

Sara Peracca, John Knodel, and Chanpen Saengtienchai

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# Can Prostitutes Marry? Thai Attitudes Toward Female Sex Workers

by Sara Peracca, John Knodel, and Chanpen Saengtienchai

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**Abstract:** This study explores popular attitudes towards female sex workers in Thailand by examining the general public's perceptions of a prostitute's ability to marry based on focus group data. The tentative conclusion that emerges from our analysis is that a relative lack of severe or lasting social stigma is an important part of a Thai context that facilitates recruitment into prostitution and permits it to persist on a widespread scale. We interpret this conclusion in terms of the broader value system in Thai society. We recognize that although our findings are comparative in nature, there is a lack information from other countries on how those who provide commercial sex are viewed by the general population. Therefore we call for research on this topic as well as on how sex workers view themselves, and how this translates into actual behavior.

**Dataset used:** Focus group transcripts from the project "The Influence of Primary Female Partners and Male Peers on Male Extramarital Sexual Behavior in Thailand"

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Address correspondence to Sara Peracca, Population Studies Center, 1225 S. University Ave., Ann Arbor, MI 48104. Fax: 313-998-7415. E-mail: speracca@psc.lsa.umich.edu.

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## **Can Prostitutes Marry? Thai Attitudes Toward Female Sex Workers**

### **Introduction**

The HIV/AIDS epidemic in Thailand is now relatively advanced having moved from limited risk groups to the more general public, including women and children (Brown and Sittitrai, 1995). The rapid transmission of HIV has largely taken place because Thailand has a sexual culture in which prostitution is a major component (Ford and Koetsawang, 1991; Knodel et al., 1996). Female sex workers (FSW) who are part of the HIV highly infected core exist within a heterosexual network where Thai men are believed to act as a conduit linking FSWs with the general population (Brown et al., 1994; Morris et al., 1996). Currently, there is widespread recognition of the risk of HIV infection associated with patronizing sex workers (Ingham, 1995; Knodel, Soottipong and Saengtienchai, 1997). Consequently, considerable change has occurred, both with respect to decreases in the number and patronage of brothel-based prostitutes and increased use of condoms in commercial sex encounters (Hananberg, Rojanapithayakorn, Kunasol and Sokal, 1994; Hanenberg and Rojanapithayakorn, 1997; Nelson et al., 1996; Rojanapithayakorn and Hanenberg, 1996). Nevertheless, substantial numbers of Thai men continue to visit prostitutes and women/girls continue to enter the commercial sex field.

It is important to recognize that both entry into commercial sex on the part of FSWs and their patronage by male customers is societally driven. Thus effectively addressing the continued transmission of HIV/AIDS through patronage of prostitutes in Thailand requires a comprehensive understanding of the social context of sexual behavior and prostitution (de Zalduondo, 1991; Ford and Koetsawang, 1991; Wawer et al, 1996, p. 454). Considerable progress in advancing our knowledge of Thailand's sexual culture, and particularly of the social context of male commercial sex patronage, has recently been made (e.g. Ford and Koetsawang, 1991; VanLandingham, et al., 1995; Maticka-Tyndale, 1997). Such research has included detailed examination of attitudes towards men patronizing FSWs (e.g. Tangchonlatip and Ford, 1993; Knodel et al., 1996, VanLandingham, 1997). One aspect of the situation, however, that so far has received little attention in Thailand, or for that matter virtually anywhere else (Basow and Campanile, 1990), concerns the way in which the general public views women who enter prostitution.

This study explores popular attitudes towards FSWs by examining the general public's perceptions of a prostitute's ability to marry based on focus group data. The tentative conclusion that emerges from our analysis is that a relative lack of severe or lasting social stigma is an important part of a Thai context that facilitates recruitment into prostitution and permits it to persist on a widespread scale. Campaigns to stop the

continued HIV transmission in Thailand can hopefully benefit by taking this aspect of the societal setting into account.

## **Background**

To better interpret popular views of prostitution in Thailand, it is important to clarify what we mean by the term and to describe its scale and diversity. For convenience, we use the terms prostitution and commercial sex interchangeably<sup>1</sup>. The key distinguishing features between commercial and noncommercial sex relationships include the explicitness of the financial exchange as well as the duration and degree of commitment in the relationship. In commercial relationships the provision of sex by one partner is exchanged for direct payment by the other. Such payment is normally required for each sexual transaction and no further obligation on the part of either party is expected. Moreover, no prior social relationship between the two parties is necessary for the sexual engagement to take place.

