

The Border of Dreams: Burmese Women Working in Thailand's Sex Industry

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The river officially separating the boundary between Burma and Thailand is known as the “border blocking our dreams.” Political repression, torture, detention, forced relocation, forced labour, rape, and lack of opportunity are just some of the reasons Burmese women are migrating to Thailand. Currently there are between two and three million migrant workers in Thailand. Approximately 80% are Burmese.[1] Many of these women are working under conditions that Thai people would refuse to accept. Most Burmese sex workers working in Thailand make the conscious choice to migrate and work in the sex industry. However, they do not make the choice to work under unfair and unsafe conditions. They do not make the choice to make the lowest wages. They do not make the choice to incur debt upon arrival. They also do not make the choice to be discriminated against by the community and the law. Combinations of factors contribute to this reality, which is often ignored or simply not talked about in the context of Thai culture and integration policies.

I met Bo (synonym for name) on my first day of work at Empower (Education Means the Protection of Women Engaged in Recreation), a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) which advocates rights for sex workers in Thailand. She is a smart Burmese woman who possesses three valuable qualities: she is young, she is pretty and she disagrees with what is

happening in Burma today. Bo came to Thailand so that her daughter would not suffer from the effects of the military regime. She also came searching for “opportunity.” Her work at a massage parlour earns her enough money to support herself and her daughter. Bo feels very privileged to have made it to where she is today. She holds the dream of returning home with a sense of wonder.

Objective

In this paper I will be discussing the political situation in Burma and the reasons why many women are migrating to Thailand to work in the sex industry. There will be four main components to this paper. First, for the purpose of context, I will discuss the current political situation, women's rights, and history in Burma. Second, I will illustrate the migration process including information about the complexities of human trafficking and the push/pull factors for women migrating to Thailand. Third, I will portray the working conditions of Burmese sex workers and highlight the issues they face. Lastly, I will describe the Empower's role in helping the situation and their recommendations for the Thai government, the Burmese government, NGOs, and the international community.

Research Methodology

This section will illustrate the approaches I used in order to carry out my research. It

also includes issues arising when researching sex work, such as academic selfishness and formality.

Issues Surrounding Research and Sex Work

When studying sex work, researchers stand on ethically sensitive ground. This is because sex workers have been exploited for years by researchers constantly victimizing the women involved in order to obtain intrigue, sex appeal, and shock effect. It is true that many women are victims of the sex industry, yet often researchers ignore the requests that sex workers have on what issues they would like written about.

Through the course of my research, I was a volunteer at Empower in Mae Sai on the border of Burma. Empower Foundation has been established since 1985 with the attention of addressing the need to provide support and education for sex workers in Thailand. Empower has four centers around Thailand including in: Mae Sai, Chiang Mai, Patpong Bangkok, and most recently, in Phuket. Empower supports the right of women to choose whichever profession they feel best meets their needs, and provides the support women seek. A policy at Empower protects the privacy of their women by not allowing researchers to interview the women at the center. As I had the fortunate opportunity to be a part of the sex worker community I did not want to abuse my role for the purpose of research. Therefore it is important to note that when researching sex work, academic adherence to strict research policies obliterates the voices which are most relevant. This is a significant flaw in much academia surrounding sex work. In this paper I will be taking into account these voices, yet I will not make any direct references to informal interviews and

conversations, for the purpose of privacy and context.

It is clear that this research has certain biases as I am not a sex worker, nor have I ever lived in Burma. As a result this paper is based on my perceptions about the issues facing Burmese sex workers as a foreign Canadian university student volunteering at Empower Mae Sai. I will be drawing my research from secondary sources and my personal experiences at Empower, living on the border, attending meetings and conferences surrounding migrant sex workers, and informal interviews.

Research Design

My research can best be described as participatory observation research. By being an active participant in the sex worker community in Mae Sai, I have been able to draw conclusions about the issues facing them. I will attempt to highlight the needs, interests, and realities of Burmese sex workers in Thailand in order to create awareness about the false perceptions that other people have in relation to these women. As a result of spreading awareness about the situation of Burmese sex workers in Thailand, it is hoped that there will be less discrimination against them and more positive action taken in the future.

