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Challenging Conventional Wisdom:
Sex Work, Exploitation, and Labor Among Young Akha Men in Thailand

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^{*} The name of the organization has been changed to protect the respondents' privacy. I also do not name my interpreter for the same reason.

Abstract

This thesis fills a critical gap in the academic literature on human trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation by allowing young men who have been affected by this human rights abuse the opportunity to narrate their own experiences. This qualitative study seeks to fill this gap and add nuance to the literature on human trafficking and exploitation by focusing on sex work, exploitation, and labor of the young men of one ethnic minority group in Thailand – the Akha.

One intention of this thesis is to help steer some of the discussion toward the exploitation of young men since the trafficking discourse is overwhelmingly focused on women and girls. I argue that the respondents in my study have endured sexual exploitation, labor trafficking, and various forms of harassment and discrimination because their limited formal education, underdeveloped Thai language ability, and ethnic minority status greatly constrain their licit and safe economic opportunities.

A solid amount has been written *about* those directly affected by exploitation but few researchers or academics have gone in and conducted a qualitative study to gather a life history of the subjects with special emphasis on questions of work, education, identity, harassment/discrimination related to ethnic minority status, and so on. Practical policy responses to exploitation and human trafficking cannot be crafted unless the reality is known – and that knowledge can only be gleaned from speaking with those directly affected.

I spent one month in northern Thailand in July-August 2011 interviewing 12 young Akha men, between the ages of 18-25. The Akha comprise one of Thailand's highland, or hill tribe, ethnic minority peoples. I employed a range of ethnographic research methods such as in-depth interviews with the 12 respondents, informal observation of them and their peers during their daily activities at their daytime drop-in center, and further observation in the target bars of Chiang Mai's night bazaar where many of them engage in various types of work. I also interviewed staff at seven Thai and Akha organizations in Thailand that work on issues related to exploitation, human rights, and citizenship.

The results of my field work yielded evidence that challenges four instances of conventional wisdom. To begin, my research demonstrates that members of this population do engage in sex work – a fact not always readily acknowledged or understood. In the first test to conventional wisdom I show that obtaining Thai citizenship is not a panacea for all of one's problems. Second, I demonstrate that even though my respondents do not neatly fit into a dominant vision of an "appropriate victim," they are indeed affected by exploitation, despite possessing great agency. Third, my research establishes that free public education itself does not reduce human trafficking. Lastly, this thesis suggests that there is a relationship between labor exploitation and commercial sexual exploitation.

Challenging Conventional Wisdom: Sex Work, Exploitation, and Labor Among Young Akha Men in Thailand

Commercial sexual exploitation and human trafficking of boys and men is a taboo, ignored, and grossly under-researched and misunderstood issue throughout the world. The topic garners even less attention when applied to a disenfranchised population such as an ethnic minority group in a country in which they are marginalized at numerous levels. Such is the case in Thailand where few actors – the state, civil society, or the general population writ large – pay much attention to the exploitation of young, highland ethnic minority males in the north.

When male trafficking is discussed, it is almost always in relation to labor trafficking while trafficking of women or girls is usually talked of as pertaining to sexual purposes. There is discussion and research of women in forced labor, such as in sweatshops, but almost never is commercial sexual exploitation of men addressed. For example, in the 2003 documentary *Trading Women*, the narrator says “Men and women travel to Thailand [from Burma]: the women for domestic and sex work, the men for exploited agricultural work.”¹ There is simply no allowance for deviation from these strict gendered dimensions of labor and exploitation.

This thesis seeks to fill this gap and add nuance to the literature on human trafficking and exploitation by focusing on sex work, exploitation, and labor of the young men of one ethnic minority group in Thailand – the Akha. In particular, I will argue that respondents in my study have endured sexual exploitation, labor trafficking, and various forms of harassment and discrimination because their limited formal education, underdeveloped Thai language ability, and ethnic minority status greatly constrain their licit and safe economic opportunities. Although there is a modest amount of ethnographic data on the Akha in northern Thailand and elsewhere in Southeast Asia and broader literature regarding sexual exploitation of highland peoples, this is largely focused on

¹ *Trading Women*. Directed by David Feingold. Watertown: Documentary Educational Resources, 2003.

women and girls. There is virtually nothing on commercial sexual exploitation or trafficking of Akha boys or men.

Specifically, this thesis will challenge four key instances of conventional wisdom related to young Akha men in northern Thailand. First, I will show that obtaining Thai citizenship may not be a panacea for all of one's problems. Second, I will demonstrate that even though my respondents do not neatly fit into a dominant vision of an "appropriate victim," they are indeed victims of exploitation, despite possessing great agency. Third, my research will establish that free public education itself may not reduce human trafficking. Fourth, this thesis will suggest that there is a relationship between labor exploitation and commercial sexual exploitation.

Terminology and Confidentiality

One of the most difficult aspects of writing this thesis was deciding what terminology to employ since the entire human trafficking discourse is a minefield. Most key words in the trafficking lexicon signal one's political position on certain issues – particularly regarding prostitution – and thus are inherently loaded. As the title of my thesis suggests, I will refer to most of the issues and situations presented herein as "exploitation." This term denotes abuse but does not conjure images of chains and shackles – common iconography in the anti-trafficking advocacy community. Importantly, the use of "exploitation" allows for both abuse and agency simultaneously – a common theme I found during my interviews. There are certain cases I will outline which clearly meet virtually any definition of human trafficking and will be labeled as such. I also employ the term "sex worker" or "commercial sex worker," instead of the more problematic and politicized "prostitute" label when referring to adults (18 years old and up) in the profession.

Most national human trafficking laws, regional agreements, and policy directives draw heavily from the 2000 UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children. Even though this convention is of central importance to most

trafficking laws in the world, there is considerable confusion and disagreement over its definition and application. The definition, ratified by the UN General Assembly in 2000, states:

"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, of 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. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.²

As anthropologists Pardis Mahdavi and Christine Sargent explain, "The ambiguity embedded in the [Protocol] definition (which was necessary for the resolution to pass) enables multiple, selective, and contradictory understandings of what human trafficking does and does not entail."³ In particular, anti-prostitution and anti-pornography activists have been pushing for more than a decade to conflate all legal prostitution with human trafficking.

The names of all the young men I interviewed have been changed. Of the seven Thai organizations at which I conducted interviews, I only changed the name of two, Akha Life and Child Help. The others expressly and repeatedly stated they had no objection to being quoted. Child Help, the organization that facilitated my introduction to my respondents, is treated pseudonymously to protect the respondents. I do not identify my interpreter for the same reason. The name of the village from which eight of the young men were from has been changed to Green Mountain.

Background and Rationale

By 2010, I had been involved in the issue of human trafficking for six years. I wrote about this human rights abuse for *UN Wire*, studied it as an undergraduate at George Washington

² United Nations. *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime* (2000).

³ Mahdavi and Sargent. "Questioning the Discursive Construction of Trafficking and Forced Labor in the United Arab Emirates." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 7, no. 3 (Fall 2011), 13.

University, designed and implemented a trafficking in persons (TIP) awareness program in Mongolia, and led DC Stop Modern Slavery's communications team in Washington, DC. In fall 2010, I took a graduate seminar on human trafficking at GWU. While reading the dozens of books, articles, and reports for the course, it became clear that there was a complete dearth of information – especially original research – on commercial sexual exploitation of young men. Further, it was apparent the voices of those exploited – particularly male – are completely unheard in the TIP discourse. Pardis Mahdavi and Christine Sargent sum up the problem perfectly:

Most problematic, 'trafficked' persons, migrant laborers, and sex workers have been excluded from the opportunity to contribute their own narratives to the programmatic paradigms into which they have been scripted. Additionally, global rhetoric about human trafficking is markedly focused on sex trafficking and has constructed the issue (in the minds of the public and policymakers alike) in specifically gendered, raced, and classed ways. The archetypical trafficking victims are women, minors, or female minors who have been tricked or forced into human slavery, often for the explicit purpose of sexual exploitation.⁴

They go on to argue why qualitative research is crucial to breaking down some of the constructs they delineated.

Unproductively polarized and politicized human trafficking discourses often depend upon differing quantitative grounds to stake their claims. For this reason, trafficking must be interrogated through qualitative, ethnographically based research methods that enable migrants themselves to address, contest, and inform current discourses, policies, and gaps in our knowledge.⁵

I searched for organizations in Southeast Asia that work specifically with young men affected by commercial sexual exploitation and found one in all of Southeast Asia that works especially with this population. In a 2005 review of Southeast Asia and Oceania-specific trafficking research, the writer, a professor of sociology, found “not a single NGO advocating for male victims of trafficking.”⁶

⁴ Mahdavi and Sargent, 8.

⁵ Mahdavi and Sargent, 11.

⁶ Piper, Nicola. “A Problem by a Different Name?: A Review of Research on Trafficking in South-East Asia and Oceania.” *International Migration* 43 1/2 (2005), 215.

I contacted the founder of Chiang Mai-based Child Help, and explained that I wished to spend time with young male sex workers, interviewing them about their lives and work, and trying to fill a small part of the tremendous gap in the TIP discourse and literature. She was enthusiastic about the idea and invited me to Thailand and offered to help facilitate my research by introducing me to members of this population. She was especially supportive because Child Help is an organization that provides direct services to its population and therefore does not have the time or resources to undertake or commission its own research on the population it serves.

Methodology

I was awarded a Field Research Fellowship by the GWU Sigur Center for Asian Studies and spent one month in northern Thailand in July-August 2011 conducting the field work. First, in the six months leading up to my stay in Thailand, I conducted a rigorous literature review while preparing my research design and planning my field work. After reading more than 40 relevant books and articles, studying applicable Thai and international laws, and engrossing myself in the desktop research, I prepared a 50-page literature review and background paper for myself in conjunction with two of my thesis advisers. This paper explored a range of key themes such as gender roles in Thailand, constructs of sexuality in Thai culture, class and social hierarchy, citizenship and identity, human rights issues among highland peoples, and Akha culture.

