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Researching Prostitution: The Methodological Challenges of Researching Sex Work in Thailand

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Abstract

This paper reports the methodological insights derived from a pilot study undertaken to inform the development of PhD methodology. My PhD research is concerned with determining whether Thai NGOs can help shape legislation in order to meet the needs of Thai sex-workers. In order to answer these research questions, I will use semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations. In July 2005, I traveled to Thailand to pilot the use of these methods with both NGOs and sex-workers. This paper summarizes the results of this pilot study, outlines the challenges identified in the pilot study and explores possible solutions to these challenges and how these lessons will inform my PhD fieldwork.

Key words: Empower, Methodology, NGO, Sex work, Prostitution, Thailand.



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Introduction

My PhD research is concerned with determining whether Thai NGOs can help shape legislation in order to meet the needs of Thai sex-workers¹. I am, therefore, interested in determining how NGOs work, how much, if any policy influence they have, and whether and to what extent these NGOs are actually speaking FOR sex workers.

In order to answer these research questions, I will adopt a feminist methodology and use semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations. In July 2005, I traveled to Thailand to pilot the use of these methods with both NGOs and sex-workers. This paper summarizes the results of this pilot study, outlines the challenges identified in the pilot study and explores possible solutions to these challenges and how these lessons will inform my PhD fieldwork.

The paper is broken into two main sections. First, I will highlight some of the key debates in the ‘prostitution problem’ literature and consider how these debates are reflected in the Thai context. Second, I will examine the methods employed during the research trip, and some of the challenges encountered whilst doing the research. This will be further broken down into 2 sub-sections: firstly, the challenges researching NGOs, and secondly, the challenges researching women in the sex industry.

Theoretical Background

Before I talk about my research experience, I’d like to start by discussing the theoretical background in which my research is grounded. My work draws on two key feminist perspectives on prostitution. Feminism has often been divided on the issue of prostitution, and there are a wide range of opinions and perspectives on how to deal with the ‘prostitution problem’. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on two main groups, abolitionists or whom Chapkis calls ‘Anti-Sex Feminists’ (p.17) and liberal or pro-sex feminists.

Abolitionist feminists suggest that prostitution is a violation of human rights, in every circumstance. Women are seen as victims of a patriarchal society that takes advantage of their status as ‘woman’ and places them in a position where they are exploited. Some abolitionists

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see prostitution as the ‘absolute embodiment of patriarchal privilege’ (Kessler, 219) and see the exchange of sex for money little more than the complete exploitation of women by patriarchy.

Teela Sanders comments:

This argument, which has come to be known as the abolitionist perspective, concentrates on the suffering and victimization of women and argues that because the nature of prostitution commodifies the body there can be no consent. This reading of victimization states that a woman can never be a ‘sex worker’ because she is turned into a ‘sex object’ by structural power inequalities between men and women. (Sanders, 38)

When faced with women who say they enjoy sex and enjoy being prostitutes, abolitionists say they must be suffering from a false consciousness, and that women cannot actually consent to being a prostitute, because it necessarily contradicts their human rights. Ajan Virarda Somswasdi, a Thai feminist, comments:

They [prostitutes] should be categorized as the forced and those who yield themselves as Prostitutes. The so-called voluntary are, as a matter of fact, those who have been framed with the idea of submission to prostitute through socio-cultural and politico-economic conditions for years in their lives.... The terminology applied as voluntary gives a picture and meaning of free will and independent determination which in fact these women do not have (Somswasdi, 43).

Abolitionism calls for the complete disintegration of prostitution, and tends to concentrate on the institute of prostitution while ignoring the prostitute. NGOs such as the Coalition Against the Trafficking of Women (CATW) are abolitionist groups interested in the complete abolishment prostitution, and advocate the criminalization of prostitution (although generally not the criminalizing of prostitutes).

While most women can agree that prostitution works in ways that can harm women, there are women who, as much as is possible, choose prostitution as their occupation. By calling into the question the morality and social consequences of the sex trade, it denies women any sense of agency, and ignores the economic realities that many women face. Abolitionist thought denies the legitimacy of *all* types of sex work.