The first step in my research was to collect information about the history of Burma and the current political situation. I read many accounts about the issues facing Burmese citizens written in NGO and INGO (International NGO) reports; I also heard many stories from people who had just come across the border. The biggest problem I faced was that it is very difficult to obtain accurate information about the current political situation in Burma. For one, the military regime has a strangle-hold on all the information coming and out of the country. Journalists are not allowed to

report inside the country. And all of the documents published by the country are generally inaccurate and biased information. Therefore, I did my best to ensure source accuracy by only using content produced by credible NGOs, INGOs and scholars, and by confirming every source in at least one other place.

The second step was to observe, question, and research how and why the political situation is bringing so many women to Thailand. This process included analyzing the situation for women once they arrive in Thailand. I looked at the process of migration and the issue of trafficking. I also looked into the conditions of sex work for migrant women, particularly in Mae Sai. Because during my research I was situated in Mae Sai, which is an open border crossing between the Shan State in Burma and Thailand, most of the information in this paper will pertain to this region.

In order to enrich this information, I conducted a large literary review. In particular, I focused on secondary sources that pertained to the current political situation in Burma and the affect it is having women. I also read human right reports that focused on the country and for sex workers.

The third step was to compile, interpret and analyze the collected data. This process involved screening what I deemed to be appropriate for this paper. Here is where I have particularly taken my biases into account.

The methodology I have outlined could easily be labelled as unsophisticated. The informality of my research and exclusion of formal interviews could also be deemed as a weakness. Yet in context of my research topic, I believe it is this informality that is this paper's greatest strength.

Key Terms

In this paper I will use the term *sex work* instead of *prostitution*. According to Empower staff sex work is a gender neutral term and pertains to an income generating activity instead of an identity. Furthermore, it emphasizes a variety of income generating activities such as dance, massage, and karaoke. Prostitute on the other hand is narrowly applied. The act of sex and money is a mere connotation. The term prostitute is very commonly used in colloquial language as well as in scholarly writing about sex work. Therefore it can be assumed that the people using this term do not take into account that it is considered derogatory among sex workers.

Commercial sex business is the umbrella term used to describe a variety of entertainment businesses. A commercial sex business is a place of work where sexual services are sold, including but not limited to: massage parlours, karaoke bars, bar-beers, Go-Go, internet sites, and phone operators. *Brothels* differ from the other places of work because they do not offer any other form of labour other than sex.

The second form of terminology in this paper concerns Burmese migrants. According to the Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants, "*migrants* are persons who are outside the territory of their state of nationality or citizenship and therefore not subject to its legal provisions." [2] In this paper, I will be focusing on migrant workers who are not subject to Thailand's legal provisions.

I choose to use the name *Burma* instead of Myanmar in order to follow the current pro-democracy movement. Burma's English name was changed to Myanmar in 1988 by the military government without consulting its citizens. [3] Lastly, I will not be referring to the Burmese military dictatorship as a *government* due to the fact that it is clearly a *military regime*. In protest, I will

be using the words *junta*, *State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)*, and *military regime*.

The Situation in Burma

In order to set the context, the following section includes a brief history of Burma. A discussion about the current political situation and the position of women in the country will follow.

A Brief History

During the pre-colonial period, numerous kingdoms were situated in the territory known as Burma today. This is because the territory was, as it is today, made up with numerous indigenous groups each composed of different cultures and identities.

