

We don't do sex work because we are poor, we do sex work to end our poverty

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Empower Foundation

Many Thai women become sex workers not because they are poor, but in order to escape poverty. In doing so they have become providers and heads of households, and they deserve respect for that accomplishment.



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Women in Thailand hold the responsibility and pride of supporting the family. In modern times the needs of the family cannot be grown by hand, but rather women must find cash to provide. Opportunities for women with no qualifications and no capital are limited. The work we can find is undervalued and is always the same every day. There are few surprises and no bonuses.

A small number of us, after many minimum wage jobs, decide to apply for work in karaoke lounges, massage parlours, brothels or bars – we decide to become sex workers. We are making a choice between the options available to us. We cannot choose options that do not exist.

Corrupt authorities use the law to make us pay for our human rights.

As sex workers we earn at least double the minimum wage. We make enough to support five other adults in our families. The work can be hard and sometimes boring, but it is rarely the same. There are lots of surprises and many bonuses.

In the modern form of sex work in Thailand we apply for our jobs and are hired or rejected. Our workplaces have regulations. There is no pimp, mafia, or gang – there is only the motorcycle taxi guy and the business manager. Our work concerns are similar to those of other workers, e.g. inadequate paid leave, lack of social security coverage, occupational health and safety.

We work to buy land and build houses. We work to pay taxes (including bribes to corrupt police), to finance the university fees of our brothers or the rental costs of shops for our sisters, and to cover any other emergencies. We become the bread winners and so make many of the big decisions for our families. Sex workers also build up the country. As far back as 1998, the International Labour Organisation reported that we were sending \$300 million home to rural areas each year, larger than any development project. We are also the backbone of the tourism industry, which makes up around 10% of Thailand's annual GDP.

Sex work has become a way out of generational poverty for us and our families that also boosts the country's wealth. We don't do sex work because we are poor, we do sex work to end our poverty.

Adapting to survive

Sex workers in Thailand have been organising, resisting and responding to change for centuries.



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Each generation of sex workers has had to invent and learn new skills that in earlier years were never imagined. We adapted to the end of slavery and the arrival of a cash economy. We keep track of world events, politics, economics, and sports to understand our customers. We learned about passports, visas, and travel. We used post cards, telegrams, pagers, emails, mobile phones, web cams, and now apps.

We want to know, if society were asked to think of us, not as criminals, immoral women, or helpless victims, but as humans, mothers, workers, and family providers, what laws and systems could be imagined?

We have also greeted many new customers over the years. Starting with the Chinese migrants of the late 1700s, the list also includes Japanese soldiers during world war two,

GI's from the US during the war in Vietnam, American and other allied troops on leave from their wars in the Gulf countries. Despite being denied schooling we learned new languages – Chinese, Japanese and English. We learned about dealing with the trauma of war. We learned the customs of many countries. Today we meet more than 15 million men from every corner of the world when they visit amazing Thailand each year.

Society has relied on sex workers to keep working, bringing in the money to mend the problems.

In 1960, when the 'Suppression and Prevention of Prostitution Act' first made it illegal to buy or sell sex, we had to learn another new skill – working on top of criminal law. We quickly learned that corrupt authorities use the law to make us pay for our human rights; the right to work, the right to safety and justice. We learned that criminal law is a way to suppress our rights – it is not designed to promote them.

In the late 1980s the country was building up its tourism and industry. Thailand welcomed millions of tourists. Thai sex workers travelled throughout the world, while our neighbours from Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar, and China were coming to Thailand to build a better life. Moving to work is our path of resistance. We refuse to accept the situations or conditions we were born into and dream of a better life. Migration is our solution, not our problem.

However, instead of the governments working to promote safe migration the 'Anti-trafficking Law' landed on top of us. We learned that anti- trafficking law does not improve our working conditions, increase our options, or end our poverty. It does not reduce armed conflict in our homelands. It does not reduce corruption. It does not increase support for children and minors. It does not demand governments or society respect us or our basic human rights. Crucially, anti-trafficking law and practice do not reduce 'trafficking' or provide justice to workers in such situations in any industry, including the sex industry. We know this, because our organisation detailed the impact of anti-trafficking law and practice on sex workers' human rights in its 2012 community research report, '[Hit & Run](#)'.

The need to stand together

Instead of being admired as activists, leaders, workers, and providers we are called bad women, criminals, and victims. We are portrayed as weak, stupid, and childlike. Our contribution to the family and the country is ignored, or redefined as a burden or exploitation.



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Increasing stigma and law has destroyed the links between us. Our friends who stayed working in the factory, on the land, or in a shop have become distant and afraid of associating with bad women and criminals. Organisations that used to cooperate together have become confused both at national and international levels. Women's groups are not sure whether to work with sex worker organisations or not. They are unsure whether to see sex workers and their organisations as criminals, as victims of criminals, or as equal partners deserving of respect. The women's movement is fractured. Projects had their funding threatened when the George W. Bush, the former US president, introduced the 'anti-prostitution pledge' in 2003. This pledge was declared unconstitutional in 2013, but only for organisations working in the US. It requires that organisations funded by USAID must not take any action or position which could "promote, support, or advocate the legalisation or practice of prostitution") Sensational reporting and hysteria have reinforced the confusion, resulting in many groups becoming afraid to stand openly with sex workers.

And so we must stand together.

For 30 years we have been organising as Empower – Thailand's national sex worker organisation. Around 50,000 sex workers have been a part of Empower. They advocate for their rights and against stigma, their efforts helped by their presence in work places, health counselling, and trainings in spheres such as Thai literacy, health education, English language, IT, and legal rights. We are sex workers working in all sectors of the industry. We love our work, hate our work, and, like most workers in any job, are often somewhere in between. We are just starting out, or have years of experience, are planning to change jobs, or retire. We are Thai, ethnic minorities, and migrants from neighbouring countries.

We want to know, if society were asked to think of us, not as criminals, immoral women, or helpless victims, but as humans, mothers, workers, and family providers, what laws and systems could be imagined? How should the state treat women who are head of the

family?

While we wait for an answer all around the world, people are still asking: 'prostitution... good or bad? Legal, illegal, decriminalised...what is best?' The debate goes on and on while we are still providing for our families, building up the country, advising each government that comes along, trying to stand up with others all while continuing to work on top of a mountain of stigma and laws.