

Prostitution in Thailand: the sex workers' perspective

Author and historian Hans Vandecandelaere has been studying the Belgian and Thai sex industries for the past four years. For this article, he talked to 50 sex workers and NGO staff members in Thailand. They provided remarkable, although at times controversial, insights.

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Ask 10 tourists what they think of when someone says “Thailand”, and most of them will immediately reply “sex”. Culture, landscapes, cuisine? No: just like The Gambia and the Dominican Republic, the “land of smiles” is seen as a sex paradise. Every year, thousands of tourists fly to Bangkok in search of it.

Different sources give the number of sex workers in Thailand as somewhere between 300 000 and 2 800 000. The first figure is a government statistic and perhaps closer to reality. The second is put forward by anti-prostitution NGOs, some of them of a Christian persuasion, which inflate the scale of the “scourge” with excessively high figures. Only a very small proportion of Thai sex workers work with foreign tourists, but these are the people I want to find, talk to and understand more about.

In the cities of Phuket, Bangkok, Pattaya and Chiang Mai, there is plenty of choice for the tourist. There are places selling sex directly, such as the many variations of massage parlours, which can be tiny or huge. But there are also the indirect channels, such as ago-go bars, beer bars and nightclubs. In these, chatting and drinking comes first, and then maybe sex.

Whenever this topic comes up, the words “human trafficking” are never far behind. “In Thailand, we still find under-age sex workers from neighbouring countries,” I’m told in the Belgian embassy in Bangkok by Usa Lertsrisanthad, who works with the NGO Foundation for Women. “They work in the sector that serves Thai men. But the branch targeting tourists is reasonably clean. In these cases, we’re talking about adults with strong financial motives.”



The ago-go bars of Soi Cowboy in Bangkok: "These sex workers aren't forced into prostitution. They want to earn more."

Women from the countryside

In one of Pattaya's hottest ago-go bars, I sit with a bottle of Tiger Beer next to a rather demure dancing girl. Some of her colleagues are naked on stage or move amongst the clientele wearing nothing, but she keeps her mini-dress and blouse on. "I earn less money because of it," she says. "My sister brought me here a month ago, but I'm still too nervous, I want to take it a step at a time. And I don't go out with clients yet." Three times she leaves me for her shift on the dance floor. Three times she spontaneously returns. We talk about the different wage brackets in this bar, and about the funny little rituals which the dancers employ to ensure good fortune and the protection of the spirits. "You think we crazy, no?"

She and a lot of sex workers come from Isan, an underdeveloped rural province in the north of Thailand. I meet daughters of small rice or jasmine farmers and poultry or buffalo breeders. But that is not to say that they've all come straight from the countryside to the sex industry. For most of them, coming to the city is the first step.

This is due in large part to the changes which the country experienced during the 1960s. The mechanisation of agriculture was devastating for a lot of small farmers. The jobs that remained were done mostly by men, whilst women had to make do with low-paid factory jobs in the towns. Social constraints disappeared, and some of them saw sex work as a way of improving their financial position. The average sex worker I spoke to started by doing other jobs in Thailand or abroad, sometimes for many years. Masseur Tutu, for example. "I couldn't stand the stink of buffalo dung," she jokes, while talking to me in the doorway of her parlour in Pattaya. "After doing a few jobs in Bangkok, I worked for seven years on a fishing boat in Norway." She shows me photos of her wearing fisherman's oilskins and breathing out puffs of cold air at minus 15 degrees. "Then I had an accident with the engine. I got a metal pin put in my lower leg, so I can't stand for long any more. After a while, I made the move into doing 'boom boom' [sexual] massages."

I also talked to Han, Maya and Will, to name just a few. All of them are from Isan or other provinces in the north. Before becoming sex workers in beer bars or massage parlours, they were accountants, teachers or golf club caddies.

The profile of sex workers varies considerably, including in terms of age. In the sector that serves tourists, the majority are in their 20s or early 30s. But there are no limits, and you see a lot of women still doing the job in their 40s or even 60s. The cliché of the fat old German, waddling blithely along the seafront in Pattaya hand in hand with a child, is

fortunately a thing of the past (at least in Thailand). Tougher laws have meant a harder crackdown on child prostitution since 1996, although there is still the hidden reality of 15- to 18-year-old sex workers, who in many cases are already mothers.



Soi Cowboy, Bangkok: Good money but terrible working conditions.