Since the research subjects were all Akha, I exerted considerable effort for about six months preceding my field work trying to identify an Akha interpreter so the interviews could be carried out in the respondents' native tongue. After contacting more than 20 organizations and experts on the Akha or highland peoples to no avail, it became clear that it would not be feasible to find someone.

I then turned to searching for the second best option: a Thai person fluent in the northern Thai dialect who was not born and raised in a city or wealthy family. I was fortunate to find a young Thai woman who was born to a Burmese father. She grew up in rural Lampang province, and

moved to Chiang Mai for university. She speaks northern Thai and grew up in a modest village similar to where many of the young men were raised. She had a strong connection with the young men right from the outset and she deserves enormous credit for this project being so successful.

When I arrived in Chiang Mai, my interpreter and I spent the first week in an unstructured capacity at Child Help. We ate lunch with the young men, helped them cook and clean up lunch, participated in their lessons, accompanied them on field trips, played table tennis with them, watched YouTube videos of their favorite Thai, Korean, and American singers, and just spent time getting to know them. We explained that I was a student from the United States who had come to learn about their lives and would like to interview them over the next month. After the first week, I felt as if I had gained enough trust and rapport with three or four of the older Child Help attendees and asked if I could begin interviewing them. In a perfect world I would have spent months settling in before beginning interviews but my compressed research timetable made this impossible.

Even though they all spoke northern Thai well, I felt uncomfortable asking them to read and sign the informed consent form in Thai. In general, their Thai reading ability is lower than their speaking and listening skills but Akha has no written language. On the second day in country, my interpreter and I met an Akha woman to whom we gave both my original English version consent form and the Thai version that my interpreter had translated. This individual then translated these aloud into Akha and I recorded her speaking the consent form in Akha.

Before my interpreter and I conducted each one-on-one interview, she gave an overview in Thai of what the interview would be about and why I was interested in the topic. I then presented the respondent with the Thai version of the consent form so he could read it and I also played the four-minute Akha audio recording. The respondent then signed and dated the form to give his consent. I am confident I obtained informed consent from each respondent through this innovative combination of written Thai, spoken Thai, and spoken Akha.

There are 20-25 young men who are regular or semi-regular attendees at Child Help's daily programs. Of that number, roughly two-thirds are at least 18 years old while the rest are 17 or under. In consultation with my thesis advisers, I decided before going to Thailand that I would only interview those who were at least 18. The ethical issues with conducting this type of research with children – particularly regarding such potentially sensitive topics – would render that avenue inappropriate and irresponsible.

I engaged with the minors who attend Child Help during the times when I was at the center, getting to know all the guys, but I never approached any of them to request an interview. In addition to interacting with them at Child Help, I also saw many of them working in the bars when I went to do my observations there. In one case, there was a mix-up over the age of one subject.

In this case, the respondent had told my interpreter and me as well as Child Help staff that he was 18 years old. We went in to the office to begin our interview and after the introduction and gaining informed consent, I began by asking about his birth date and birth location. I immediately realized there was an age discrepancy and he was now saying he was 17 years old. After speaking further and ascertaining that when he said he was 18 he was operating under the Akha convention that one turns a year older on January 1, but in fact his actual birthday was not until the fall, I immediately halted the interview and explained that although I wanted to interview him and learn about his life, research guidelines prohibited me from doing so.

The interviews themselves were semi-structured. I developed a set of questions in conjunction with my thesis advisers and other faculty members and experts whom I consulted. The questions were organized largely along the following categories: growing up, family, home village, work, labor recruiting, education, citizenship, identity, harassment/discrimination, land rights, Child Help, and their goals and future.

Of all my interviews, I estimate that about 80 percent of them largely followed the same set of questions. The questions were designed in such a way, however, that we could explore some themes in more depth, if the respondent had an interest in doing so – or if I believed it would be fruitful – while in other interviews the respondent clearly did not want to discuss certain areas. In one case, a respondent was clearly upset about his father’s failing health and so we quickly moved on from the line of questioning about his family.

The interviews were conducted in a sensitive, empathetic fashion and my paramount guiding principle was “do no harm.” I cut short certain lines of questioning or skipped entire sections if it was clear the respondent did not want to engage with those issues.

With the respondents’ consent, I audio recorded the interviews and did not take notes during the conversation so I could focus my full attention on the speaker. All 12 respondents assented to my recording the interview. In the evenings, I transcribed the audio recordings and then I coded the hundreds of pages of transcripts. I primarily used the transcripts during the writing of this thesis and referred back to the audio files for clarification, when necessary.

I employed a range of ethnographic research methods such as in-depth interviews with the 12 respondents, informal observation of them and their peers during their daily activities at Child Help, and further observation in the target bars in Chiang Mai. These observations were critical as they validated – and occasionally contradicted – some of what the respondents told me.

I also interviewed staff at seven Thai and Akha organizations in Thailand that work on issues related to exploitation. Our conversations served as another method of triangulation. By conducting a broad but thorough literature review of an array of themes – gender roles, Akha culture, and Thai trafficking and labor laws, for example – into my research design, conducting numerous observations of my subjects in different contexts outside our formal interviews, and interviewing

Thai experts who work on related issues, I was able to add further layers of analysis to my thesis, rather than simply reporting what my 12 respondents told me.

Literature Review

I will not conduct a thorough literature review here since I believe it is much more effective to cite the literature where it is relevant in the thesis, rather than listing it out here. I will, however, make a few introductory comments. As mentioned above, there is a gaping hole in the literature on sex trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation in the form of original research obtained by talking to individuals in these situations themselves. One reason for this gap is obvious: it is extremely difficult to access individuals currently involved in trafficking or exploitation.

I was pleased to discover during my pre-field work that there was a modest literature describing the methodological challenges of conducting field research with typically hidden populations such those involved in human trafficking, street children, and others. After reading some of these articles (see: Denise Brennan; and Guri Tyldum and Anette Brunovskis) I incorporated the authors' experiences and recommendations in helping to craft my own research design.

A solid amount has been written *about* those directly affected by exploitation but few researchers or academics have gone in and attempted to conduct a qualitative study focused on gathering a life history of the subjects with special emphasis on questions of work, education, identity, harassment/discrimination related to ethnic minority status, and so on. Practical policy responses to exploitation and human trafficking cannot be crafted unless the reality is known – and that knowledge can only be learned from those directly affected.

Many of these reports or articles are written in such a way that the writer speaks *for* the people affected, rather than presenting the subjects' voices to let them speak for themselves. For example, the US State Department's 2011 *Trafficking in Persons Report* contains 14 "victim's stories" which

spotlight trafficking cases from 17 countries. Not one of them contains a single direct quotation from the exploited individual.⁷ To avoid drowning out their important voices, I will quote many of my respondents at length in this thesis.

The few studies from Asia that are based on interviews with sex workers themselves involve relatively small sample sizes. For example, Katherine Keane's study for Action Pour Les Enfants in Cambodia had a sample size of 19 boys.⁸ Jasmir Thakur and Glenn Miles conducted a survey of 52 young "masseur boys" in Mumbai, India.⁹ Alastair Hilton led a nine-person team to carry out an exploratory study on the sexual abuse and exploitation of 40 young men in Cambodia.¹⁰ Although my study of 12 respondents is small, it is not unreasonable and complements the existing literature.

Most importantly, British anthropologist Heather Montgomery published a book in 2001 based on her doctoral dissertation in which she spent about a year in a peri-urban slum community in Thailand with 65 minor sex workers, about half of whom were boys.¹¹ I draw heavily on Montgomery's seminal work throughout my thesis since it was the single most relevant study for my research. Her work was an indispensable blend of theory and empirical research that guided both my analysis and research design.

In crafting my introductory section on the Akha I relied heavily on the ethnographic data of the Akha in northern Thailand. Upon beginning my research it became quickly evident, however, that much of the ethnography is quite dated. Leo Alting von Geusau, the Dutch anthropologist of the Akha, was one of the most prolific observers of the Akha and has since died. The two women

⁷ United States Department of State. *Trafficking in Persons Report 2011* (GPO: Washington, DC, 2011).

⁸ Katherine Keane. "Street-Based Child Sexual Exploitation in Phnom Penh and Sihanoukville: A Profile of Victims" (Phnom Penh: Action Pour Les Enfants, 2006).

⁹ Thakur, Jasmir and Glenn Miles. "Baseline Survey with Masseur Boys in Mumbai," (Paper presented at the Second Annual Interdisciplinary Conference on Human Trafficking, Lincoln, Nebraska, September 30 – October 2, 2010).

¹⁰ Hilton, Alastair. "I Thought It Could Never Happen to Boys:" Sexual Abuse & Exploitation of Boys in Cambodia – An Exploratory Study." (Phnom Penh: Hagar, 2008).

¹¹ Montgomery, Heather. *Modern Babylon? Prostituting Children in Thailand*. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001).

who have written the most relatively contemporary studies on the Akha are Deborah Tooker and Mika Toyota and I reference their work often throughout the thesis.

In addition to the Akha-specific literature, there is a broader body of work on highland peoples in general in northern Thailand – both from ethnographic and development or human rights perspectives. I was able to use some of these to fill in some of the gaps in the Akha literature. In particular, Bradley, Cohen, Jonsson, and Kunstadter gave me a deeper understanding of highland issues in northern Thailand. However, like the Akha literature, some of this broader literature was also dated.

One area in which there is a thriving literature is on issues relating to gender, sex work, and sex workers' rights in Thailand. Indeed, there was so much to read it was initially difficult to discern which articles and books were the most relevant to my study and which were more ancillary. Cameron, Gray, et al, Guest et al, Keyes, Morrison, Truong and others all were useful in helping me think through this set of issues.

Perhaps no other set of literature was as important as the robust research and theory on male sex work and Men Who Have Sex With Men (MSM) in Thailand. One of the leading voices in this area of Thai studies is Peter Jackson, a social scientist at Australian National University. His own book, plus two others he co-edited, represents a large portion of the foundation in the gender and masculinity section of my thesis. Those edited volumes contained numerous essays (De Lind van Wijngaarden, McCamish, and Storer) that helped me understand the nature of relationships among male sex workers and the norms most pertinent to their lives and work. Thomas Shulich's PhD dissertation from Brandeis University on intimate and economic relations between men in Chiang Mai was extremely helpful – especially the chapter on the night bazaar bars. I was pleased to discover that many of our findings mirrored each other.