At the International Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, Siriporn Skrobenak of the Foundation for Women in Thailand comments:

There was a strong abolitionist movement in Beijing... They are class-based fundamentalists. Some said I was an instrument of the West. It is so patronizing: because my country is a centre for prostitution and trafficking, my concern for the woman was interpreted as condoning it... The main thing, in my view, is crimes against humanity and those must be our target. In one workshop... a sex worker, a Latin American woman, challenged the abolitionists. She said 'You say you speak for me, but you are against me. How can this be?' (Seabrook, 144)

Some feminists feel that abolitionists, in their great concern for women's rights in the dismantling of prostitution, actually strip these women of their agency. They see all prostitution as a violation of human rights, and all prostitutes as victims.

The abolitionist perspective manifests itself in its approach to legislation. Abolitionists want to see prostitution in all forms ended, and they feel the best way to do this is to outlaw prostitution. There are several examples of this type of abolitionist legislation in effect. In Sweden for example, the customers of prostitutes are penalized for buying sex, while in several English counties prostitution and soliciting is illegal.² (Bindel and Kelly, 23) Abolitionists feel that the legalization or decriminalization of prostitution only serves to worsen the problem, and that for the complete eradication of sex work, criminalizing the people involved in sex work (although not usually the prostitute) is the most effective means to do this.

In contrast to abolitionist feminism, liberal feminism allows for prostitutes to maintain their agency, and allows for women to enter into the sex industry as a rational choice. As women often have unequal access to education, employment and resources, prostitution can be regarded as the best choice given the circumstances. The 'least worst' choice, if you will. Truong notes: 'In this context, women's entry into prostitution is understood as an entrepreneurial move or a rational choice women make under the conditions of inequality and discrimination in the wage-labour market, and given the comparative advantages they have' (Truong, 48). Liberal feminism rejects the institution while working to protect the people involved.

Liberal feminism does not view female sex workers as passive victims of male oppression. Instead, they see the realities of prostitution as more complex, and more layered than do abolitionists. Wendy Chapkis comments:

² There is no national prostitution policy in England, and that the statutes can vary widely from county to county, even local boroughs can have different statutes.

Practices of prostitution, like other forms of commodification and consumption, can be read in more complex ways than simply as a confirmation of male domination... they [liberal feminists] insist that the position of the prostitute cannot be reduced to one of a passive object used in a male sexual practice, but instead can be understood as a place of agency where the sex worker makes active use of the existing sexual order (Chapkis, 30).

The liberal argument places great emphasis on the question of choice. Women can choose to be a prostitute, women can choose sex work, and denying this element of choice can be dangerous.

Chapkis notes:

From the perspective of abolitionists, prostitution and pornography alone required no modifies to signal abuse because, there, no meaningful distinction could be made between ‘forced’ and ‘free’. Indeed, for abolitionists, prostitution can no more be a ‘chosen’ or consensual activity than rape. But defining prostitution as exactly the same, whether consensually enacted or forced, poses a problem for sex workers. If prostitution is a form of sexual violence exactly like rape and incest, then the rape of a prostitute becomes predictable, indeed redundant (Chapkis, 51).

Liberal feminists advocate decriminalization of prostitution, as an effort to protect and empower the women involved. They argue that the benefits of decriminalizing prostitution are considerable for the women involved. They suggest it would allow women the opportunity to work without fear of punishment from law enforcement, which in Thailand has been noted as a particular problem due to the corrupt nature of the police force. It is argued they would be protected from abuse at work, would be able to receive benefits from the government, including social security, health care, and social welfare, but it would also allow workers the ability to unionize and speak out about abuses in the industry without fear of arrest or intimidation. Lastly, it has been suggested that decriminalization would also allow women to *legally* form support networks that work to educate and empower each other, as well as other sex workers.