In 1824, the British Empire seized Southern and Western Burma, and continued to annex the rest of the country until 1885, when they received control of Northern Burma. The British brought with them infrastructure, the idea of representative government, and the expansion of political and economic ideas.[4] They also brought with them the Western notions of states and fixed boundaries in order to make policy. However, this split many ethnic communities. As a result, bitter feelings developed between the Burmese, the indigenous ethnic nationalities and the British. The colonial administration continued with limited local self-government until the Union of Burma achieved independence in 1948.[5]

The new state came into being as a parliamentary democracy and, although beset by ethnic strife, territorial dispute, and little social welfare they survived as a representative government until an army coup in 1962.[6] A military-dominated regime led by the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) held power for the next 26

years. There were no free elections, and freedom of expression and association were almost entirely denied to the people of Burma. Torture, political imprisonment, and other human rights abuses were common.[7]

Once among the largest rice-exporting countries in Asia, Burma was facing food shortages by 1988.[8] At this time the silence was broken by the beginning of extreme pro-democracy movements. The military “responded” by announcing the start of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) which was renamed the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in November 1997.[9] An election was held in 1990, and the Pro-Democracy party won by a landslide. Again this did not instil any change in governance. Instead the leader of the National League of Democracy (NLD) Daw Aung San Suu Ky was detained. She remained under house arrest until 1996.[10]

Burma’s political history is coloured with political strife, civil war, human rights atrocity, and economic disparity. This is not because the country lacks sufficient natural resources, because the country is flourishing with natural resources. Nor is it because the civilians possess a war-like mentality. Instead, it is due to a complex war between ethnic minorities and the Burmese military dictatorship and the abuse of power and political mismanagement.

Current Political Situation

It is relevant to understand the current political situation in Burma in order to comprehend why so many women come across the border to work in Thailand. It is crucial to note that the majority of women come to work in Thailand as a result of the junta’s actions and the endless civil war, not because they would prefer to leave their culture to live and work in Thailand.

Presently there are two key political issues facing Burma. The first issue is the restoration of democracy and the second is the resolution of political rights for ethnic minorities.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyy is the symbol of hope and freedom in Burma. Surprisingly she has achieved this while spending the majority of the past 15 years under house arrest. On May 30, 2003 she was re-detained and remains under house arrest today. According to the United Nations, in January 2005 her detainment was postponed for another year.[11] The president of the Shan State Peace Council and the Chairman of the Shan National League of Democracy were both arrested for no apparent reason in early 2005. According to Amnesty International, currently there are 1,300 political prisoners. The detainment of these political activists who oppose the government portrays the lack of freedom, speech and choice in the country. Citizens of Burma are currently experiencing unnecessary social and economic hardships without an inclusive decision making process.

From the military regime's perspective, they must use their power through force in order to protect people from ethnic armed organizations. Propaganda is rampant through the country in order to make people live in fear, so they will adhere to the SPDC. A common saying on the front page of state controlled newspapers is "The Tatmandow has been sacrificing much of its blood and sweat to prevent the disintegration of the union." [12] This illustrates the SPDC's efforts to promote themselves through control of the media.

In regards to national reconciliation, the regime wants to bring all ethnic areas, which compose approximately half of the country, under the centralized control of the

government.[13] The largest ethnic groups include Burmese, Mon, Karen, Shan, Kachin, Chin and Arkanese.[14]

The SPDC does not see any room for political autonomy outside of their centralized force. Nor do they believe in cultural autonomy for these ethnic groups. Because the country is so divided ethnically, religiously, and politically, it is difficult to generalize want and needs of different groups. However, a common thread between all ethnic groups is the oppression they face from the government.

According to the United Nations Special Envoy in facilitating national reconciliation and democratization in Burma, Razili Ismail, the current situation is far from democratization and national reconciliation. In fact, Razili Ismail has only been to Burma once in 2004, and he is not allowed back.[15] Razili Ismail's role is to ensure people receive the same benefits of economic, social and political development in the country. This illustrates that the state of Burma does not want the international community to be aware of their political and economic corruption.

Women's Status in Burma

Men and women have suffered equally from harassment under the current regime in Burma. Yet the opportunities for women are much smaller than men because of the status of women in the country and because of traditional cultural roles.