Key Caveats

I am acutely aware that a study of 12 respondents is not a representative sample. Nevertheless, this research is still useful as it provides evidence to challenge the four examples of conventional wisdom specified earlier. I make no claim that the findings herein apply to all Akha male sex workers at large and I therefore will not attempt to extrapolate my findings onto any population except the 12 subjects interviewed here.

Further, I am well aware of the difficulties inherent in conducting this type of qualitative study. First, I recognize that as a researcher I bring an array of biases and assumptions, many of which are subconscious, which can influence how I perceive the responses the respondents provide and even how I approach the entire project. Second, I know that I have a relatively high status in the minds of those I interviewed and that could affect their view of me and potentially the answers they provide. The fact that I am a white, American man, who has a high level of education, and is presumably wealthy since I was able to come all the way from America to carry out this project, are all important factors in shaping my respondents' perception of me.

I acknowledge that some of the answers given by my 12 respondents were contradictory or even false. Some of their statements were undermined through my observations or by later answers they gave. For example, one respondent denied ever drinking with customers for tips. However, on two different nights I observed him drinking with two different middle-aged white men. I did not feel as if I had an especially strong rapport with this respondent and thus I am not surprised he may have wanted to protect his image and dignity by not acknowledging his work in the bar to me. This is completely understandable.

Nevertheless, overall I have great faith in my respondents and the information they relayed to me. To minimize the chance of obtaining false data, I employed methodological triangulation in an attempt to verify information received through one research method (such as my interviews with

respondents) with data from another source (such as my literature review or participant observation).

One reason why academics are largely silent on the issue of young people selling sex is due to charges of “academic voyeurism,” intentionally writing about titillating subjects.¹² The tremendous dearth in the literature on the issue of child sex trafficking, especially regarding boys, suggests academic researchers may be kept at bay by these concerns. It is important to note that NGOs have been far ahead of academics in terms of writing about child sex trafficking, as evidenced by the reams of reports produced by NGOs throughout the world on the subject, particularly in the last 15 years or so. Unfortunately many of these reports are difficult to access either because they are not online or because they are not in English.

By publishing this thesis I may leave myself open to various criticisms. However, I decided to take this risk because I felt so strongly that academic research was lacking and needed on this topic. Academic voyeurism charges are inappropriate and dangerous because they promote self-censorship among researchers who want to better understand some of the world’s most serious, but understudied, problems. Commercial sexual exploitation of young men is already a vastly under-researched issue and if academics are scared off by potential accusations of voyeurism, young men in these situations will continue to be silent and ignored in the literature.

The fact that my respondents were so open with me and revealed so much sensitive information suggests they had enough faith in me to entrust me with some of their most wrenching stories. In addition, as the reader will see at the end of the thesis, many of the respondents spoke with me because they wanted the readers to better understand their lives and challenges.

¹² Montgomery, 2.

Introduction to the Akha

Before examining the findings of my study and addressing the four cases of conventional wisdom, I will provide a brief overview of the Akha, since many readers may have limited prior exposure to this population. In an interview with Chutima, an Akha woman who is the president of Chiang Mai-based Inter Mountain Peoples Education and Culture in Thailand (IMPECT), she told me that Thailand is home to approximately 80,000 Akha. Somewhere between 500,000 and 2,000,000 Akha live in highland Southeast Asia – specifically parts of Burma, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and China’s Yunnan province. The vast majority of these Akha live in southwestern China while Thailand is home to the fewest. Estimates from the mid-1990s indicate that approximately 2,000,000 Akha live in the region¹³ while a journal article from 2011 says there are far fewer – “more than 500,000.”¹⁴ Since there is such a scant amount of data, it is unclear which figure is more accurate. Sociologist Mika Toyota cites the 2002 Tribal Population Survey which states that Thailand is home to 914,755 hill tribe people – 1.4 percent of the population of Thailand.¹⁵

The Akha are still relatively new to Thailand, first arriving from Burma in 1903 but their numbers in northern Thailand sharply increased beginning in the 1960s due to the deteriorating security, political, and economic situation in Burma.¹⁶ When I told Chutima I read that Akha first migrated to Thailand in 1903 she disputed this and said the first Akha came to Thailand 150 years ago. Together, the population of all the highland groups in northern Thailand is estimated at

¹³ Toyota, Mika. “Urban Migration and Cross-Border Networks: A Deconstruction of the Akha Identity in Chiang Mai.” *Southeast Asian Studies* 35, no. 4 (March 1998), 201.

¹⁴ Lyttleton, Chris and Douangphet Sayanouso. “Cultural Reproduction and ‘Minority’ Sexuality: Intimate Changes among Ethnic Akha in the Upper Mekong.” *Asian Studies Review* 35, no. 2 (June 2011), 172.

¹⁵ Toyota, Mika. “Subjects of the Nation Without Citizenship: The Case of ‘Hill Tribes’ in Thailand.” In *Multiculturalism in Asia*, edited by Will Kymlicka and He Baobang, 110-135 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 110.

¹⁶ Altung von Geusau, Leo. “Dialectics of Akhazan: The Interiorizations of a Perennial Minority Group.” In *Highlanders of Thailand*, edited by John McKinnon and Wanat Bhruksasri, 243-277 (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1983) 246-247.

approximately 600,000 to 1,000,000.¹⁷ This translates to about 1 percent of the country's population.¹⁸

The Akha, which have eight subgroups,¹⁹ are members of the Tibeto-Burman ethnolinguistic group, along with the Lahu Nyi, Lisu, and Karen (Pwo and Sgaw), among others. As I discussed in the methodology section, the Akha language has no indigenous script.²⁰ A 1977 survey by Chiang Mai's Tribal Research Centre labeled about 70 percent of the Akha in Thailand animist while the remaining 30 percent were said to be Buddhist.²¹

Economically distressed Akha in Thailand have been converting to Christianity in increasing numbers since the 1970s since in part, it is a much less expensive religion than their traditional Akhazan practices.²² After a Christian missionary came to her village and many villagers converted, one Akha woman said "We had a problem [economic situation]. But after he came, we do not have to worry any more. He knows we are poor, so he introduced us a cheaper way."²³

Complying with Akhazan indeed is a significant investment of money and time. For example, when a wealthy Akha person dies, the family sacrifices a buffalo and other animals. While witnessing the death rituals for a poor Akha person, a Danish anthropologist observed three chickens, a hen, and pig slaughtered over the three day ritual period – a considerable expense for an Akha village family.²⁴

¹⁷ Physicians for Human Rights. "No Status: Migration, Trafficking & Exploitation of Women in Thailand: Health and HIV/AIDS Risks for Burmese and Hill Tribe Women and Girls." (Physicians for Human Rights, 2004), 27.

¹⁸ Physicians for Human Rights, 11.

¹⁹ Toyota (1998), 202.

²⁰ Tooker, Deborah E. "Identity Systems of Highland Burma: 'Belief,' Akha Zan, and a Critique of Interiorized Notions of Ethno-Religious Identity." *Man* 27, no. 4 (Dec. 1992), 801.

²¹ Kunstadter, Peter. "Highland Populations in Northern Thailand." In *Highlanders of Thailand*, edited by John McKinnon and Wanat Bhruksasri, 15-45 (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1983), 25.

²² Kunstadter, 43.

²³ Toyota (1998), 211.

²⁴ Hansson, Inga-Lill. "Death in an Akha Village." In *Highlanders of Thailand*, edited by John McKinnon and Wanat Bhruksasri, 278-290 (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1983), 278-279.

It seems many of these “conversions” are more based on an economic calculation rather than a spiritual revelation. For example, an anthropologist observed an Akha family “convert” to Christianity due to the expense of a required purification ceremony. A few days later wealthy relatives lent them the required sum and the family immediately “reconverted” back to Akhazan.²⁵ David Bradley notes the Catholic Church has had particular success converting Akha, although he does not cite any statistics.²⁶ Some Akha may also convert to Christianity since the religion is often associated with more powerful or wealthy people, including foreigners, and holds the promise of greater educational, employment, and financial opportunities.^{27*}

I will now provide an overview of Akhazan, the Akha guiding philosophy. Akhazan has sometimes been shorthand as “animist” but American anthropologist Deborah Tooker pushes back on this label since animism actually denotes “belief in spirits.” As Leo Alting von Geusau, the late Dutch anthropologist of the Akha, explains, Akhazan is a system of ritualized behavior formulated by Akha ancestors. For this and other reasons, Akha should be considered as “practising ancestor worship combined with a rice-fertility cult.”²⁸

Importantly, one can tentatively link some elements of the Akhazan mindset to shed some light on young Akha men weighing their options in the labor market. Alting von Geusau tells us “The word ‘Akhazan’ or ‘Akhajan’ has been translated as ‘religion, way of life, customs, etiquette, and ceremonies,’ and ‘traditions as handed down by the fathers.’” Akhazan does not really promote feelings of guilt, such as occurs in many religions. Also, one tenet is that “discreet behavior is highly

²⁵ Tooker (1992), 799.

²⁶ Bradley, David. “Identity: The Persistence of Minority Groups.” In *Highlanders of Thailand*, edited by John McKinnon and Wanat Bhruksasri, 46-55 (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1983), 52.

²⁷ Thanks to my thesis adviser, Dr. Christina Fink, for sharing with me this important insight on September 16, 2011.

* My questionnaire included questions as to the respondents’ religion but I ended up abandoning that series of questions. I do not know the exact reason why, but for some reason my questions – which seemed fairly straightforward – simply were not translating coherently. I lost a significant amount of time in the first few interviews stating and re-stating questions about religion that were somehow lost in translation.