Both the liberal and abolitionist groups are key figures in the international debate on prostitution, and organizations such as CATW, the Global Alliance Against Trafficking of Women (GATW), and a number of other key groups such as *Empower* and *Friends of Women* are debating these issues within a Thai context. At the moment Thailand is encouraging this debate, as the Thai government is currently considering a change to the law in Thailand. Currently selling sex is technically illegal, although with one of the largest sex industries in the

world, it is obvious that this law is by and large being ignored. Groups on both sides of the feminist divide are taking part in the discussions, advocating different measures and policies to, as they see it, help women in the sex industry.

A key component of my research will be to examine the views of these groups in their legislative approaches, and to analyze how much policy influence they actually have. In so much as that is concerned, I am also eager to find out if they are speaking *for* and accurately representing the sex workers that they claim to represent. While most of the groups I interview in the pilot study adhere to a liberal perspective, I intend to broaden the scope and look at both abolitionist and liberal groups in my PhD research.

The Pilot Study

In the context of the above theoretical debates, my PhD research will seek to answer a number of questions: What are the needs of sex workers in Thailand? What is the most appropriate legislation to meet these needs? Do NGOs speak FOR sex workers? And are NGOs able to influence the development of policy to ensure the appropriate legislation is enacted?

To answer these questions will employ both semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations. In order to test the feasibility of these methods, in July 2005 I went to Thailand to interview both NGOs and sex workers. The remainder of this paper outlines the challenges faced in applying these methods in Thailand. The next section will look at some of the challenges faced whilst interviewing NGOs. The following section will examine the challenges faced in interviewing sex workers.

NGOs

Piloting the semi-structured interviews with NGOs raised a number of challenges. Firstly, initiating contact. I had enormous difficulty in getting in touch with all of the NGOs. Either no email address existed for the organization or if one did exist, the NGOs didn't respond to email enquiries. I faced the same problem with telephone contact. This meant I was doing initial contact face to face upon arrival in Thailand, not knowing what to expect or even if the NGOS would be willing to speak to me.

I had initially planned to visit each NGO to set up interviews for a later date. However, NGOs were often reluctant to speak to me, and several refused interview requests. I believe this is due to a number of key factors.

- Firstly, many of the NGOs were also dealing with broader women's issues, they suggested they did not feel comfortable answering questions relating specifically to sex work, even if this was an area they dealt with.
- Secondly, not having made contact with the NGOs beforehand made the situation difficult, as they didn't fully understand my research project. I was often faced with a situation of trying to sum up my research project in two minutes or less, as many NGOs were understaffed and facing tight deadlines.
- Thirdly, because many of the NGOs were understaffed, there was often only one or two people manning the office. The person who was there didn't always feel comfortable being a spokesperson for the NGO, or might not have had the authority to do this. Often trying to rearrange the interview for another day was difficult, as staffing and scheduling was often not planned far in advance.
- Finally, while all of the NGOs had a spokesperson whom spoke English, oftentimes the person manning the phones or answering the door did not speak English at all. I was fortunate to have a research assistant who spoke basic Thai, enough to explain the situation.

While these factors made interviewing problematic, even more challenging was the attitude of a few of the NGOs towards 'researchers'. One NGO was initially particularly hostile: *Empower* in Chiang Mai. This initial hostility seemed to be due to a number of factors.

- Firstly, empower gets hundreds of requests each year from researchers and journalists for interviews. Many of these interviews are from people who hope to discredit the organization, or are generally negative about the goals of the NGO. This has made Empower slightly wary of granting interview requests.

- Secondly, there is a general feeling at the NGO that researchers are there to exploit the sex workers, getting their information and then leaving. They don't help the NGO, or the sex workers, but are merely there for their own personal gain.
- Thirdly, I had plans to interview a well-known adversary of Empower, a professor at the University of Chiang Mai who was theoretically opposed to Empower's ideology. Empower was aware of this interview, and this added to the tensions.

These problems made interviewing NGOs in Thailand a particularly challenging aspect of the fieldwork.

There are some key lessons to take away from this experience. Firstly, more time needs to be allowed to arrange meetings and to set up interviews. When I conduct my PhD research I hope to spend at least six months in the field. I hope this will give me an adequate amount of time to make contacts and to conduct research.