According to the military regiment, technically, the legal status of women in Burma is equal to men. The Myanmar National Committee for Women's Affairs claims that the Myanmar (or Burmese) constitution holds laws to protect women's rights.[16] The government also claims that during the colonial period women's rights flourished and continue to today. However, presently there is no valid

constitution in the country. A draft was started in 1993 but there is no final document. Much of the law in Burma was codified 100 years ago before women's rights were recognized; therefore, most legislation does not ensure equality.[17]

For many well educated and higher class women affiliated with the SPDC, a feeling of equality holds true. Yet the reality is that most women in the country are not well educated and do not have access to relevant information pertaining to their rights. It is especially difficult for ethnic women and rural women to access education. However, it is not in the interest of the SPDC to improve the current education system because the more people become educated the more chances there are for opposition.[18] In addition, approximately 50% of the SPDC annual budget goes to military expenditures. The Tatmandow currently maintain an astounding army of 400,000.[19] Thus there is no room to improve the education system. Even if the laws to protect women's rights in Burma were sufficient in context to the international community, it is difficult for the junta to be held accountable. If the government is not accountable then laws are not legitimate.

The restriction of movement for women within the country's borders is an attempt by the SPDC to control the status of women. Accordingly, in the Shan State a woman under the age of 25 is required to travel with a legal guardian or an agent usually connected to the SPDC.[20] On the other hand, it is extremely difficult for a Burmese woman of any age to obtain a passport. Women must pay between 100,000 and 200,000 kyat (or approximately 16,200 Canadian dollars) in order to receive a valid passport. This makes traveling outside the country very difficult. Theoretically, everyone in the country is eligible for a national identity card which enables one to cross the Thai

border for one day to trade, shop or do business. Yet, in many ethnic areas it is difficult to get an identity card, which makes it impossible to travel anywhere legally.

Culturally, women hold an important role in the family. In the Burmese language, the term relating to family is "mi thar zu." Literally, this means *mother with a group of children*. [21] However, traditionally the man is viewed as the head of the household. In many remote areas, women live under traditional roles. Yet because of recent actions of the SPDC, many women face the burden of protecting their families. Forced re-location, forced labour, detention, execution, and torture has taken many men away from their homes.[22] Therefore women are left to fend for themselves and their family. It is not an uncommon situation that in these circumstances many women are raped by soldiers or forced to marry. The physical and psychological impacts are very damaging for those involved, yet there is a severe lack of social welfare for women to get help.

The Migration Process

"Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment."[23]

"Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state. Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country."[24]

Every year, thousands of Burmese women flee their country in search of safety from violence and a "better life." Some migrate legally; however, the majority of women cross undocumented. An undocumented migrant must find work

illegally. This holds true for the majority of Burmese women working in the sex industry in Thailand.[25]

The Trafficking Complex

The universal definition of human trafficking created by the UN Protocol to Prevent Suppress and Punish Trafficking is as follows:

Trafficking in persons shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person for the purpose of exploitation.

Over the past ten years there has been a large focus from the international community on the issue of human trafficking. In particular, the topic of Burmese sex workers in Thailand has been a subject of much concern in the context of trafficking. However, according to Empower, NGOs and INGOs that deal with human trafficking often have little or no experience on the issues of migration, labour, sex work or women's rights. They also often neglect to look at the issue from the "victim's" perspective.

Because Burmese women are not allowed to travel without a legal guardian or "agent" under the age of 25 it makes it very difficult for a woman to legally leave the country looking for employment opportunity.[26] However, if a woman does not have a passport or ID card she will pay the agent to get her across check points so that she can come to Thailand. It costs 400 baht (approximately 15 Canadian dollars) to cross the Mae Sai River illegally

without going through the official immigration post. Therefore it is not very difficult for a woman to get around the government induced restrictions on traveling in Burma.

Women crossing the border this way are often perceived as "trafficked" if they end up working in the sex industry. However, typically the woman does not see herself as a "victim of trafficking." This poses to be a complex situation, especially in context to "raid and rescues," where an anti-trafficking organization or the Thai government will raid a brothel, close it down and "rescue" the women.[27] Generally raid and rescues are a sex worker's worst nightmare. A common saying at Empower is, "Find out if we need to be rescued before you rescue us." This is because the raids do not pose a solution. In turn, these women are then out of work and face the possibility of jail or deportation as an undocumented migrant working in Thailand.