²⁸ Tooker (1992), 801.

estimated” [esteemed].²⁹ There is also a fundamental, permeating ideal in Akhazan of compromise, flexibility, and adaptation. On a personal level, though, Akha cosmology advises: “...compromise to make something acceptable in order to survive; remain flexible so that you can adapt to majorities and other outside pressures.”³⁰

Flexibility and compromise is not limited to the personal sphere. The central government in Bangkok has traditionally exerted limited control over the highland north and thus contact with the state has been uneven in that area of the country. In some cases, however, the imprint of the government can be felt at the village level. For example, village headmen report to and are paid a salary by the state.³¹ Still, some ethnic minority peoples in northern Thailand still live their daily lives beyond the reach of the central government.

It is critical to make clear, however, the Akha have not been “marooned in the hills” or “left behind by civilization,” as the “civilizing” narrative often holds. Instead, for millennia, the Akha have made a deliberate calculation to distance themselves from the lowland power centers as well as marauders and others that may threaten them economically, politically, or militarily.

Yale University Political Scientist James Scott quotes Dutch anthropologist Leo Alting von Geusau who says “... tribal groups such as the Hani and Akha also selected and constructed their habitats – in terms of altitude and surrounding forestation – in such a way that they would not easily be accessible to soldiers, bandits, and tax collectors.”³² Indeed, upland peoples’ physical locations in mountainous terrain is a “political, cultural, and, often, military decision.”³³ This can be seen in modern times as Akha have preferred to establish new villages beginning in the 1960s at medium

²⁹ Alting von Geusau (1983), 249-250.

³⁰ Alting von Geusau (1983), 276.

³¹ Thanks to my thesis adviser, Dr. Christina Fink, for alerting me to this fact on December 6, 2011.

³² Scott, James C. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009), 150.

³³ Scott, 32.

altitudes far from highways.³⁴ There could, of course, be alternative explanations for the establishment of these new villages such as settling in new areas with available land. In sum, “Akha flight and statelessness is normatively coded in their history and cosmology” and the Akha see themselves as a “state-evading people” and have been doing so since the thirteenth century.³⁵

Of course it would be misleading and incorrect to state that all Akha view state evasion as an imperative. Certainly some Akha have found ways to reap benefits from the state through mutual accommodation. For example, the government opened an agricultural substation in an Akha area of northern Thailand in the mid 1980s and a number of Akha villagers obtained employment there and, in many cases, got along well with their ethnic Thai co-workers.³⁶

Akha identity is anything but static. For example, as a small group of people were walking toward a store in a northern Thai Akha village, a Lisu “remarked that nowadays one can’t tell if they are Lisu, Akha, Chinese, or Yao because they all were wearing town/‘modern’ clothes.” Similarly, two Akha traders from Burma passed through the same Akha village in northern Thailand whereupon they remarked the Akha of Thailand were becoming *ganlan*, a term for northern ethnic Thai lowlanders.³⁷ French anthropologist Bernard Formoso notes that generations of highlanders in Thailand have migrated to the lowlands seeking greater economic opportunities. He goes on to say “The consequence of this intensification and diversification of exchanges with an enlarged outside world is that the highlander’s self-perception is more ambiguous and blurred than before.”³⁸

Mika Toyota quotes Alting von Geusau’s explanation of how one can actually become Akha:

Several originally non-Akha groups entered the Akha “ethnic alliance system” ... these include poor marginalized Tai and Chinese, “mountain people,” such as the Lahu and “forest people” such as the Wa. These become Akha through attaching themselves to the

³⁴ Alting von Geusau (1983), 264.

³⁵ Scott, 176.

³⁶ Tooker, (2004), 263.

³⁷ Tooker, (2004), 270.

³⁸ Formoso, Bernard. “Zomian or Zombies? What Future Exists for the Peoples of the Southeast Asian Massif?” *Journal of Global History* 5, no. 2 (2010), 330.

ancestor system and accepting Akha customary law. The Akha call this *padaw-en*, or “adoption” of a group or person into the Akha alliance system by intermarriage or in the past, as *jakh’a* (bonded servant). This did not happen in a “class” context, however, but in a “family” context, leading to integration. There are particular places in the genealogical system where a group or person can attach him/herself (von Geusau 2000: 134).³⁹

As we turn from the discussion regarding Akha identity to examining the numerous vulnerabilities that this group faces, let us pause for a critical caveat: there is nothing deterministic about being Akha. Identity is a construct – and a very fluid one at that. The preceding few pages have attempted to outline some basic hallmarks of Akha identity but not all Akha subscribe to these traits or would even recognize them as being relevant or appropriate to their lives. This is especially true for urban Akha, including the young men in my study. As Toyota has said, “It is misleading to set the shared common customs as a basis of Akha ethnic identity ... it is recognized that ethnic identity is not an inherent bounded phenomenon as once assumed, but an ever-changing process.”⁴⁰

This introductory Akhazan section shows the limits of using Akhazan to understand current cultural practices among the Akha. I had hoped to make connections between Akhazan and my respondents’ lives but am unable to do so given the limited data and how dated much of it is. I read everything I could about the Akha to try to understand their lives and culture and apply those findings to my study. However, much of the data was simply old or irrelevant which made cultural explanations inappropriate or difficult. Quite simply, the little ethnographic data on the Akha has limited relevance to my respondents’ lives today. This makes my evidence-based explanation for how these 12 young men went from schoolboys in their villages to working in Chiang Mai’s bars all the more powerful and necessary.

Further, the literature on the Akha is quite discrete and largely does not address sexual issues. Much of the literature focuses on Akhazan, belief systems, and identity. From the way

³⁹ Toyota (2005), 114.

⁴⁰ Toyota (1998), 199.

ethnographers have characterized Akha culture, it is difficult to discern links between these descriptions and the actions my respondents have taken in their lives. It is therefore difficult to use this introductory section to make concrete links to the main themes of my thesis: labor, exploitation, and sex work. Instead, this introduction was critical in giving the reader a frame of reference with which to understand my respondents as we now turn to the findings of my research.

Male Sex Work in Thailand: New Qualitative Data

Before discussing the four challenges to conventional wisdom, I want to take the readers inside the bars of Chiang Mai – and briefly to Pattaya – to get a sense of what these bars look like, what happens in them, and why my respondents work there. It will become quickly apparent that the bars, and the sex work that occurs therein, are not monolithic. There is a range of sexual and non-sexual activity that occurs in these establishments but this nuance is difficult to find in the literature.

The following account is a rare, inside peek into an often overlooked or invisible world using new qualitative data I collected in the summer of 2011. This data does not exist anywhere else in the literature and this is the first time these stories have been told. Beyond going inside the bars, this introductory section acquaints the readers with the young men who work in these bars and provides an opportunity for my respondents to explain their views on their work, life, friends and family.

Intellectually, most people know that some young men sell sex. It follows that of that group, some will inevitably be subjected to various kinds of abuse and exploitation. However, from reviewing the limited sex trafficking and global commercial sexual exploitation discourse and literature, one could infer that this abuse rarely happens given the paucity of attention and scholarship. Therefore, one of the most important findings of my research is that some young men – including those from ethnic minority highland groups like the Akha – are affected by commercial sexual exploitation in Chiang Mai and elsewhere in Thailand. Figure 1 shows the spectrum of

answers the young men gave as to the type of work in which they engage in the bars of Chiang Mai's night bazaar.

Responses Pertaining to Sex Work (n=12)
Fig. 1

Type of Work	Number Self-Identified	Note
Sex work	5	Of the five, two also reported engaging in sex work while dancers at a gay club in Pattaya. A third told me he lived with a 45-year-old expatriate for three months in 2011 in a sexual relationship in which money played a significant role.
Drinking with customers at night bazaar bars for tips	4	A fifth denied doing this but I observed him engaged in this activity during two separate bar observations. He denied ever going off with customers.
Waiting tables at gay karaoke bar	1	This respondent said that sex was not sold in this bar and that this was a "normal" bar. I observed him at the night bazaar bar.
No sex-related work	1	The twelfth respondent denied any connection with sex work or with the night bazaar bars. I observed him at the night bazaar bar.

These individuals have not been "trafficked" into this work according to the sensationalized understanding of the word. These young men were not sold by their parents or kidnapped. Instead, there is a great deal of agency involved although they made this decision within an environment of severely constrained economic opportunities. This thesis will clearly show in later sections the natural and logical progression of how one enters this type of work. If the respondents had other options, I doubt many, if any, would sell sex. Of the six respondents to whom I specifically asked if

this was a good job or if they would recommend that their friends do this work, only one seemed to view it in a somewhat positive light.

A good job?

Yapa, 18, did not acknowledge selling sex but he did say he drank with customers for tips and said “the customers touch me and things like that.” Since he had just turned 18 about two weeks prior to our interview, and he said he had been working at the bar in this fashion for about a year, it is clear this touching happened while he was still a minor. If a customer ever touched Yapa’s genitals, that would constitute a crime under Article 26.1 of Thailand’s Child Protection Act.⁴¹ If a customer had touched Yapa’s genitals and then given him money, that situation could meet the definition of human trafficking under Thailand’s Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act, Section 6.1 and 6.2.⁴² When I asked him if he liked the job and if he would recommend it to others, Yapa said:

I like this job; it's a good job. It depends [whether or not I would recommend it to others]. It's up to them if they want to. But if they've never worked this kind of job they will not understand. They will not understand how it feels and they will think it's a bad job. The outside people will think this. Sometimes customers touch me and things like that.

Whereas Yapa’s response was ambivalent, leaving the door open to potentially recommending it to others, the five other young men who either acknowledged selling sex or working in the bar in some fashion all categorically stated it was not a good job and they would not recommend this type of work. Twenty-four-year-old Prasit simply stated that this was not a good job and he would not recommend it. Sirichok, 22 years old, recommended to his peers that they not work in the bar because “this is not much different than being a female prostitute.” Initially, 22-year-old Supoge told me that working at the bar is “entertaining” and “I like it.” Later in the interview, however, his opinion seemed to change. “Now I am looking for a new job. I don’t want to keep

⁴¹ Kingdom of Thailand. *Child Protection Act of 2003*, September 24, 2003.