I also plan on using participant observation with the NGOs. Despite the initial hostility from *Empower*, I did manage to get an excellent interview from them. I was eventually invited back to work with them sometime in the future. I plan on going back and working directly with Empower during my PhD field research, possibly teaching English or computer skills to sex workers. I hope that by using participant observation I can help break down more of this hostility, and also get a better understanding of how the organization works. I hope that I might be able to work or volunteer with a number of other organizations as well.

Lastly, learning to speak Thai would help in both engaging with NGOs as well as with sex workers. This will be discussed in more detail later in the paper.

Sex workers

Researching women directly involved in the sex industry proved more challenging than I had initially imagined. I had planned to interview sex workers who were affiliated with the NGOs, as well as those who were not in order to achieve a more balanced view. Many of the women's organizations I spoke to did not have direct, day to day contact with women working in the sex industry. Because of this, my interviews were limited to women working with *Empower*, as

they have frequent and direct interactions with sex workers. However, because of *Empower's* views of researchers, this proved rather difficult.

Fortunately, I was able to get interviews with two sex workers. Because *Empower* runs an English language programme, the sex workers I spoke to had excellent English skills. However, I did have a research assistant along in case there were any problems. Both women gave their informed consent to the research, and both women had a chance to change or amend the details in their interviews. The data collected is stored electronically with a password to protect to ensure the privacy of the women involved, and their names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

Accessing women who were unaffiliated with an NGO was much more problematic. I think the biggest problem was that I had assumed it would be relatively easy to approach a woman working in a bar or a club and ask for an interview. Looking back this seems obviously naïve, but at the time I hadn't realized exactly what the bars in Thailand would be like. I encountered a number of problems whilst trying to conduct these interviews. First, whilst many of the women working in bars and brothels speak English, many of them do not.

Second, many of the bars were staffed by men who help 'facilitate' transactions, and they weren't particularly pleased by the idea of western researcher talking about the nature of prostitution during working hours. If I had bought the time of the young women in the bars, I might have met with less resistance. However, this presented a number of ethical issues. Most critically, I felt that if I pay a sex worker for her time, she might tell me what she thinks I want to hear, rather than what she really thinks. In the end, I felt that paying for the time of a sex worker was not something I was comfortable doing. This meant, unfortunately, that I did not get any interviews with unaffiliated sex workers.

One way to overcome this challenge would be to an ability to speak Thai. Learning the Thai language would be immensely helpful for conducting interviews and carrying out research. However, I realize that it might not be possible to become completely fluent in the space of a year, but I hope that I can learn enough to speak basic Thai, and to hopefully understand some more. This means that I will most likely employ a Thai research assistant to conduct interviews with non-English speaking sex workers. This could pose a potential research risk as I will have to rely on my assistant to translate the interviews verbatim and to conduct the interviews in keeping with a feminist methodology. However, because I am conducting a relatively small

number of in-depth interviews, I hope that I can accompany my research assistant on all the interviews, and hopefully my command of the Thai language will extend far enough to understand the conversation.

There were a number of ethical issues that needed to be considered whilst carrying out the research. Because my research was informed by a feminist methodology, part of my research aim was to break down the power relationships that are inherent in the research relationship. However, because my research trip was preliminary, there was only so much I could do to ensure a more equal balance of power. A key objective was to get to know the women I interviewed, and to share information about myself to help make the research relationship slightly more equal, operationalizing Oakley's participatory model (Oakley, 1981). The two sex workers I interviewed would often ask me personal questions about my life, and I always answered as honestly as possible. One of the women invited me to spend some time with her at the bar that she worked at, and I gladly went along. Not only did this give me a chance to see how the sex industry worked, but it also gave me a chance to get to know her better.

Something I wasn't prepared for was the emotional impact of the interviews. A lot of personal information came out of the interviews with the sex workers, some of which must have been difficult for them to discuss. While both women seemed comfortable telling me these stories, I was also aware that it might have an emotional impact on them. For this reason I gave both of them my contacts, email and phone numbers, and if they wanted to talk more about it, or if they were having any problems they could get in touch with me. Neither of the women contacted me, but I can never know for certain whether or not they were upset or traumatized by revealing their personal histories with me.