Commercial sex is widespread in Thailand and takes diverse forms. Most popular accounts of Thai prostitution grossly exaggerate the number of commercial sex workers (with estimates ranging up to 2.8 million). Nevertheless, from most perspectives even the more realistic estimates that place the number of female sex workers between 100,000 and 200,000 are substantial (Boonchalaksi and Guest 1994; Hanenberg and Rojanapithayakorn, 1997). This is the case despite the fact that officially prostitution in its most direct forms has been illegal since 1960<sup>2</sup>. Many accounts of prostitution in Thailand also stress its connection to the tourist industry and the stationing of American troops in the country in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Enloe, 1990; Thitsa, 1990) but these reports are misleading given that the industry has deep historical roots and largely serves indigenous demand with the large majority of clients being Thai men (Bamber, Hewison, and Underwood, 1993; Boonchalaksi and Guest, 1994; Wilson and Henley, 1994).

Noncommercial sexual relations in Thailand are quite varied ranging from casual encounters to marriage. They share the common feature that they do not involve direct per act compensation. Most forms require some prior social relationship as well as some

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<sup>1</sup> Our use of the words prostitute and prostitution are not intended to convey a pejorative connotation nor to distinguish any particular type of sex worker. We do note that in the Thai language the term typically translated as 'prostitute' (sopheni) has a much more specific and negative meaning referring to brothel workers and street walkers while bar girls, masseurs, cocktail lounge hostesses and the like would be referred to more neutrally as 'service women' (Phuying borikan).

<sup>2</sup> Note that although prostitution was outlawed in 1960, the government legalized massage parlors in 1966 suggesting less than thorough opposition to commercial sex. However, at the end of 1996 a revised law entitled the Prostitute Prevention and Suppression Act took effect. The new law claims to institute stronger penalties against parents, customers, pimps and owners of commercial sex establishments in an attempt to alleviate the victimization of the actual sex worker (Bhatiasevi, 1996). It is too early to know what if any effect it will have on the commercial sex industry. Many women's groups argue that in some ways this law is weaker than previous statutes and while alleviating victimization of the prostitute, it may victimize the parents.

expectation of a continuing involvement although they vary considerably in the degree of emotional and financial commitment. Noncommercial extra-marital female partners of married men often expect some financial or material benefit for their participation in the sexual liaison but typically in the form of gifts, occasional loans, help with the rent, or even total support rather than direct per act payment. Noncommercial sex partners who are supported in full by married men are referred to as minor wives (*mia noi*). Such relationships have apparently been common for centuries in Thailand among the upper strata (Wilson & Henley, 1994). Although most noncommercial sexual relationships of married men are probably of a less committed nature than this, it is the most salient type of noncommercial partner for many Thais because minor wives pose particularly serious threats to the well being of the man's major wife and her children by him (VanLandingham et al., 1995).

Noncommercial sexual relationships in Thailand generally involve a greater linking of material interests and emotional involvements than is the case in the West (Cohen, 1987, p. 232). For example, there are forms of sexual relations whose status as commercial sex is ambiguous such as when money is exchanged for each sexual transaction but is considered to be a gift or gratuity rather than a purchase of sexual services. Additionally, encounters that initially begin as commercial ones, can evolve into more lasting and committed noncommercial relationships. Nevertheless, despite some ambiguity in the line between commercial and noncommercial sex forms, in the vast majority of cases the distinction is undoubtedly clear to those involved.

Commercial sex is a pervasive feature of most urban areas and available in some rural areas, either on special occasions such as festivals and cattle markets or in fixed establishments on an around-the-year basis (Maticka-Tyndale, 1997; Lyttleton, 1994). Overall, there is an enormous range of venues through which commercial sex is offered (Ford and Koetsawang, 1991; Boonchalaksi and Guest, 1994) and a prostitute's status tends to be inferred depending upon the type of establishment in which a prostitute works. These include 1) straightforward brothels that sell only sex, 2) restaurants and bars where the waitresses not only serve food and beverages but also sell sex either on or off the premises 3) massage parlors where sex may be included in the price of a massage or can be purchased for an extra payment, and 4) nightclubs and cafes where singers and hostesses can be available for sex after closing hours. Freelance prostitution ranging from street-walking to loitering in hotel lounges or coffee shops or attending discos is also prevalent.

Most descriptions of commercial sex in Thailand in the recent literature describe its diversity mainly in terms of the different types of establishments and venues through which it is offered. This is but one way to describe how prostitution in Thailand varies. It does not necessarily reflect the dimensions that are both salient to common Thais and that influence their judgments of FSWs. Our focus group discussions make this quite evident. Without trying to be exhaustive or mutually exclusive, some other dimensions along which prostitution varies include the following: 1) the mode of entry into the profession, e.g. whether by force and deceit, through pressure from family, or by free will

within the constraints of the socio-economic situation; 2) the motivation for becoming a FSW, e.g. to assist family or for easier money for oneself; 3) the nature of commitment to work, e.g. as a longer term career or as a shorter term activity with a fixed duration; 4) the price received for rendering of services, i.e. whether low or high priced; 5) whether free lance or employed in an establishment; 6) and whether full-time, part-time or occasional. Although most of these dimensions are interrelated and overlap, one or another may carry particular weight when individual Thais express their judgment regarding the social acceptability of current or former FSWs.