⁴² Kingdom of Thailand. *The Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act B.E. 2551 (2008)*, January 30, 2008.

working at the bar. I know that I'm wasting every minute, every hour - drinking, wasting time. I came to Chiang Mai in June and now it's August. I don't even have money to have my own room. I just hang out and eat."

The final two responses to this line of questioning were illuminating because they show the attraction of this type of work and why it is difficult to simply move on. Lawpha, 19, explains:

I would not recommend this job to anyone. If you do this job you will be lazy because you get money easily. You can get 7,000 baht (\$233) to 8,000 baht (\$266) per month but you can't save it because you drink a lot. Also, among the friends, whoever has the most money at the moment will pay for everyone else. You can tell your friends you don't want to go to the bars but when they invite me it's hard and I want to go.

Lawpha's response shows that this work is about more than just sex. Instead, the most critical aspect is the fact that a major component of my respondents' social and support systems – their friends – are all found at the bar. In his PhD dissertation at Brandeis University, Thomas Shulich agrees: "The local youths hang out [at the night bazaar bars] night after night more for a sense of community."⁴³ He also says, and I found this in my research as well, that "The main way for a local youth to become a regular at one of these bars is to be invited by a friend who already works there."⁴⁴

In addition to simply wanting to see one's friends, there also seems to be a sort of code or agreement among this population that whoever has the most money at the moment takes care of everyone else. This parallels a norm in Thailand whereby whoever is in the higher position or has a cash windfall treats everyone else when they go out.⁴⁵

If one makes the decision to no longer sell sex or even hang out and drink with customers, his universe will shrink. He will stay in his room at night by himself because most or all of his

⁴³ Shulich, Thomas. "Love in the Time of Money: Intimate and Economic Affiliations Between Men in Chiang Mai, Thailand." PhD Dissertation, Brandeis University, (September 2005), 279.

⁴⁴ Shulich, 301.

⁴⁵ Thanks to my thesis adviser, Dr. Christina Fink, for sharing with me this important insight on November 23, 2011.

friends are out at the bars. This explains why 23-year-old Jamlong, who has renounced selling sex after going off with customers for three or four years, still goes to the bars with some frequency – to see all his friends.

Like Lawpha, 25-year-old Kichat categorically states that he does not like the job and that he would not recommend it. Still, the pull of the bar and friendship is powerful. Additionally, Kichat provides a glimpse of how one goes from just hanging out with one's friends at the bar to going off* with clients.

I stopped going off because I didn't like it. I would not recommend this type of work to someone I know. Most of my friends know this is a bad job but they still want to come sit in the bar. My friends come hang out with me in the bar and we're talking. If a customer comes and likes my friend, I'll ask the customer if he wants to go with my friend. My friends who now go with customers started by just sitting and drinking in the bar and now they have this habit.

Inherent in the preceding discussion as to whether or not this is a good job is the identity or categorization as “sex worker.” Although I will refer to my respondents who acknowledge selling sex in this paper as sex workers, this is not a label they would use themselves. In fact, never in my conversations with my respondents did I hear them use “prostitute” or “sex worker.” Instead, they always used euphemisms such as “go off” with clients or that they “sell.” They referred to those who purchase sex as “customers” or “*farang*.”*

These findings echo British anthropologist Heather Montgomery's field work with 65 children who sell sex in Thailand. Her research showed that most refused to identify as a “child prostitute.” Instead, many of the children in her study employed similar euphemisms for prostitution like “going out for fun with foreigners,” “catching foreigners,” or “having guests.” If a client

* “Going off” is a common euphemism in Thailand for going off to have sex with clients.

* *Farang* is a Thai word typically used to denote Caucasian foreigners.

returned to the same child three to four times he typically was known as a “friend.”⁴⁶ One qualitative study from the United Arab Emirates reveals a related finding: “There are sex workers who choose to migrate to Dubai in search of better economic opportunities and who view sex as a form of labor and not an identity.”⁴⁷

Both my and Montgomery’s research demonstrate that young Akha men, in my case, and Thai children, in Montgomery’s, fall outside the popular understanding of sex workers – usually women – banding together to empower themselves and demand more equitable treatment. Visions of female adult sex workers in Amsterdam generally come to mind but 1,600 Korean sex workers and pimps, for example, took to the streets of Seoul in September 2011 to demand more freedom in their sex work.⁴⁸

In Chiang Mai, the Empower Foundation runs the “Can Do” bar at which the entire staff is made up of female sex workers. According to Empower’s website, “‘Can Do’ is a great place to hang out, have fun, dance, fall in love, fall over, sing well or sing badly. ‘Can Do’ is also a working model of an entertainment place with just, safe and fair conditions for bar staff and sex workers.”⁴⁹

Although a novel and positive initiative, it should be recognized that few female sex workers in Thailand have access to programs like the “Can Do” bar.

I highly doubt my respondents will ever band together and establish a restaurant or attend a rally to agitate for better conditions for their work or to secure more sex workers’ rights for a simple reason: they do not identify as sex workers. They are temporarily doing this work because they cannot find a better option at the moment. As their responses showed, they largely do not like the

⁴⁶ Montgomery, 91.

⁴⁷ Mahdavi and Sargent, 9.

⁴⁸ Associated Press, “S. Korean Sex Workers Rally to Protest Stricter Laws,” *Associated Press*, September 22, 2011 <<http://www.chron.com/news/article/SKorean-sex-workers-rally-to-protest-stricter-laws-2183059.php>>.

⁴⁹ “Can Do!,” accessed October 29, 2011, <http://www.empowerfoundation.org/barcando_en.html>.

job. Undoubtedly there are significant numbers of young Thai and ethnic minority women who fall into this same category of engaging in sex work but who do not self-identify as a sex worker.

Another critical aspect of sex work is agency and control. Although these young men have elected to either engage in sex work or drink with customers for money from a universe of limited options, it is clearly their choice and no one is forcing them to do this work – neither their families nor pimps. Of those I asked, the young men told me they worked on their own and no one controlled their work in any way. One of the young men who acknowledged drinking with customers for tips also said that no one controlled his work in any way or took any portion of his earnings. I should make clear these young men all freelance in bars and do not work in brothels.

Dancing in Pattaya

While the focus of my research centered on the sex work in Chiang Mai's boy bars at the night bazaar, two of the respondents told me about sex work in which they engaged in Pattaya, a popular beach resort in southern Thailand. Both of these cases meet the legal definition of human trafficking under both Thai and international law since they started occurring when both individuals were under the age of 18. Twenty-five-year old Kichat told me:

Every dancer in a gay bar can be offed. The customer just points at the dancer they want. There is no minimum number of offs the dancer must fulfill each month. My boss didn't order me to meet a quota. I was offed 10 times. There is a commission system. If you are offed 20 times in a month you will get bonus pay. Everyone in the bar wants to be offed every night but it depends on who the customer wants. I don't know the amount of the bonus because I never hit the 20 off mark. I did not get any salary. In Pattaya, I was paid 100 baht (\$3.33) per song to dance. There were only two ways to make money: dance or be offed. You could also make money by selling drinks. Some customers were very nice and would just give me money directly ... I [began] working in the bar at 17 years old.

Supoge, 22, relayed a similar account:

I have also worked at a gay bar in Pattaya as a dancer for two months. This job paid good money but it bothered my heart – it bothered me. But it was a job and I had to do it. I didn't want to do it but it was work and I had to do it. The money varied; it depended if the customer offed me. A lot of other guys were better looking than me so sometimes I wouldn't get any money. It depended on each night. My salary was 2,000 baht (\$67) per month. I would get an additional 20 baht (66 cents) per song that I danced. I would also get

a cut of some of the customer's drinks. The money was good. If you work at this job you have a quota of 20 offs per month. You also have to sell 40 drinks per month in order to not be fired. Off doesn't necessarily mean you have to have sex with the customer. You can ask them to pay your off fee to the bar. I was 17 years old at the time, 16 according to the ID card. I left after two months because I had a girlfriend. We had broken up before I started working at the bar and then we got back together when I quit. She didn't want me to work this job. She thought I was her lover and she didn't want me to sleep with anyone else – especially men.

During the interviews with all 12 respondents, even when discussing sensitive topics such as physical abuse, family poverty, and discrimination, there were few times when any of the 12 seemed embarrassed, ashamed, or uncomfortable. For the most part, the young men discussed these and other difficult questions matter-of-factly. However, when both Kichat and Supoge told me about their experience as dancers in Pattaya, at certain points they each shifted uncomfortably in their chairs, lowered their voice, and would not look me in the eye – not for the reason one might suspect, though.

These two young men were not embarrassed to tell me they had been dancers at a gay club or had gone off with customers. They relayed these facts in the same forthright tone they used throughout the rest of the conversation. Instead, Kichat seemed ashamed to tell me that he did not know how much the bonus was for being offed 20 times in a month since he had never met this target. Similarly, Supoge seemed genuinely embarrassed to tell me that because some of his fellow dancers were better looking, some nights he was not be chosen to be offed. These two conversations laid bare the complexity of this issue. Kichat and Supoge illustrated how being offed can become tied to one's sense of self-worth and how the bars' monetary incentives reinforce this notion of self-worth.

These two stories were important since they showed that the payment structures varied between the two clubs at which the young men worked. In Supoge's case, he had a minimum number of drinks he had to sell and a minimum number of times he had to be offed each month in order to not be fired. At Kichat's bar, however, there were no quotas. Understanding the business

models of these clubs is a crucial aspect to understanding this industry and much more research needs to be undertaken to determine which economic model is more prevalent, or if a different model dominates.

Inside Chiang Mai's Night Bazaar Bars

The business models in Pattaya's gay clubs that Supoge and Kichat described above differ from the model at Chiang Mai's night bazaar bars. Whereas Supoge operated within an incentive structure and Kichat had to sell a quota of drinks in order not to be fired, the young men who work in the night bazaar bars work under a much more self-directed system. At these bars the sex workers do not have to sell a minimum number of drinks per month because *they* are what sell the drinks. It should be noted there is no dancing at the night bazaar bars which may at least partially explain the different payment structure.