However, the emotional impact of the interview process had an impact on me as well. Simply listening to the stories of their lives was harrowing, and processing the reality of their experience was difficult. While I was more concerned with how the women were dealing with this 'telling' process, the 'listening' process was difficult for me. Whilst this particular aspect of the research was difficult, the research process as a whole was also incredibly emotional. Traveling to Thailand, dealing with the cultural shock of being in a completely new environment, dealing with hostile NGOs and uncertain situations, coming to grips with the scale of the sex industry, all of these things made for a very emotional experience.

A number of lessons were taken from this experience for the design of my PhD fieldwork. First, it is important to ensure that the women I interview have adequate support. While I did provide my contact details, ideally when I carry out my PhD research I will be conducting a number of interviews with the same women over a longer period of time. Hopefully I will be more able to address any emotional issues that emerge for the interviews and provide a higher level of emotional support.

For myself, having support from a supervisor is essential. I was fortunate to be in contact with my PhD supervisor before the fieldwork was undertaken, and her insights were invaluable. She gave me a better idea of what to expect, and this was really helpful. However, having more support whilst in the field will be incredibly important, and I'm confident that my supervisor will be a source of knowledge and support during the research process.

Keeping a field diary that details the emotional experiences of my fieldwork will be important. When I began my research trip in Thailand, my diary was a very factual account of the interviews and the information gathered, but as my trip went on my accounts became more and more emotive. This was helpful as it allowed me some space to consider what I was going through, and to reflect on the research process in a different way. This is something I will continue in my PhD research.

Other issues to be considered

There remain a number of unresolved challenges raised by the pilot that I will need to address before undertaking my PhD fieldwork. One of the main challenges for the research will be how to access unaffiliated sex workers. Whilst learning Thai might prove helpful in this situation, the problem extends far beyond a mere language barrier. It will still be difficult for me as a white, female researcher to enter a bar or a brothel and expect a sex worker to speak to me. It is possible that I might be able to use a snowball sampling technique to access women, but this of course raises issues of representativeness. However, researchers such as Maher (2000, p. 29) criticize the emphasis on representativeness and suggesting that a focus on representativeness 'obscures what the anomalous or the marginal can reveal about the centre... and perhaps most of all, strategies of resistance'. However, whilst this may be true, I think it will be important to caveat my findings by mentioning the difficulty in accessing hard-to-reach groups such as

unaffiliated sex workers, and to be upfront about my sampling strategy and the implications this might have on the representativeness of the sample.

Another problem with interviewing unaffiliated sex workers will be addressing the power imbalance that is inherent in the researcher/subject relationship. I hope that by working with groups such as *Empower*, I will be able to form relationships with the women I interview, and to give something back to them, to help address the power imbalance. However, this strategy might not be possible or as feasible for women who are unaffiliated with an NGO. How then, do I address this problem, and ensure that I am not exploiting the sex workers I interview? I don't as yet have a satisfactory answer to this problem, and for me this is a key issue that needs to be seriously considered.

Another issue to be considered is interviewing non-empowerment NGOs. During my preliminary research, I only interviewed one person who maintained a non-empowerment ideology. However, it is possible that groups such as CATW might have a better insight into the prostitution problem, or at least have some different ideas about it. It will be important to try and understand a range of views on the subject, and to interrogate a wide variety of opinions in order to try and understand the complexity of the issues at hand.

One last issue to be considered is the role of policy makers. My research trip focused on groups trying to influence policy, but it will be important to understand the position of the Thai government on prostitution, and to examine how policy decisions are made. Accessing policy makers and MPS involved in the decision making process will be a valuable insight into the sex industry in Thailand, and I hope that I will be able to make some contacts with key officials to make this happen.

To conclude, my research trip to Thailand provided me with valuable insights into the sex industry in Thailand. Whilst the research project did not accomplish everything that I had hoped it might, it did provide me with useful lessons to consider when considering the methodology for the PhD project. I hope that these insights will make my final research fuller and more comprehensive.

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