## **Data Sources and Methods**

Data for our analysis of Thai female sex workers comes from focus group discussions held separately with married men and women in Bangkok, two provincial towns in the Central region (Lopburi and Kanchanaburi), and villages in the environs of the two towns. In Bangkok, separate sessions were held with factory workers, residents of organized slums, and middle class occupational groups. The size of the groups ranged from 7 to 10 with most participants between the ages of 25 and 40. Field work took place during the latter part of 1993 and early 1994. Selection of participants was purposive and largely opportunistic and often involved the aid of intermediaries. Details of the design and field methods are described elsewhere (VanLandingham et al., 1994 and 1995).

The main purpose of the focus group discussions was to explore social influences, particularly that of peers and wives, on male extramarital sexual behavior. The sessions proceeded on the basis of prepared guidelines which 'focused' and structured the discussions yet allowed considerable leeway for the informants to express their views of a situation. There were no direct questions included in the guidelines asking about participants' views of female commercial sex work. However, there was an explicit question asking "Would most men object to marrying a woman who engaged in commercial sex work?". Since the question does not specify what is meant by sex work, it undoubtedly conjured up different images to different participants. Sometimes it is obvious from the comments what type of sex worker the speaker has in mind and the dimensions of the situation are prominent in forming the participants' judgment. Other times this is less clear and complicates interpretation. Additional ambiguity arises from the occasional extension of the concept of marriage by some participants to include minor wife relationships. In these cases, the discussion may blur distinction between the chances FSWs have for entering such unions and the possibilities for marriage in the fuller sense of the word.

The discussions were tape recorded, fully transcribed and translated. Our analysis of the focus group data is based on the segments of the discussion prompted by the question on whether men will marry FSWs as represented in both the Thai and English transcripts. Although this question was originally intended to be asked in all 14 focus group sessions, because of time constraints it was omitted in three (Bangkok middle class men, and the urban and rural men's groups in one of the provincial settings). Consequently, data are available for a total of 4 men's groups and 7 women's groups.

The emphasis on urban sites in the research design was deliberate and in line with the main purpose of the focus groups to examine social influences on male extramarital sexual behavior (VanLandingham et al. 1995). Still, the inclusion of at least some rural groups and the purposive selection of several different social class milieus in Bangkok ensure that the data represent the views and behaviors of a fairly wide spectrum of Thai society. As with all qualitative research, however, no claim can be made of representativeness in any statistical sense.

Illustrative verbatim quotations from the focus groups are included in the following analysis. In each quotation, the location and type of group or interviewee from which it is drawn is indicated. In the focus group quotes, participants are identified only when more than one individual is quoted within the same group and then only by the first initial of their first name to protect confidentiality. Sometimes the comments are extracted from a longer discussion, omitting intervening statements for the sake of brevity.

## **Findings**

### *Views on Marriage Possibilities*

The focus group discussions clearly show that despite a common negative view of commercial sex work within Thai society, the stigma attached to such work is not sufficient to seriously hamper a prostitute's chance for marriage. In every group, there was general agreement that FSWs find husbands. The discussions indicated that for some men, if not all, a woman's involvement in commercial sex is not an insuperable barrier to their choice of a wife. There was an overwhelming consensus on this point regardless of gender, rural-urban residence, or socio-economic groupings as targeted by our study. While men are thought not to purposely seek current or former prostitutes as wives, marriage with a woman with a history of commercial sex work was common enough that in four of the eleven groups participants made reference to such marriages among friends or acquaintances.

If men love them and don't mind the past, they'll marry them. (Bangkok slum man)

It's possible [for prostitutes to marry] and there are many cases now. If they changed their mind and quit working... Men who love them... They don't mind. (Lopburi rural man)

If he likes her, he won't mind. One of my husband's friend is married to a singer and they live together. They love each other... She became a housewife and looks after her children. (Bangkok middle class woman)

Mrs. L: There are many men who give such girls a chance.

Mrs. T1: Men don't mind.

Mrs. T2: They can have good husbands and raise their status.  
(Lopburi urban women)

There was some indication, from two female focus groups, that prostitutes are chosen sometimes to be a minor wife or mistress rather than as a primary wife. In such cases, even though the woman gives up her job as a sex worker, she does not attain full status as a married woman. However she still enjoys many of the benefits of a marriage-like relationship.

Rich men take them out [from their jobs] and support them but they have to quit their jobs. The men don't marry them, they just live together. They don't have to work and are well-provided for even though they didn't have wedding ceremonies.  
(Bangkok slum woman)

Most participants, however, when discussing the possibilities of men marrying prostitutes appear to mean that men will take them as a full wife and not just as a mistress. Thus participants commonly acknowledged that female sex workers have a chance at experiencing married life provided the woman and her husband truly love and understand each other. As several of the above quotes indicate, participants viewed love as a critical factor not only to ensure that the initial marriage would occur, but also to ensure success in continuing the marriage.