To the respondents who acknowledged selling sex in the night bazaar bars or drinking or flirting with customers for tips, I asked each one if he had to pay any sort of fee to the bar manager for allowing him to work there. When I asked this question it was one of the few times when my respondents looked at me as if I were completely clueless. Each one emphatically told me that he does not have to pay any bar fee and in fact, he receives a cut of the drinks he sells. He is an income-generating attraction and the bar owner is pleased to have him working in his or her establishment.

Praiboon, 25, told me he receives a 30 baht (\$1) commission for each cocktail he sells but he receives no commission for selling beer or soda. Lawpha, 19, reported receiving 20 baht (66 cents) commissions on cocktails and juice. Like Lawpha, 24-year-old Prasit told me he receives a 20 baht commission on juice.

Besides receiving formal commissions from the bar management for pushing customers to buy drinks, many of the respondents reported receiving tips from customers for the pleasure of their company. Some told me the customers were just nice and tipped them. Some worked for the tips by

giving massages to the bar patrons while others received tips in exchange for being touched. Shulich also found in his field research that these tips were a primary source of income for the young men who work at the bars.⁵⁰ Since sex work and other kinds of labor that happen in these bars are the central issue in this paper, I will now quote extensively from my respondents. When added together, these testimonies provide a rich, textured, insider's view of this oft-hidden world.

Jamlong, 23, told me:

Since I moved [to Chiang Mai] I followed my friends who worked at the night bazaar so that made me meet many people. There are different groups who work at the night bazaar bars. One group works as waiters. Another group goes just to hang out and drink. Another group goes to go out and hang out with *farang*. I have been with *farang*. I am in the group that goes with *farang*. Some people in the group go with *farang* to go shopping and some go with them to drink more in another club. I don't go with *farang* anymore. I only go to the bars now to see my friends. I did this work for many years, maybe three or four years [started at about 19 years old]. I have some older friends who have done that for 9-10 years. I stopped because I could see myself in 10 years doing the same thing and not going any further in life. I didn't want to do it anymore.

Prasit gives further insight into the reality of these bars.

My friend then asked me to go to the bar. I didn't know what this work was exactly and then *farang* wanted to off me. I didn't want to go. I didn't go with them because I just wanted to hang around. I continued going and then yes, I have been with the *farang*. I did this for many months. If Child Help hadn't helped me maybe I would still be doing this. You will see many teenagers come to the bar to see their friends. The teenagers are from many hill tribes and they will ask the *farang* if they want a massage. If so, you give them a massage. The *farang* will sometimes then buy me a drink and we'll drink together. If I get a customer to buy a drink, I'll get a cut. There are many of these bars in Chiang Mai. The *farang* will ask the bar guy if he will go off with him. It's his [the worker's] decision. Now I don't really do any work – just give a *farang* a massage and get 40 baht (\$1.33) which only pays for one meal. If you work as an actual worker at the bar, you will get 1,500 baht (\$50) per month plus tips. If you're selling [sex], though, you'll get more. Right now I still work at the bar asking *farang* if they want massages ... Child Help doesn't like me to go to bars but it's hard for me to say no because I used to go there. I still go to the bars sometimes to see my friends.

Supoge's description of the work demonstrates the great deal of agency the young man exerts in this situation.

⁵⁰ Shulich, 285.

I work at the bar – sit at the bar, drink at the bar. I hang out at the bar and if I see a person I want to go with I'll go; if there is no one there I want to go with then I won't go. It's freelance. I've been doing this for about one year. When I broke up with my girlfriend a year ago I made a plan to do this type of work. I was working at 7-11 when my wife and I were still together. Working at the bar is entertaining. I like it. I can drink with the customers and then ask for money. If they ask if I sell then I'll go ... The guys who come to the bar look like tough men but since they're gay, when we go to the room, they act like a girl. They're afraid of me and my feet. They're totally different on the outside than when we go to the room. There are some customers who are regulars. They buy me drinks but I do not get money. I make money by drinking with *farang*.

Kichat makes it clear he knew exactly what the work would be before he started working at the bar. This prior knowledge underscores the agency and decision-making capability he possesses.

If I see my [repeat] *farang* customer then I have to take care of him; I have to drink with him. I knew before I started working at the bar that if I work there what will happen to me. I knew before. You get a lot of money and don't have to work hard but you're at risk for AIDS ... If they don't off me I will just make tips from talking and drinking with them [100 baht (\$3.33) to 200 baht]. I don't have to give any of the money I make to the bar owner. I work on my own and no one controls me.

Ahloh, 20, and 18-year-old Yapa told me they had never engaged in sex work but they make it clear that a young man can always stop by the bars and make a little money. "Sometimes I go massage people and get 100 baht (\$3.33) to 200 baht ... at the night bazaar," Ahloh said. "Some nights I give massages at the bar. I also sell drinks [and get a cut]. I have been doing this for almost a year. I just go, play around, play snooker, and hang out," Yapa said.

The Going Rate

I asked a few of the respondents who acknowledged selling sex how much they charged. I only queried those with whom I felt like I had established sufficient rapport. Although Prasit did not quote an exact number, he said that waiters and bartenders at the bar who do not sell sex make about 1,500 baht (\$50) per month plus tips and that those selling sex make more. Similarly, Kichat reported that non-sex selling bar workers make 2,000 baht per month. He then told me: "The amount the customer pays depends if they're nice or not. If they're nice they'll pay more; if they're not nice they'll pay less ... I don't have a minimum amount I must get in order to go off. You can't

have a minimum if you work at the bar. It depends on the customer.” Later in the conversation Kichat told me his minimum is 500 baht (\$16.67). Supoge told me “The money varies; 1,500 baht is my minimum. I won’t go with them unless they pay that fee. If they pay more then I’ll do the best. Normally I cannot make the 1,500 baht minimum. The average is 500 baht.” It was unclear whether he accepted 500 baht since he had just said 1,500 was his minimum.

Sirichok, 22, and Praiboon, 25, both denied ever selling sex but were able to still provide information. Sirichok told me that he knew from talking to his friends that the young men receive 1,000 – 2,000 baht per customer. Praiboon said he had learned from his friends they made “at least” 1,000 baht.

The most fascinating aspect of this data is that it appears to be largely irrelevant to these young men’s everyday lives. Counter-intuitively, whether one of these young men makes as little as 500 or as much as 2,000 baht in one night going off with a customer does not seem to be salient. For example, Jamlong told me “Every night I worked I spent all my money. I never saved money or thought about the next day. Sometimes I didn’t eat because I didn’t have money. I worked day by day.”

As I mentioned earlier, it was clear during my interviews these young men take care of each other and provide basic needs for their peers. This appears to be based on whoever has the most cash on hand at the moment. I inferred that my respondents talk among themselves and they all know who made the most the night before and the expectation is that person will provide for the rest. Lawpha told me “You can get 7,000 (\$233) to 8,000 baht per month but you can’t save it because you drink a lot. Also, among the friends, whoever has the most money at the moment will pay for everyone else.” I did not ask the other respondents to confirm or deny this statement but in my conversations with other young men this sentiment seemed to come through.

These findings closely echo a young Akha male sex worker named Lek quoted in a 2000 study by Simon Baker. Lek told Baker “You could earn money quickly, but the money would disappear quickly. The money was hot. I would buy everything for my friends. We would go and drink alcohol and I would also buy clothes. I would get 1,500 baht (\$50) and would use it all in one or two days.”⁵¹

To help readers of this thesis form a mental image of the bar complex, I will now use my observations plus those of writers from gay tourism websites as well as other observers. This bar complex is not exactly seedy but it is certainly not nice. In his PhD dissertation, Thomas Shulich describes it as “A line up of very cheap gay bars, most owned by *farang* expatriates and managed by local youths, are hidden away from public view, located in the very heart of the tourist area.”⁵² In a city the size of Chiang Mai and with the number of bars it has, there would be no reason to frequent these bars if the young men were not there. They are the attraction. Gay tourism websites confirm this:

“A row of open air bars across the small *soi* (street) at the rear of the Night Bazaar building, there are still some ‘gay’ bars there including Cruise, Cream, Dragon King and Secrets, all with freelancers around for a chat,” according to www.dreadedned.com.⁵³ Another website, www.nicksgaychiangmai.com advises: “The Night Bazaar ... used to be a very popular part of the gay scene, but many of the old venues have closed and now there are just a handful of bars in one small alley. They are mainly tourist beer bars. The lads here are mainly straight hill tribe boys and

⁵¹ Baker, Simon. “The Changing Situation of Child Prostitution in Northern Thailand: A Study of *Changwat* Chiang Rai” (ECPAT, 2000), 26.

⁵² Shulich, 279.

⁵³ “Chiang Mai Gay Listings by Type – Bars and Pubs,” accessed October 17, 2011, <<http://www.dreadedned.com/directory/bytype/2/6/>>.

you'd do well to check IDs for age.”⁵⁴ www.radchada.com echoes the previous website and adds an extraordinary warning:

The Night Bazaar area is Chiang Mai's main tourist location. A few years ago it was a popular part of the Chiang Mai gay scene but times have changed and the best of the entertainment is now to be found in the Chang Puek/Santitham areas. The few remaining venues are small outdoor beer bars for the tourist market. Opposite rear entrance to D2 Hotel, a row of small outdoor bars adjacent to the 'Foxy lady' bar. Chiang Mai's notorious 'Sleaze Alley' a few commercial beer bars with freelance hustlers (Mainly straight Akha and Lisu hilltribe guys - check for ID - some of the guys here are not as old as they claim) ... AT YOUR OWN RISK - the boys here are freelancers; they might be cheaper than going to a go-go bar or Karaoke but you have no recourse if things go wrong and they often do not have Thai ID. Also gang fights, problems with drugs and assaults on foreigners have been reported here. *Caveat Emptor*.⁵⁵

An entire article could be written about the use of “*caveat emptor*” by the author of this website. It is remarkable that the author found it more necessary to protect the “buyer” of this sexual service rather than the young seller himself. In the writer’s mind, sex tourists or expatriates are more vulnerable in this situation than the sex worker. It is also noteworthy that the latter two websites noted the presence of highland boys working in the bars and the third website even specifically mentioned the high proportion of Akha sex workers. The latter two websites also correctly singled out the fact the most of the boys in the bars are straight – potentially an attraction for some customers.