Another contradiction with the issue of Burmese sex workers who have been "trafficked" is that of coercion. An important component to the universal definition of human trafficking is the use of coercion, force, or the abuse of power over a victim. Yet it is difficult to define what constitutes these forms of coercion with the various forces compelling women to migrate. Most women make a conscious choice to seek work outside Burma because SPDC policies make it nearly impossible for women to support themselves and their families. Therefore, there is no other alternative left to the women other than migration from Burma. Thereby, the situation can be perceived as, the government that is coercing or forcing them to leave the country.

Push and Pull Factors for Migration

An interconnected web of push and pull factors has resulted in the number of Burmese women working in the sex industry in Thailand; social, economic and political factors combined.

Most women face the same realities which push them to leave Burma, including human rights abuses, gender discrimination, and lack of economic opportunity. Lack of employment in Burma forces women to seek socio-economic opportunities elsewhere. In addition, political suppression has caused uncountable incidences of human rights abuses through enforced government policies. Forced village re-location, the detainment of political activists, rape, torture, execution, and the destruction of property are some of the harsh realities imposed by the SPDC. According to Amnesty International, the Burmese “government” has one of the worst human rights records in the world.[28] If one is suspected to be apart of an opposition group, torture is not uncommon. Rape is a regular occurrence. In traditional society, a woman who has been raped is not desirable by men. Therefore, victims of rape live with guilt and shame and often think that it is better to be a sex worker than be a sex object for soldiers.[29] A common saying for migrant sex workers in Thailand is that “sex work in Thailand is better than being raped by the military, because you get paid.”[30]

There is almost an equivalent abundance of pull factors for Burmese women to work in Thailand. First, the relative ease of crossing the border illegally makes the transition to Thailand accessible. Second, the perception of an abundance of wealth and opportunity in Thailand is another pull factor. The idea of economic development in Thailand infiltrates Burma by word of mouth. The prospect of less political and social oppression is enough to make many

women decide to migrate from Burma. However, most often the romanticized idea of coming to Thailand to work does not hold true once women arrive in the country. This is because real information about labour opportunity, laws, and migrant rights is hard to find because of restrictions in press and freedom of speech in Burma.

Another common pull factor for women is the notion of high wages in the Thai sex industry, with which they will be able to support their family. Many daughters are persuaded into the sex trade by their mother. Often it is one’s mother who arranges her “agent” to get her across the border. Young virgin girls under the age of 18 are in a high demand in Thai brothels.[31] It is these women who get paid the most. A virgin girl is worth between 20,000 and 30,000 baht (approximately 600 Canadian dollars) for her first time.[32] However, her wage decreases after she is no longer a virgin. It is these young girls who are more commonly the “victims” of trafficking. It is these women who should be “rescued.” Yet sadly it is often their mothers and fathers who victimize them in the first place.

The amalgamation of the mentioned push and pull factors establishes why the number of Burmese sex workers is increasing. A combination between the ease of crossing the border, the Thai economy, the perception of the Thai economy, and the demand for cheap labour pulls Burmese women across the border. The combination of political suppression, human rights abuse, and lack of labour/opportunity for women in Burma drives them across.

Thai Policy in Terms of Migrant Workers

Thailand started a policy of “constructive engagement” with Burma over ten years ago under the Chatichai Choonhavan

government. This policy aimed to increase the cross-border exchange between Thailand and Burma in terms of capital goods and labour.[33] The cost of labour increased during Thailand's economic boom between 1986 and 1996. As a result, an influx of migrants came to Thailand to work under cheaper conditions. Although the crash in 1997 caused a decrease in labour opportunities, the Thai economy is now starting to boom again and there is a large increase in the demand for jobs. Therefore, the desire for migrant workers to do jobs that the Thai would not do is increasing by the day.