The discussions suggested that there were several different scenarios through which a woman who engages in prostitution can find a husband: by prior agreement; by meeting him as a customer; and by meeting him after quitting commercial sex. One male group referred to the special situation in some areas of northern Thailand where it has become common for families to contract daughters to work for fixed periods in brothels throughout Thailand. This phenomenon is well known among the Thai public (see e.g. Ekachai, 1990, pp. 168-179; Chanjaraen, 1994). The participants in the focus groups that discussed this issue believe a stint as a commercial sex worker is considered in these areas to be almost normal for at least some social strata. Under these circumstances, a young woman before her departure may already have a boyfriend whom she has agreed to marry when she returns.

Mr. L: [In the north] they may have agreed to marry before the woman leaves to work to make some money to help the family. When she returns, they get married. It's acceptable in some areas.

Mr. P: They understand each other. (Lopburi urban men)

A recent study of several communities in the north where it was not uncommon for women to enter commercial sex reveals that many women later returned home and married men living in the same community (Limanonda, 1996). While the study does not indicate if the marriages were the result of prior arrangements, it supports the focus group

participants' views that commercial sex work was not highly stigmatized in such communities.

A second and more commonly suggested route to marriage is to meet the future husband as a customer. According to numerous focus group participants, customers may form a relationship with a particular FSW and then offer to support and marry her out of sympathy or pity and a wish to help her leave the job. This view was expressed in one of the men's groups and several of the women's groups.

Mr. S: [Soldiers] go as customers and then take pity.

Mr. P: They sympathize with the girl when she tells her story. They feel sorry for her.

Mr. S: Then the man accepts to take care of her.

Mr. P: Sometimes he may request the girl to leave and to live together with him [as husband and wife]. (Lopburi urban men)

It is up to each case. If they really love them and pity them, they may agree to marry them. (Kanchanaburi rural woman)

Mrs. K: Men may pity them.

Mrs. S: Most want to give those women a life-opportunity.

Mrs. K: A chance not to do such jobs.

Mrs. S: Some really love them. (Lopburi rural women)

Although the focus groups recognized the role of pity and sympathy, they also indicated that a commercial sex worker needs to begin a new life if she was to be married. In cases where the woman is still working as a prostitute, there is agreement that she must give up her occupation and behave in a manner befitting marriage. In part this is reflected in the idea that men will marry the FSW out of pity and to help her build a new life. However, it also likely reflects the double standard in Thai society which, while to some extent condoning male marital infidelity, unambiguously condemns female infidelity (Knodel et al., 1996).

Mr. D: She has to give it up and be a good girl.

Mr. N: The past is not important if they can begin a new life. (Bangkok slum men)

Moderator: Then these women have to stop after they are taken as wives?

Mr. L: Certainly. Completely...

Mr. S: The woman has to stop working like that. She can't go back... The man won't want that. (Lopburi urban men)

Although focus group participants believe that the vast majority of men who consider marrying a FSW would insist that she cease such work, several participants mentioned exceptions in which the man takes the role of pimp. In these cases, the man is

attracted to a prostitute as a marital partner because he wishes to live off her earnings. This is by no means a predominant theme but it did arise in two of the group discussions.

While the vast majority of customers undoubtedly do not become emotionally involved with the prostitutes they patronize, the fact that women providing commercial sex have opportunities to meet so many men in the course of their work may be seen by some participants to actually enhance their chances of finding a husband, especially one who is well off. The perception that a FSW needs to be attractive as a prerequisite of her work is also thought to facilitate chances that some customer will want to establish an exclusive noncommercial relationship with her. Although only implicit, these points seem to underlie the following comments from several women's focus groups.

They get better men than we do since they are in the rich circle. (Bangkok slum woman)

These women are pretty so they can find [a husband]. (Bangkok factory woman)

Mrs. M: Actually, they have better chances than we do.

Mrs. T: They can become soldiers' or policemen's wives but we can only be laborers' wives... Some men like them and they can choose...

Mrs. M: They are good at choosing and most end up with good lives. (Lopburi urban women)

Thus several women participants expressed envy or even resentment that prostitutes have opportunities to find a "rich" husband in contrast to non-prostitutes or they expressed disapproval that FSWs would only be interested in rich men as husbands. Quite likely in these discussions participants typically have in mind high-priced sex workers with some discretionary power to choose customers as opposed to the low-priced, brothel-based prostitutes that seem to dominate thinking when pity is discussed as a motivating force behind marriages with prostitutes.

A third situation in which a FSW can marry occurs when she meets her husband after leaving commercial sex work. According to focus group participants, the husband may or may not know that his prospective wife is a former prostitute. In cases in which he is unaware, presumably her prior occupation is not at issue. However, as the first set of quotations presented indicates, in the opinions of participants, even knowing the past history does not necessarily deter marriage. Several participants pointed out that a former FSW's monetary savings could be an appealing asset in the marriage market thus helping her chances for finding a husband.