I did not include a question in my survey about other, non-Akha highland young men working in the bar. Three of my respondents, however, volunteered some insight. Prasit told me the “teenagers [workers] are from many hill tribes.” Lawpha reported Thai Yai (Shan) and Lisu workers in addition to the Akha but that “most” are Akha. Sirichok stated that “most” young men in the bars are Thai Yai. Supotch, the manager of Mplus+, a Chiang Mai-based NGO that works on HIV/AIDS prevention and care for target groups such as Men Who Have Sex With Men (MSM),

⁵⁴ “Night Bazaar Area,” accessed October 17, 2011, <<http://www.nickysgaychiangmai.com/gay-chiang-mai/bars/>>.

⁵⁵ “Gay Bars, Pubs, Clubs, and Entertainment in Chiang Mai,” accessed October 17, 2011, <<http://www.radchada.com/chiang-mai-gay-bars-clubs-pubs.html>>.

gay men, and transgendered individuals, echoed these assertions. He told me the Thai Yai have the “highest number of hill tribe” MSM in Chiang Mai.* In his dissertation, Thomas Shulich said that “many of the youths who frequented these bars were ethnically hill tribe.”⁵⁶

Chiang Mai Land

Early in my research, 23-year-old Jamlong took an interest in me, as a foreigner, and the research I was conducting. Jamlong is an earnest young man, studying English hard, and trying to orient himself on a healthier, more stable path. He repeatedly asked me if there was anything he could do to help me with my research. One day I told him I would like to have him take my interpreter and I around late at night so he could show me the “real,” non-touristy parts of Chiang Mai. I told him I wanted to understand how Chiang Mai looked to him – not how it appears in tourist guidebooks. He excitedly agreed to do so and a group of four of us – Jamlong, me, my interpreter, and the American founder of Child Help – went out late at night twice that week.

At about 10:00 pm on a Wednesday night, we set off. Jamlong showed us the snooker hall where he and his friends usually go and took us to a row of about 20 bamboo bars, many with glowing red lights and bored-looking young women in miniskirts waving as we drove by, at which he and his friends usually go for drinks. He then took us to a slum inhabited by Burmese migrants.

There were some lean-tos built along the road, which was filled with potholes as soon as we got off the main road, in which families slept. There was no door so you could clearly see chopped wood, dirt floors and some dirty clothes inside. There was no cooking space, running water, or electricity. Beyond the row of makeshift shelters, there were about 15 bars and karaoke

* Despite Supotch’s labeling of Thai Yai as “hill tribe,” they normally are not considered as such since they tend to live in valleys of mountainous areas, were organized into principalities in Burma’s Shan State, and are closely related to central Thais and other Thai (Tai) populations in northern Thailand. I thank my thesis adviser, Dr. Christina Fink, for this nuanced explanation on November 23, 2011.

⁵⁶ Shulich, 282.

establishments with three or four girls hanging out in each one. This was the first time in Thailand I got stares that clearly said “what is this *farang* doing here?” It was obvious that not many *farang* venture into this area. As we drove by, some of the girls waved and called out to Jamlong by name. When I asked him how the female sex workers knew his name, he blushed and said he had no idea.

The next Tuesday, the four of us set off on another nighttime expedition. Jamlong took us to a few karaoke bars and explained that the waitresses sit with the customers and they can flirt with her, fondle her, and then off her. I asked if there were karaoke bars like this featuring men. He immediately said yes and offered to show us. At about 11:00 pm on a Tuesday night, we pulled up to a non-descript bar in the neighborhood of Chiang Mai Land.

The bar was a typical, generic Thai bar: fake leather couches, dark interior, and loud karaoke. When we entered we were the only people inside. There was not a customer or bar worker in sight. We lingered for a moment and then started to turn to leave but then a parade of 12 identically dressed – black shirts and pants – young men emerged from the back, walked out, and sat down on the 12 bar stools at the front of the bar. They lined up so we could choose which one we wanted to sit with us and eventually take off.

A similarly aged young man, probably in his 20s, but who was dressed differently, came over to greet us. After he left I asked Jamlong if he was the manager but Jamlong told me that man was the pimp. After a few minutes of us ignoring the 12 young men – I was still in shock since this was the first time I had ever experienced such a thing – they left and disappeared through a door next to the bar. A couple of them lay around on the couches, bored and texting on their cell phones, but most disappeared into the back. One of them, 20-year-old Ahyu, who used to come to Child Help, joined us when he noticed Child Help’s founder.

Ahyu was one of the most informative respondents I met in Thailand and was able to provide a detailed, insider’s view of this bar. He told me that most guys who work there are Thai Yai

(Shan) but that three or four are Akha. He said that customers must pay an off fee of 400 baht (\$13) to the bar plus the price the young man himself receives. He told me most of the bar workers ask for 1,000 baht (\$33) but they will go off for 500 baht. I asked the age of the youngest man there and he said that most or all are at least 18 but that if I wanted someone younger they can find one for me.

After about 45 minutes Ahyu asked if we wanted the guys to come back and walk around our table so we could view them again. He said this was free, no pressure, and that if we did not want to buy anyone we did not have to and there would be no charge. We declined and he repeated this offer three more times in the next five minutes. It was clear that we either needed to make arrangements to take someone off or leave.

We left after singing a few karaoke songs and the bill was a steep 660 baht (\$22). We ordered two beers, one bottle of water, and one Sprite. The bill was not itemized so I have no idea how much was for the drinks, Ahyu's time and attention, and the songs.

For an alternative view on karaoke bars in Chiang Mai I turned to www.whorist.com, a sex tourism website written by "Thomas," who proclaims on the home page "I have been whoring touring for 37 years now, 1974 to 2011, and still enjoying it :)." The site gives detailed sex tourism or "whoring" tips for Thailand and the Philippines. Although this website deals specifically with female karaoke bars, one can imagine how these tips might apply to the male karaoke bar that I visited. Chiang Mai has its own page on the website and on it Thomas outlines "the usual procedure for the karaoke is":

1. Select a gal from the line up.
2. Take a seat and buy the selected gal a Ladies Drink. On a previous trip my babe gave me her cellphone number within 2-3 mins of sitting down with her. This was a hint for me to call her next day and bang her, away from the expensive Karaoke, methinks. See story about 'Miss Karaoke,' in the 'NEW' page, 'Fishin for Fun – 1' link (No.16).
3. Grope-illation (aka, tit-illation :): Hire a VIP room on an hourly basis, its not cheap (no figs). Grope and fondle her, she likewise you :). Personally, I recommend getting her cell

phone number and fondling/banging her away from the Karaoke. Dont waste money on an expensive VIP room.

4. Fuck her short time (VIP Room), but enquire as to the cost before hand, its not cheap, around Baht 1500-2000, which is expensive for this neck of the woods. Better, cellphone her and bang her in your hotel room next day (P500-1000)

5. Take out Long Time, all night? It would be prohibitive cause an attractive gal might be able to secure 2-3 ST fucks in a night at the Karaoke itself, plus a bag of ladies drinks, plus cash flow in the form of VIP room rentals. Cellphone her and bang her in your room next day, lot cheaper.⁵⁷

The Customers

Since Ahyu seemed to be so open about sharing, I asked about the usual clientele of this bar. He told me the customers are primarily *farang* men but that around 3:00 or 4:00 am Thai women come in groups. He said both young and older women come to off the young men. My female interpreter expressed embarrassment about this, as a woman, but Ahyu replied “it’s OK, I’m a man.” I did not ask directly, but my supposition is that having sex with women, even if they are older, is preferable to sleeping with men for these young men, most of whom are straight.

Some of my 12 respondents, in addition to Ahyu, volunteered demographic information about their customers. Praiboon, 25, told me “There are some female customers. They go off with the boys. Of the women, most are Thai, not *farang* ... The customers are about 80 percent men, 20 percent women.” Eighteen-year-old Kanok also reported women in the bar. “I have seen women come into the bar but I don’t know if they went off with the boys.” Clearly this is one area that requires an extensive amount of further research. There is tremendous denial about the role that women play in purchasing sex but it is happening in these bars in Chiang Mai.

Besides data regarding female customers, some respondents gave me a peek into a few details of the male customers. Kanok estimated about 80 percent of customers are *farang* and 20 percent are Thai. I believe he was only talking about male customers but I failed to confirm this.

⁵⁷ “Sex w’ Hookers Women – Chiang Mai,” accessed October 29, 2011, <<http://www.whorist.com/chiang-mai-thailand-sex-hookers>>.

Praiboon told me “Most of the men are *farang*. Usually they are very old – even with a cane.” From repeated observations at the bar I can attest that most *farang* men I saw seemed to be in their 50s and 60s. I did not see anyone who appeared to be under the age of 40. Sirichok, 22, said that “most” customers in the bar are *farang* but there are some Thais. He singled out Australians as being particularly common among the *farang* men. Supoge reported the customers are “mostly” *farang*.

Nineteen-year-old Lawpha had a different opinion about the demographics than the previous four respondents. “All of my customers have been Thai except for [one expatriate]. There is a mix of Thais and *farang* at these bars. There are actually more Thais that come ... after 11:00 pm the Thai men start coming.”

Thomas Shulich found in his dissertation field research that the predominance of ethnic minority highlanders in the night bazaar bars is enough to preclude most class-conscious middle class Thais from frequenting them.

