urbanization in Thailand have led to economic hardship on people from rural and agricultural areas. As a result, it has led to a mass migration from rural to urban areas as people seek economic improvement. A large number of these migrants are young, uneducated and unskilled women and many of them are lured into prostitution. In addition, few job alternatives and social pressure from families also force young women to continue this occupation.

There has been increasing international pressure on Thailand to take steps to eliminate sex tourism. Organizations such as the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and End Child Prostitution Pornography and Trafficking (ECPAT) have helped to raise awareness of the problem and put pressure on those engaged in prostitution and sex trafficking. However, the existing laws in Thailand are only intermittently enforced since the Thai government appears to have a “wink-and-smirk” attitude towards its sex tourism because of the economic benefits it provides. Sex tourism accounts for five percent GDP in Thailand (Boje, 2002) in comparison to mainstream tourism’s 14 percent (http://news.bbc.co.uk). If Thailand does not take steps to clean up its image as a sex tourism capital, it risks losing mainstream tourists who spend more money in the destination than sex tourists. More importantly, refusing to act will continue the devastating social consequences caused by sex tourism.

References