Some [men] don't know they're prostitutes and they don't tell those men they are. Some just think they are rich... They don't know anything about those girls but they are pretty. (Bangkok slum man)

These women have a good opportunity. Not every woman is there to stay. After they get enough money, they go back home and marry a man in their community... After they have the money, they move to a new place and build a new house. This way, they meet new men who don't know about their past. You know, many women around here have gotten good husbands who work as lieutenants and majors in the army... We don't know anything. We meet her, like her, and marry her. (Lopburi urban man)

Mr. C: It depends on each person whether he likes her.

Mr. D: Sometimes the man knows the truth.

Mr. C: They may get married if the man comes from other provinces. But for men living in the same village, they may not want to marry prostitutes. (Lopburi rural men)

Related to how the possibility of marriage arises, the participants implied that certain types of men were especially likely to marry FSWs. As noted earlier, such men include clients of commercial sex establishments (since they would have more exposure to meeting FSWs). Another characteristic cited was that the men tended to be wealthy. In the latter case, sometimes the implication is that the FSW would become the man's minor wife or mistress, i.e. a luxury that a less well-off Thai man could not afford. Some participants, particularly those in Lopburi where a sizable military base is located, singled out soldiers as likely mates, stressing that usually officers rather than enlisted men married sex workers. Police officers were also specifically mentioned as possible mates to commercial sex workers. This probably reflects a perceived close connection between police and the commercial sex industry through illegal but common arrangements between police and owners of commercial sex establishments that allow the establishments to operate relatively freely (Bangkok Post, 1996).

### *Social Stigma*

Despite the prevalent belief that prostitutes have ample opportunities to marry, the focus group participants also make clear that commercial sex work is generally viewed negatively and that there is some enduring social stigma attached to a woman for having been engaged in it. The predominant view that emerges from the discussions is that while some men are willing to marry prostitutes, a woman's current or past involvement in commercial sex was generally still seen as a detriment to her marriage prospects. For some men, such a background would be unacceptable for a potential wife.

It's not acceptable in the Thai society [to marry a prostitute]. (Lopburi urban man)

Formerly we did mind about [marrying a prostitute] because it is wrong in Thai culture. (Lopburi rural man)

Such blanket statements were uncommon, however, and typically qualified in subsequent discussion. A far more frequent expression of the social stigma attached to

having been a FSW is that her history should be kept unknown to the community. With the exception of the areas in the north of Thailand where recruitment of young women into prostitution is perceived to be a tradition, participants thought it best if the couple lives where others did not know of the wife's history as a commercial sex worker and her background kept secret. Numerous participants felt that public knowledge of this aspect of the woman would lead to gossip about her or the couple. Encountering such social disapproval amongst others in the community could cause strains on the couple and even lead the marriage to fail.

But okay, if you got her and took her somewhere where people don't know, then there's no problem. (Lopburi urban man)

Mr. K: Sometimes they meet and have a relationship. Then the man may take her home and live with her. There's nothing bad. The man can simply say I got a new woman. It's usual. They keep it between them. They don't have to say she's from a brothel.

Mr. L: If other people know, they talk. And then, they won't be able to live there anymore. To put it simply, you must care about people in the community also... If they talk a lot every day, what would your wife think? (Lopburi urban men)

Besides worrying about community reaction, participants commented extensively on how other family members, particularly the man's parents, might react to their son's choice of a wife who had been a FSW. Opinions are mixed among our participants. They range from seeing no problem, to reluctant acceptance into the family for the son's sake, to unqualified opposition. Most common was the view that in-laws would be against the marriage.

Moderator: What about the parents? It's their son?

Mr. L: We won't tell. We don't have to say where the woman comes from. (Lopburi urban man)

We can accept them but we cannot guarantee that our families will. (Bangkok slum man)

We wouldn't want people to gossip about our daughter-in-law. And we must see among us that they really love each other and she's really going to stop [being a prostitute]. For our son's sake, for his happiness, we can accept that. (Lopburi urban man)

Mrs M: People nowadays even mothers-in-law, don't mind such girls.

Mrs. C: They can live together if husbands and wives understand each other. (Lopburi urban women)

Some participants associate being a prostitute with negative character traits for which entry into the commercial sex trade may be initially selective or which might

develop as a result of the experience. From this vantage point, those who willingly entered this type of work on their own were viewed particularly unfavorably. It was believed that these women were involved in commercial sex as a means to obtain easy money. They were viewed as greedy individuals rather than women working out of a sense of family obligation.

Mr. L: There are two types [of prostitutes]. Those willing and those not willing. Some are willing to come work as prostitutes since they can make a lot of money.