Technically, legal migrant workers are entitled to protection under the Thai Labour Law 2541.[34] The law restricts discrimination on the basis of religion, ethnicity, and gender. Accordingly, this law is meant to protect workers who are most vulnerable in Thai society; for example, unskilled migrant workers. However, if one is working as an undocumented migrant the law will not protect them. Unfortunately, as previously mentioned, most Burmese sex workers are undocumented migrant workers.

Another problem with the Thai labour law is that it does not cover sex work. Because of the Prevention and Suppression of Prostitution Act in Thai legislation, it is impossible to protect sex workers, not to mention migrant sex workers, in their workplaces.[35] The only way for this to change is for the Thai government to decriminalize sex work and disregard the Prevention and Suppression of Prostitution Act. On a positive note, the Thai labour law does include some entertainment establishments. This gives many sex workers some hope for change.

Because there are between two and three million migrants living and working in Thailand, one would come to the conclusion that it would be in the government's interest to protect them. As

mentioned above, the majority of these people are doing jobs that the Thai would not do, therefore it should be deemed important, by the government, to ensure their safety. This should also include the safety of migrant sex workers.

Conditions in Thai Entertainment Places for Burmese Women

Most documents say that Burmese women working in the sex industry are exposed to violence, coercion, abuse, rape, and HIV/AIDS. Documents also say that most Burmese women face the worst working conditions in the sex-industry.[36] Much of this is true. Burmese sex workers commonly face the "3 Ds" of sex work: Dirty, Dangerous and Difficult.[37] The demand for cheap labour is high, especially in border towns such as Mae Sai. And, with a lack of Thai language and access to information, Burmese women are more subject to cheap labour and poor working conditions. Largely, this is because Burmese women do not have legal status in Thailand. Hence they are not subject to the same working conditions that many Thai entertainment workers are entitled too. On the other hand, as mentioned above, poor working conditions in Thai brothels are often favourable to the human rights abuses many women face or live in fear of in Burma.

In Mae Sai there are three main places of work for sex workers: brothels, karaoke bars and massage parlours. Each of these places offer different services and have different conditions to work. However, social benefits are invisible in each of these workplaces, and days off are rare. Generally a sex worker will have 1-2 days off in a month.

According to Empower records, there are currently approximately 400 women working in Mae Sai. Yet this number is constantly in fluctuation

because Mae Sai is generally a starting point for sex workers. If the opportunity arises, often Burmese women will move to Chiang Mai, Bangkok, or if they are really lucky, to Phuket. This is because the working conditions, opportunities and salaries are much better in these locations.

Brothels

The situation is different in every brothel, so it is difficult to generalize. Therefore I will give the most basic non-biased review of the circumstances that I am able.

The managers of brothels are generally called Mae or Pae (Thai for mother or father). The sex workers are commonly referred to as their children. Sometimes women are expected to live at their brothel, but this is not always the case. Nonetheless, they are expected to be on call 24 hours a day. In Mae Sai, the managers receive 60% of sex worker's earnings. The worker earns 40%. Brothels usually do not offer extra services; therefore, the customer is only paying for sex. Women working in brothels work under the worst conditions. Expected to sleep with many customers, it is not uncommon for a woman to have 18 clients in one night. Customers usually pay between 150 and 350 baht (between four-eight Canadian dollars). With a 60% wage cut, the woman does not earn a significant amount. On top of the wage cut, often women acquire a loan. Expected surgery such as nose jobs, room and board, and travel costs are common debts. The unfortunate reality is that it is nearly impossible to pay off these debts with such a low salary, wage cuts, and family payments.[38]

Massage Parlours

There are two main types of massage parlours: traditional massage and modern massage. In traditional massage parlours,

the women are not on display for men to choose. In contrast, modern massage means that women are on display. Modern massage includes a bath, as well as massage and sex. Sex is not necessary; however, it is generally expected. If a woman does not want to have sex with a customer, they are usually not forced to. Workers in massage parlours generally get 1/3 of the pay cut. In Mae Sai, women are paid every 15 days. Usually the working conditions in massage parlours are better than in brothels and karaoke bars.