These sex workers all share the desire to earn more. They are not forced into prostitution; this career path is rather the result of a massively inadequate social and economic system. Thai social security is laughable. At the Belgian Embassy, my Thai contacts give me reliable figures. The minimum wage here is the equivalent of about 280 euros a month. Unemployment benefit is stuck at 90 euros and is paid for no more than six months. The maximum pension is also 280 euros. People over 60 with no pension entitlement receive a replacement income of 20 euros. For every 10 years more that they live, they get another 3 euros. Only now is child benefit starting to be paid in Thailand: just 20 euros a month, for two years. Someone who completes higher education and becomes a civil servant earns a starting salary of 450 euros a month, just enough to live on in Bangkok. A senior employee in the national oil company Limited makes 1 500 euros. That's top dollar by Thai standards.

“The sex workers I meet earn easily twice to 10 times the minimum wage.”

By contrast, the sex workers I meet earn easily twice to 10 times the minimum wage. Maya, a former teacher who now gives “soapy massages”, puts it like this: “I like this for the moment. Not the soapy, but the money.” “Isn't it hard work physically, using your whole body to massage other bodies?” I ask. “I do it on average three times a day,” she says. And with her monthly salary of 2 250 euros she laughs at the idea of working for Limited.

Broken relationships

In the sweltering atmosphere of the huge ago-go bar complex of Nana Plaza in Bangkok, I lean over the first-floor railing with dancer Hannie, who is on her break. She's not looking to me for a tip or for sympathy. She simply tells me that she sends home a small part of her wages each month for the care of her 10-year-old son and her mentally handicapped father. The Thai sex industry not only pays a substantial income to its

workers; it also acts as a mechanism for redistributing monetary flows from the towns to the underdeveloped rural areas. This compensates for poverty and the lack of a social safety net.

The question then arises: if it is lack of money that drives people to prostitution, what can be done about it? Should campaigners push for clients to be penalised, thus drying up demand, and then put pressure on the Thai authorities to create greater equality of opportunity? Or should they take a different route, simultaneously pursuing more

“Provide better opportunities for women and meanwhile make the sex industry as safe as possible.”

economic opportunities *and* better legal rights for sex workers? The latter approach is what Borislav Gerasimov would like to see. He works for the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), an NGO which, among other things, spreads awareness of

new prostitution laws in Thailand among local organisations. “For us, sex work is not ideal, but it’s usually the best option,” he says. “The concept of human trafficking is too simplistic for understanding prostitution in all its complexity. We have to provide better opportunities for women and meanwhile make the sex industry as safe as possible.”

I see some sad things, of course. One freelance sex worker gets drunk while playing pool with me. I help her out of the bar and find her a taxi, but her loss of control is a reminder that sex work is always risky. But whilst things really can get out of hand, I would venture to make a few general points. It is not true, for example, that Thai sex workers can be bought for a pittance by fat-cat tourists. That implies powerlessness. Usually they are not so badly off financially that they have to take on just any client. In many massage parlours, there is no free choice, but in others sex workers choose men according to their appearance, age, personality and skin colour.

Another important point is that the social and economic imbalance in Thai society does not explain everything: gender inequality is also a factor when people opt for sex work. Liz Hilton, spokeswoman for the Thai sex workers’ group Empower Foundation, sees it this way: “Both sons and daughters have a duty to care for their elders, but in practice the burden falls more on the women. Certainly in the context of a failed marriage. If the man leaves, the woman is very often left to bring up the children. If you’ve not much money, sex work can be a solution. Not usually because you really want it, but because it is necessary in order to live better.”

The impact of broken relationships is well documented. It features in 80% of my conversations with female sex workers. Their partner leaves, is lazy, or addicted to drink or gambling, and the woman is left to take care of the children alone. Masseur Nathy is 38 years old. She is the sole provider for her sick mother and a daughter of 19 who is a student nurse. She worked in a factory until she was 31. She then got several massage diplomas and moved to a spa in Kazakhstan, where she found seven clients a day too much, before switching to sex work in Isan. Now she is trying out Pattaya for a month.

Your own boss

When sex workers tell their stories, these are never pathetic tales of woe. On the contrary, the average woman radiates pride and looks relatively well and healthy. Notwithstanding social inequalities, most of them make well-considered and fairly independent choices.

This choice starts with looking for a good working place. Sometimes the bosses of big ago-go bars and massage houses still send out recruiters into the countryside to encourage women to apply for available jobs. But mostly women find their own way into the sex industry via smartphones and a network of friends. At least that is the case with Thai sex workers; women from neighbouring countries often pay a third party to get them across the border.