Mr. P: They are willing because they like it and they have money to spend.  
(Lopburi urban men)

They won't take farmers like us. They don't want to work hard. (Lopburi rural man)

Mrs. C: These women won't take poor men... who can't afford them. Only one lipstick costs the whole amount of his salary. (Bangkok factory woman)

Besides potential social disapproval of a spouse who was a former FSW, several other disadvantages were raised. In one men's group and one women's group, individuals mentioned the possibility that the wife would go back to commercial sex work, causing considerable shame to the husband given the strong and almost universal disapproval of female marital infidelity in Thailand referred to earlier. A somewhat related disadvantage mentioned in one men's group was the possibility that the wife's past behavior will prey on the husband's mind later and undermine the marriage. Finally, one women's group brought up the threat of AIDS as a deterrent to marrying commercial sex workers. Men are thought to fear marrying FSWs as a result of the current HIV/AIDS epidemic and the well publicized high prevalence of HIV among prostitutes. Given that these points arose only rarely, they are apparently perceived to be a secondary deterrent compared to the more common threat of potential social disapproval.

### *Moderating Influences*

The focus group discussions reveal both widespread agreement that many men are willing to marry prostitutes and the common view that there is social stigmatization of such marriages. In some sense these appear to be contradictory views. They could simply reflect opposing opinions among different participants. However, this does not seem to be the case. Analysis of the transcripts reveals that sometimes the same individual holds both views. Instead, the explanation lies in other aspects of the Thai value system that moderate the deterrent effect of social disapproval of prostitutes. In particular, the discussions stressed the primacy of individual decisions in spousal choice and that a sense of sympathy and pity for the woman's situation tempers the social stigma attached to being a prostitute, at least in the cases where a woman's involvement in the commercial sex business is seen as having been a sacrifice for the benefit of their family.

As noted in numerous studies of Thai society, both the choice of spouse and the timing of marriage are considered largely decisions for the individual couple to make themselves (Pramualratana, Havanon and Knodel, 1985; Knodel et al., 1987). Thus marriage between a man and a prostitute is seen mainly as a personal matter between the couple. Some participants quite explicitly stated this as an important reason why prostitutes had a chance to marry. This appears to be a common view of both men and women as well as participants in urban and rural settings.

Moderator: Will village people accept these type of women when they return home?

Mr. C: It doesn't matter because it's their own business. They didn't do any harm to the village. (Lopburi rural man)

Mr. P: Those who want to do that on his own will [are the ones who marry prostitutes].

Mr. C: It depends on the will of each person.

Mt. T: Individual decision. (Lopburi rural men)

Given the sense that marriage is viewed primarily as a personal decision, participants felt that the views of non-family members should not unduly affect the couple's wish to marry. Even in the case of opposition of family members, ultimately it was the choice for the couple as implied by the comments reviewed above. In a more narrow sense, the participants concentrated on the man's decision rather than the woman's because it was he who had to decide whether to accept a wife who had been engaged in commercial sex work. At the same time, there was a recognition that the couple needed mutual understanding to withstand possible social rejection.

Still it is up to [the men] whether they really love the girls or not. If they do, they don't mind their background. (Bangkok slum woman)

Good understanding is the most important factor for husbands and wives. (Lopburi urban woman)

Mrs. N1: If they love them, understand them, they may reach an agreement.

Mrs. S: It's up to each person. People are different.

Mrs N2: They may love them and take their background as the past. Women won't go back to that career. There might be some cases. (Bangkok slum women)

The sense of pity and sympathy that the participants stated led some men to eventually marry FSWs was shared by many focus group participants themselves. Numerous groups conveyed the sense that these women deserved forgiveness and understanding for the commercial sex experience that they had endured either unwilling or due to their desire to help their parents and siblings. They referred to their belief that many women enter the profession due to impoverished family situations. Rather than blame the women, they see them as victims of societal circumstances.

Mr. D: We can forgive them if they can give it up.

Mr. C: They might do it out of necessity, right? They might do it for their family... It's up to us whether we mind it or not...

Mr. D: We have to understand their environment. That is, they may come from very poor families and have to do it... The parents are poor so the women had to do it for their sake. (Bangkok slum men)

Mr. L: We don't blame the women. We need to look at the society. We must understand that they are not willing, they don't know where to go. If they have a choice, they won't do it...

Mr. P: Sometimes we understand them, why they have to be away, separated from the family...

Mr. K: Some women were made to work like that because of their parents. (Lopburi urban men)

This pity seems largely directed toward women who enter the trade out of a desire or obligation to help their family. Thus it is probably restricted largely to prostitutes based in brothels or similar establishments where they have little discretionary control over either accepting customers or switching jobs because of contractual arrangements between the brothel and her parents. Thus, although many expressed disapproval of the actual occupation, many did not hold resentment against the commercial sex workers but rather felt sympathy and forgiveness towards them.

## **Discussion**

The findings presented above are largely consistent with our understanding of Thai society and its prevailing value system as revealed by previous studies. Here we explicate some of these links in an effort to place our findings within a societal context.