A positive factor about massage parlours is that women cannot get fined for illegal work. This is because massage is offered and sex is not publicized. The drawback is that women, especially migrants, do not get any social welfare.

Karaoke Bars

Like massage parlours, there are two main types of karaoke bars. The first is the high class closed karaoke bar. Burmese sex workers are rarely employed here. The second is the road-side open karaoke bar. This is the type of karaoke bar that operates in Mae Sai. Karaoke and drinks are sold in these establishments. Sex is not always an outcome; however, it is usually also expected by customers.

Unsafe working conditions and overly intoxicated customers are frequent workplace dangers. Another drawback is that if one is late they get fined 2 baht per minute in Mae Sai. The rate and frequency women are paid varies. Some women are paid daily and some every 15 days.[39]

Problems Sex Workers Face

Deportation:

One of the biggest fears women face as illegal migrant workers is deportation. The consequences for a woman who has crossed the border illegally upon arrival back to Burma can be terrible. Often it is

unknown what happens to these women. However, the stigma attached to sex work is clearly known and is not good. Arrest and deportation is not uncommon in border towns. During my research, I regularly saw trucks of women being deported back across the border.

Brothel raids by the police often amount to arrest and deportation. Brothels are illegal in Thailand. However, the police have accounts on every operating brothel. In fact, the police personally benefit from the presence of these establishments. In Mae Sai, brothels pay off police 1000 baht (thirty Canadian dollars) per woman per month. The amount the brothels pay the police is different in each province because it is based on personal negotiation. Brothel raids are usually in response to outside criticism or for an authority to further their own career.

Health Concerns:

The health system in Thailand is legally bound to give treatment to anyone who is ill.[40] However, this is not publicized and therefore it is widely unknown to most migrant workers. Fear of arrest or deportation and lack of communication skills often prohibits women from using public health facilities.

Burmese workers often suffer from malnutrition when entering Thailand due to economic disparity. This puts them at greater risk for contracting diseases as a sex worker. The risk of contracting HIV/AIDS for a migrant sex worker is very high. This is not because they are engaging in sex work. It is because they are put at high risk because of unsafe working conditions; for example, a lack of condom distribution, unclean facilities, and unattainable customer quotas. There has been much interest and research about the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS amongst Burmese sex workers. However, it is almost impossible to obtain accurate statistics because “counting sex workers is like

counting stars.”[41] Sex workers are generally very informed about precautions to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS. This is because there are many education programs aimed to educate sex workers about health issues. As a result, the prevalence of HIV/AIDS is declining among sex workers in Thailand. Unfortunately, the prevalence is rising among students and housewives.[42]

Discrimination:

The amount of discrimination Burmese migrants have to face living in Thailand is astonishing. Add the label of “prostitute” on top of being Burmese, and you are a guaranteed mark. There is literally no space in the context of Thai culture to celebrate being Burmese. If one does not adhere to Thai cultural norms including dress, speech, action, and music, it is close to impossible to be accepted. As a result, it is rare to meet a Burmese sex worker who does not look, act, and talk like a “Thai.” And it is even rarer to come across a Burmese sex worker who will speak openly about her life in Burma. The irony is that most Burmese women preferred their life at home. Economic and political conditions out of their control force them to adopt a new life.

Another aspect to discrimination is through victimization by the press and academics. While many Burmese women working in the worst brothels could be classified as “victims,” doing so does not help the situation. There have been countless books and scholarly articles written about the prostitution problem in Thailand. According to Leslie Ann, the foreign author of the book *Sex and Borders*, “the prostitute is always problematic. Seen as an agent, she is an accomplice in the destruction of national identity; seen as a victim she is sympathetic but also powerless.”[43] Many of the books I read during my research described the prostitute in the same light: as a victim with

no power, no choice, and no identity. Yet the reality is that sex workers are people, they are friends, and they do have an identity, if society allows them. They do have a voice which can be heard, if we listen and do not discriminate.