Once in work, the sex workers decide what suits them best. I settle down in an open-air bar on the huge, traffic-clogged Sukhumvit Road in Bangkok. I'd put Nhum at no older than 20. She clammers on to the high stool and starts explaining to me how the bar works and the custom of offering a drink to the woman. "I get half of what he pays for his drinks," says Nhum. "If the client wants to go to a hotel afterwards, he first pays the bar 20 euros, and then he pays me 60 euros for a short time, an hour." "Isn't that just the same as in the ago-go bars?" I ask in surprise. "Yes, but there are too many rules there. And above all, in the beer bar, you don't need to put yourself on show to an audience. It's nicer. You talk to people from all over the world. And you play a lot of pool." An older colleague joins her. "In terms of age, I'll soon be past it," she says. "In the Bangkok ago-go bars in Soi Cowboy, I'd still be welcome, but not in those on Nana Plaza. But in the beer bar, I'm the one who chooses the client."

The ago-go bar women and transgender people have the same line of reasoning. Because it demands a certain level of capability and endurance: dancing every night amid deafening noise, drinking an awful lot, overcoming a natural modesty and staring down the overwhelming attention of the watching tourists. But this side of the industry has its advantages too. The accent is on body language and less on verbal skills in getting on with clients. Earning more and liking to dance seems to be factors too or another woman explains: "Look at my hands. I'm too thin. How would I manage with heavy bodies in the massage sector?"

The atmosphere is calmer at Beer Garden, a Bangkok landmark. This is where freelance sex workers pick up tourists beneath an enormous corrugated iron roof. They often combine sex work with other jobs. There are no binding rules here as there are in the beer bars. The women bring in the necessary trade for the boss, but after that neither the client nor the sex worker has to pay anything to the café owner. Interaction with the client always begins with a discreet game of glances. "Here I can quietly sound the men out," says Nike (33). "You need a strong mind for this job. I can't just go to bed with the first man who asks. The client has to make me feel good first. Only then do I think about money."

These are the various criteria that sex workers apply when looking for the right job. And they explain the constant comings and goings in the working places. Which place is the safest? Where can I be anonymous or have the best financial benefits? Where can I meet clients who suit best?

Illegal

If the problem is not forced prostitution, what is? The average tourist will be surprised to learn that it is illegal to sell sex in Thailand. Prior to 1996, sex workers could be jailed for up to three years and made to undergo “re-education” and rehabilitation. Following reform of the criminal law, that is still possible in theory for one month, but mostly you risk a fine of 1 000 baht (30 euros). Liz Hilton of the Empower Foundation says in no uncertain terms: “I’m horrified when people say that sex work is tolerated. Tolerating

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means leaving sex workers in peace. It’s more accurate to say that the authorities are flexible about it but crack down when it suits them. Every year, 5 000 sex

workers are arrested and fined. That fine also means a criminal record, for breaching the Prostitution Act. And these measures are completely arbitrary. One day it’s a massage parlour, the next it’s a ago-go bar.” How then does that chime with the relaxed attitude I’ve seen amongst the sex workers? “Simple: they pay bribes through their boss.”

The criminal law opens the door to a range of shady practices. A corrupt police force gets rich on backhanders. Raids on sex work premises don’t need a warrant from a magistrate. Possession of condoms is seen as proof of prostitution. Irregular foreign sex workers are held for “re-education” and then deported. If a real victim of trafficking is found, fellow sex workers can be detained as witnesses. And above all, being criminals in the eyes of the law makes it very hard for sex workers to sue in an employment dispute or a case of physical violence. “You can bring an action for rape,” says Liz Hilton. “But it’s very likely that the police will do nothing because you’re engaged in an illegal occupation.”



Beer bar in Pattaya: Hanging out, playing pool and sizing up the clients.

The other big problem is the terrible working conditions. Most workplaces are registered as part of the entertainment sector and are perfectly legal, provided there is no selling of sex. But Thai employment law doesn’t count for much. In the ago-go bars, the noise levels are too high, there are no emergency exits, no separate toilets for clients and sex workers, and there are not enough statutory days off. A dancer who breaks her leg when wearing the mandatory high heels suffers the consequences of this herself. Many ago-go bars do pay a basic wage, but it is often below the minimum wage. Wage deductions are the order of the day for every little thing: arriving late, not meeting the drinks quota, not having

the mandatory medical check-ups on time. “All these things could be improved by proper application of the employment laws,” says Hilton. “Job satisfaction stays high because earnings are high. But it’s a fact that the overwhelming majority of sex workers work in conditions of unacceptable exploitation. There is only one conclusion: sex work must be decriminalised, and police intervention must be replaced by a labour inspectorate.”

Author Hans Vandecandelaere's publications include: *En vraag niet waarom: Sekswork in België* (And don't ask why: Sexwork in Belgium), EPO, 264 pp. 2019