### *Buddhism and Thai Values*

Personal Responsibility. Discussions of the nature of Thai society and many of its more specific aspects including prostitution are often linked to the population's adherence to the teachings of Theravada Buddhism (e.g. Limanonda, 1995). Most Thais accept reincarnation and believe that the degree of suffering that a person experiences in one life is determined by the person's karma, i.e. the sum of the physical, verbal and cognitive actions in past lives (Vyanjana, 1992). According to the 'law of karma', good actions earn merit and bad actions demerit, and both alter one's karma with implications for the extent of suffering to be experienced in one's current or next incarnation (Muecke, 1992, p. 893). Thus deliberate activities to make merit are a common concern for much of the population. There is also a realization that a misdeed, whether discovered or not, is irrevocably a part of a person's karma (Klausner, 1987, p. 202)-- that is to gain merit or demerit depends on one's intention.

Because it is believed that those who are prostitutes are losing merit, it is generally assumed that their lowered karma results in greater suffering in life (Muecke, 1992). However, if the woman is a prostitute with the intention to help others, her merit accumulated by doing so may counterbalance the demerit of prostituting herself, though this is unlikely. In addition, she could also add to her merit by making donations to monks or temples or sponsoring religious activities, something her relatively higher income would facilitate (Muecke, 1992; Wawer et al., 1996, p. 456). Women who engage in commercial sex hope that acts to earn merit will alter their bad karma and result in less suffering later in this life or the next. Although a prostitute may be accumulating demerit as a result of her current actions, her existence as a prostitute is not viewed by society as being a result of bad karma but rather as a contribution to it (Jackson, 1995, p. 85). This distinction adds to our understanding of the complexities of societal attitudes towards prostitutes in Thailand.

Buddhist thought stresses the importance of an individual's personal responsibility for attaining spiritual liberation while also exhibiting social responsibility (Mole, 1973, pp. 65-68; Phra Rajavaramuni, 1983, p. 16; Vyanjana, 1992, p. 57). Since the negative ramifications of behavior that is considered to be demeritorious (and against the prevailing values) are perceived to specifically affect only the offending individual, such behavior may persist with only minimal societal sanctions. Thus, although at the societal level, being involved in commercial sex is not condoned, others hesitate to intercede in the process by which a woman enters prostitution, the extent to which a man patronizes prostitutes, or a man's decision to marry a woman who has a history of commercial sex work.

Regardless of their different economic, rural-urban or gendered perspectives, the focus groups referred to the ultimate importance of the individual's will. Our findings support this notion of the importance of personal responsibility with respect to marriage to prostitutes and in connection with the patronage of prostitution (VanLandingham et al., 1996). Participants did not view it as their or society's role to discourage a man to marry a woman because of her past as a commercial sex worker. Rather such decisions are viewed as the primary responsibility of the couple and should not be primarily determined by the desires of other family members or the community at large. The lack of strong condemnation of prostitution evident in these discussions is likely to derive from the fact that both the commercial sex worker and the client are seen to be responsible for their own fate, a view that undoubtedly reflects the broader value system as influenced by Buddhist beliefs.

Compassion, Tolerance and Forgiveness. Evidence that Thais, although disapproving of commercial sex as an occupation, do not disparage the female sex worker is evident from this study as well as a 1991 study of school children in two northern provinces (Sittitrai et al., 1992). Many Thais are actually sympathetic towards FSWs when considering the social conditions these women face. Particularly as poverty is viewed as a form of suffering (Phra Rajavaramuni, 1983, p. 37), women attempting to escape poverty by entering commercial sex can experience compassion from other Thais.

Compassion for those afflicted with suffering is a strong Thai value emerging from their Buddhist tradition and is commonly expressed in everyday life (Klausner, 1987, p. 201; Vyanjana, 1992, p. 53; Jackson, 1995, p. 112). There was no indication that any focus group participant felt that FSWs deserved to suffer because of their work, perhaps because goodwill or loving kindness constitutes a main principle of Theravada Buddhist morality (Vyanjana, 1992, p. 59).

Evidence of tolerant behavior, another Thai value, also emerged in the context of a prostitute's ability to marry. The emphasis of freedom of will in Buddhism (Vyanjana, 1992), provides an understanding of the tolerant attitudes towards prostitution that dominated amongst the participants even though, overall at a societal level, they recognized norms that stigmatize prostitution. In general, Thais avoid interference with the affairs of others because, in most cases, such interference is viewed as inappropriate behavior (Mole, 1973, p. 66-67). For example, slander and speaking harsh words or gossiping may be viewed as interference and are considered immoral in Theravada Buddhism (Vyanjana, 1992, p. 125). Furthermore, in some localized areas, particularly in the north of Thailand, not everyone holds a negative perception of the occupation (Sittitrai, 1997), indicating that the norm may not be universal.

Forgiveness is also a strong value of Thai culture, particularly pertaining to past events and behaviors. It may be considered a form of generosity which in Buddhism is linked to the origin of all good actions (Vyanjana, 1992, p. 124). In almost every case when the focus group participants identified the possibility of a prostitute marrying, they stated that the prostitute would no longer be practicing commercial sex. In this sense, being a FSW can be seen as a facet of one's life that has ended. It is understood that if the FSW has quit, she may be forgiven by both society and her future mate. She thus primarily faces stigmatization only while she is actually a female sex worker. The residual stigma may otherwise be modest. In sum, Buddhist notions of individual responsibility, compassion, tolerance and forgiveness reduce what might otherwise be strong social sanctions against prostitution and in this sense can be seen to facilitate its widespread prevalence in Thailand.