Looking Forward

Empower Mae Sai

Each Empower center in Thailand works with a different target population of sex workers. Empower Mae Sai is situated strategically in order to work with migrant workers, particularly Burmese migrants. It is difficult to engage in work with this target population because of the fact that the business is very “underground.” Nonetheless, Empower has the ability to connect with the Burmese. This is because the staff have experience in the industry, as Burmese migrants or previous sex workers. Therefore, there is a common-thread of understanding which breaks the conception of “underground work.” Empower works on the basis that every woman has the right to choose their profession as long as they are safe. This enables them to have direct contact with women working in the sex industry giving them the ability to address needs, wants, and desires without misconception.

Undocumented migrants usually do not have access to the resources to protect themselves; therefore, they are the most vulnerable in the sex industry. Empower strives to help decrease this vulnerability by giving women the opportunity, knowledge, and resources for them to protect themselves.

Education, advocacy, and outreach are the three main components of Empower, which many other programs fountain out of. In Mae Sai, the non-formal education program includes: Thai language, English language, sewing classes, life-skills classes, and health education.

Health education is performed at the Empower clinic which is open 6 days a week. The clinic distributes information about HIV/STD's, performs STD checks, performs health check ups, distributes condoms, and acts like a drop-in center. Thai classes, English classes and sewing classes are held daily at the Empower school. Life-skills classes are on a weekly basis and are subject to women's wants and needs. Conferences and meetings about border health, HIV/AIDS, STDs, and migrant rights are held monthly. Women's rights and law are discussed daily through the advocacy component of Empower. Freedom and awareness marches are not uncommon. Because Burmese migrants are unable to go to state education institutes, Empower has been registered as a non-formal education school. Therefore, students of Empower are issued student identification cards which enable them to seek employment elsewhere in Thailand with more legitimacy.

Outreach is an integral part to the Empower program. This is because women who are unable to visit the clinic and school are able to be reached. The outreach team visits entertainment places weekly distributing information about STD's/HIV, health, condoms, emergency contacts, Thai language, and women's rights. Psychological counselling is also offered. One of the most important components to outreach is the ability for women working under harsh conditions to receive friendship outside of their box. Friendship is the first step Empower takes in order to distribute vital information. This is the step that many other organizations fail to recognize.

What Migrant Sex Workers Want in a Workplace

In this section “we” will be used to describe what sex workers want.

First, and foremost we want sex work to be decriminalized so that we will not be arrested for our work. We want to be treated like equals under the labour law. We want to be recognized for our work. We want to have a fair pay and share of our income. We want social benefits such as: occupational health and safety, days off, sick leave, overtime pay, maternity leave, and compensation when customers abuse us. We want to stop ignorant “raid and rescues.” We want to be apart of the community. We want to celebrate our own culture. We want the ability to travel without fear of deportation. We want equal opportunity in education. We want our voice heard.

Recommendations

“We dream of peace so that we can return home in safety.”

Until life under the SPDC gives peace a chance in Burma, women will continue to migrate illegally to Thailand. Therefore, it is time for the Thai government to take more responsibility while networking with grassroots NGOs and INGOs to improve the situation Burmese women face. Furthermore, the solution should not be to wait until Burma starts to engage in its seven step process to democratization.[44]

Policies need to be made to respect women’s rights as migrants. Women should be granted the freedom to travel and migrate independently. Sex work should be decriminalized and protected under Thai and international labour laws. Work permits should be granted for sex workers enabling women to access vocational training and movement. Adult women should not be arrested nor deported as a result of measures aimed to protect trafficked children. Women in need of assistance should have appropriate services suiting their needs. Lastly, legal authorities and police should be more

informed about the situation facing women in Burma today.

If the Burmese military regime takes the responsibility of democratization, this situation could improve much more efficiently. However, to count on this would be naïve. Therefore, it is in the responsibility of other governments and international organizations to urge for a transition for democracy. Many attempts have been made by the international community, but the action is not enough. We need action with sustainable answers. And we need it now. Women are suffering, and this must stop. Amid the suffering, we must not victimize, ignore, judge, or discriminate. Instead, we must act with an alliance of understanding.

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