### *Market and Familial Duty*

In addition to the presence of these Thai values that counteract the stigmatization of being a FSW and other community social sanctions, other influences operate as well. The monetary needs of the families of women who engage in commercial sex may take precedence and further allow for communal and familial sanctions to be reduced (Ford and Koetsawang, 1991, p. 409; Lyttleton, 1994, p. 261). There are substantially higher economic rewards possible in the sex industry than virtually any other occupational opportunity available to most of the women who become prostitutes (Boonchalaksi and Guest, 1994; Wawer et al., 1996). This realization combined with the motivation for many that they must support their family can act as a strong force to counter the stigma attached to such work. Additionally, given their lack of sufficient education and resources, the alternative jobs available to most women who enter prostitution, especially

those who work in brothels (Wawer, 1996, p. 460), typically have little social status attached to them. In this sense, the stigma attached to being a prostitute does not represent a significant amount of sacrifice in potential respect and esteem and can more easily be outweighed by the monetary benefits derived from commercial sex.

With the understanding that many daughters prioritize their responsibility to support their parents and siblings, prostitutes are often perceived as unselfish individuals, (recognizing that the focus group participants also believed that some women enter prostitution because they are lazy and selfish). There is a distinction made between the brothel worker who becomes a FSW due to societal forces or by physical force and the FSW who works in high class establishments with more freedom to enter and exit the job according to her own will. While the former is viewed as unselfish and sacrificing, the latter is seen as selfish and desirous of easy money. Because Buddhism does not condone self-indulgence (Vyanjana, 1992), it is understandable why the focus group participants held negative perceptions of the FSWs in the latter category.

There is indeed ample evidence that, in addition to money advanced to parents on contracting the daughter for commercial sex work, many prostitutes send significant remittances home to their family (Boonchalaksi and Guest, 1994; Waver et al., 1996). Given the strong sense in Thai society that children have a moral obligation to repay their parents for giving them life and raising them (Knodel, Chamratrithirong and Debavalya, 1987; Knodel, Saengtienchai and Sittitrai, 1995), the support prostitutes provide to their parents is viewed favorably and may even earn them some social admiration despite the stigma attached to their actual job. Recognizing these obligations, the focus group participants expressed an understanding of the difficult position in which some women who become sex workers are placed, having to weigh familial obligations, monetary needs, concerns about stigma and lack of other viable options against each other. In the end, while normative rules disapprove of commercial sex for women at the societal level, at the individual level, the woman may be forgiven because she is viewed as lacking sufficient choice and fulfilling valued obligations.

## **Conclusions**

Based on our findings, we are left with the impression that the social stigma in Thailand attached to having been a commercial sex worker is mild, and that this attitude helps account in part for the widespread nature of commercial sex in Thailand. This conclusion is necessarily tentative since it is based on the assumption that Thai prostitution is relatively widespread and that in most other settings where prostitution is less common, the stigma attached to prostitutes is greater and inhibits the scale of the commercial sex. This is in fact a comparative statement for which we unfortunately lack relevant data from other societies to substantiate. There is not only considerable uncertainty about the scale of commercial sex in Thailand (e.g. Boonchalaksi and Guest 1994) but, as far as we are aware, there is even less reliable information about its scale in most other countries. Even more germane to our current study, and as noted in our

introduction, there appears to be almost no research that examines popular views of prostitution elsewhere to provide the needed comparative perspective.

On another level, research within Thailand pertaining to the level of internalization amongst prostitutes of these general attitudes would also facilitate a greater understanding of prostitution. It is uncertain if Thai prostitutes hold the same attitudes as the general public about their work, themselves, and their ability to marry. Furthermore, additional research regarding the influence of these attitudes on their behavior is important to better understand the dynamics of prostitution in Thailand.

Thus we conclude our study with an appeal to continue this initial effort to fill the gap in our knowledge about how those who provide commercial sex are viewed by the general population, view themselves, and how this translates into actual behavior. The almost total lack of such research is remarkable considering how much attention commercial sex has received since it was identified as a key vector for HIV transmission in many countries of the world. There can be little doubt that popular attitudes towards prostitution vary greatly cross culturally. For example, Caldwell et al. (1989) has argued that transactional sex (i.e. exchanging sex for material benefits) is far more acceptable in much of Sub-Saharan Africa than in the West or parts of Asia. Yet he can only cite evidence from a modest number of scattered ethnographic studies. More systematic research seems clearly called for if we are to make solid cross national comparisons and to more fully understand the social context of commercial sex. We hope that this beginning attempt to explore this topic will stimulate further research on the topic not only in Thailand but elsewhere as well.

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