Several middle class Thai men who enjoyed sex with men told me that youths of this low social status are decidedly not erotic objects for most Thais. Lighter skin color was a standard of both masculine and feminine beauty to the mainstream Thai view promoted by the mass media. Hill tribe peoples were generally looked down on as unsophisticated by ethnic Thais, not *riap roi* “fine” and “clean.”⁵⁸

Other Bar Details

My respondents provided me with a number of other insights into life and work at the night bazaar bars. While I was interested in finding out if there were many minors selling sex in the bar, I chose not to pursue this line of questioning because it was so sensitive and also represented elevated risk both for my respondents and myself. Fortunately, I was able to glean some of this information through other avenues.

⁵⁸ Shulich, 302.

First, it was clear from my interviews but also from my participant observation that some of the respondents began selling sex before they were 18 and that some of those other Child Help participants under 18 were likely selling sex. Although I did not formally interview any of the approximately 10 minors at Child Help, I did have the chance to get to know them and interact with them over the month that I conducted participant observation at the center. Further, I had the chance to observe them when I conducted observation in the bars where they worked with their older friends. I saw many of the 14 and 15 year-old-boys in the bars interacting with, and being hit on, by *farang* male customers. The Child Help staff confirmed that some of these boys sell sex.

Two of my respondents offered differing estimates about underage boys selling sex in the bars. Sirichok said “quite a lot of under 18 boys work here.” Praiboon, however, disagreed: “In the past we used to have boys under 18 working here but the *farang* and boy got caught. Now I don’t see anyone [under 18] go off with *farang*.” For the reasons cited in the previous paragraph, I am inclined to side with Sirichok’s analysis.

Thailand’s attitude toward sex with minors is less black and white than in the West where in most cases, sex with an individual under the age of 18 constitutes a crime. Sex between a man and a boy (it is unclear whether this refers exclusively to Thai men and boys) under the age of 13, or if there is “force” involved, draws “considerable criticism,” according to Australian social scientist Peter Jackson. He does not define force but one assumes this refers only to rape and excludes other types of psychological exploitation or manipulation.

Once a boy reaches approximately 15 years old, though, sex between that boy and an adult man does not receive any special criticism. Once a male reaches puberty, he is generally seen as sexually mature and is granted great agency in choosing his sexual partners. Further, there is an

understanding that the boy stands to benefit from the relationship through education, career advancement, and financial assistance and thus the boy may view the relationship positively.⁵⁹

A few respondents volunteered some information regarding condom usage and HIV/AIDS.* Kichat, 25, told me: “I knew before I started working at the bar that if I work there what will happen to me [selling sex]. I knew before. You get a lot of money and don’t have to work hard but you’re at risk for AIDS. I don’t worry about this, though. It depends on people and if they’re protected. I use condoms.” Sirichok, 22, told me “If the customer pays more then they will get the new boy [virgin] so they don’t have to use a condom.” I asked a few follow-up questions and he was unable to provide any specific information and therefore I cannot assess the validity of this claim. Separately, I was surprised when 25-five-year-old Praiboon told me he used to be a volunteer HIV/AIDS educator. “In the past I used to be a UNICEF volunteer in Chiang Mai to educate people about HIV. I went to bars and clubs to tell people about HIV. I taught them about HIV and how to use condoms and I then I gave them condoms. I don’t know about the boys’ habits with using condoms with customers.”

Two respondents provided a few details about the nature of police interaction with these bars. One of my respondents told me “last night when I saw you at the bar I had just come from doing heroin. You can’t buy it at the bar. It used to be widespread at the bars but not anymore ... there is a guard and he watches out for drugs. If he sees drugs he calls the police. The bar owner tells the guard to watch and call the police if he sees drugs.” Praiboon reported “In the past we used to have boys under 18 working here but the *farang* and boy got caught. Now I don’t see anyone go off with *farang* who is under 18 ... Now you have to be above 18 to go to the bar. The police usually come here and check things all the time. They check ID cards and give urine tests.”

⁵⁹ Jackson, Peter A. *Dear Uncle Go: Male Homosexuality in Thailand* (Bangkok: Bua Luang Books, 1995), 149-150.

* I did not ask many of my respondents about condom usage because it just felt like such an invasive question. I do understand how valuable that data would have been.

I did not ask any of my respondents if they had a “sugar daddy”-type relationship but one, Lawpha, 19, volunteered that he did. This is another area that deserves much more research.

During February through April this year I lived with an American *farang*. After April I just go to the bars to drink with customers but don't go [off] with them. If I don't have money I call that [American] man. I call him once a week and he gives me 500 baht (\$17) – 1,000 baht since I used to live with him. [Matt asks Lawpha if he has to do anything for the money]. Sometimes I go sleep with him but not all the time. Normally I just go to the mall with him. He is 45 years old and doesn't work. I don't know how he makes money but he's rich. He has four or five other boys and one in Bangkok. He rotates us four or five guys through his house. It depends who he likes at the moment.

He asked me to go to America with him but I didn't want to go so we broke up. He wanted to marry me and take me to America. If I married him I would get US citizenship because he's a US citizen. I just do this kind of job because of the money. No one really likes to be with a guy. I can't really stay with him.

This is a remarkable account. The second paragraph is a fascinating glimpse inside the mind of one of these young men. In Lawpha's case, this relationship appears to be completely based on a transaction between sex or companionship and money. I was surprised when he told me he typically goes to the mall with the *farang* rather than sleeping with him now that he has been rotated out of the house and is still paid for that service. I expected the *farang* to insist on sex before issuing Lawpha's stipend rather than just spending an afternoon with him. Even more illuminating was Lawpha's reaction to the expatriate's offer to take him to the United States. “I just do this for the money,” he told me. “No one really likes to be with a guy.”

Family Knowledge

As one would expect, there is denial among parents and community members as to the true nature of the sex worker's work. Most male sex worker participants in one study from Pattaya told the researcher that they told their parents they worked in hotels or restaurants even though the amount of remittances was clearly incompatible with these types of jobs. Malcolm McCamish says that this “don't ask, don't tell” policy from the parents must be understood within a Thai framework

of non-intervention in the affairs of others, particularly if such involvement may lead to conflict or loss of face.⁶⁰

Of the five young men in my study who acknowledged selling sex in the bars, I asked four if their families knew about their work. I asked another respondent who told me he worked as a bartender but never went off with customers what his family thought about him working in that environment. The latter, Praiboon, 25, told me “My mom is okay with me working here because she knows I only work at the bar and don’t go off with *farang*.” The other four relayed a wide variety of responses.

Kichat, 25, said “I will not tell me dad about my work. My wife knows about my work. She is okay with me doing this job.” Nineteen-year-old Lawpha also told me his female partner accepted his work:

People in my family know a little about what I do. When I was staying with the *farang* I told them everything. My grandfather was okay with it. He told me you can do whatever you want but not to make trouble for myself. My grandmother told me not to worry about money since my cousin who works in Phuket gives them money every month. She gives them 4,000 baht/month ... My dad knows about what I do. My girlfriend is okay with my job; she follows me and does whatever I want.

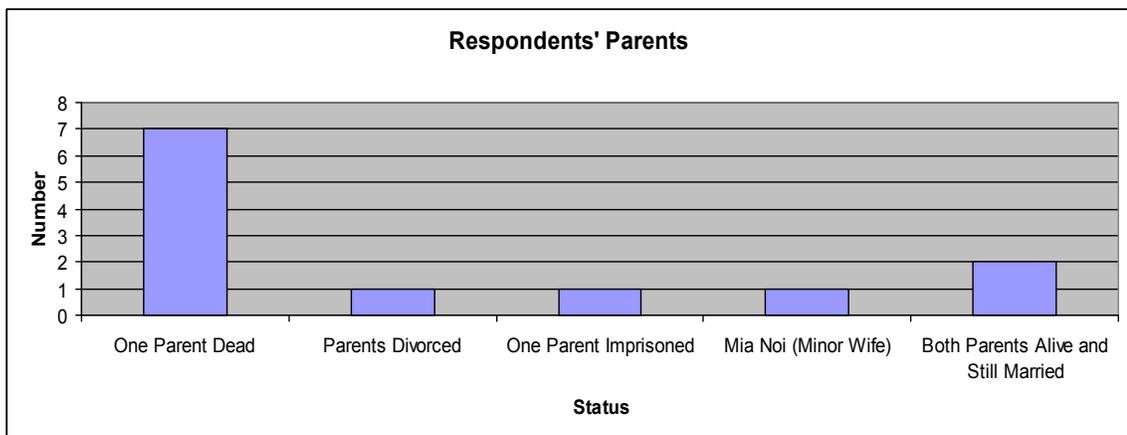
Jamlong, 23, told me “People in the village thought I sold [sex] since I worked at the bar.” Supoge said “My family knows about the work I do. Maybe they don’t know because I’ve never told them. If I tell them they would tell me to take of myself since I’m already grown up.” Of the four, only 24-year-old Prasit was categorical in his negative response. “My dad does not know,” Prasit told me.

It is important to mention here that for many of these young men, telling their families about their work is impossible because one or both parents are absent, either because of death or

⁶⁰ McCamish, Malcolm. “The Friends Thou Hast: Support Systems for Male Commercial Sex Workers in Pattaya, Thailand.” In *Lady Boys, Tom Boys, Rent Boys: Male and Female Homosexualities in Contemporary Thailand*, edited by Peter A. Jackson and Gerard Sullivan, 161-191 (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1999), 174.

divorce. Indeed, it was striking that of the 11 respondents whom I queried, only two came from homes in which both parents were still alive and married. I am not arguing a causal relationship but it does seem noteworthy that nine of 11 respondents represent families in which at least one parent is missing. In the “one parent dead” column in the graph below, in two cases the parents were already divorced prior to the death of the one parent. One respondent, whose mother had died, has two stepmothers. His first, official stepmother is the woman whom his father married after his mother’s death. The second woman is the respondent’s father’s *mia noi* – his minor wife.

Status of Respondents’ Parents (n=11)
Fig. 2



Conventional Wisdom 1: Access to Citizenship is a Panacea

During my literature review, I read two articles that influenced my thinking about exploitation in northern Thailand. The first was a 2004 report by Physicians for Human Rights entitled “No Status: Migration, Trafficking, and Exploitation of Women in Thailand.” The second was Vital Voices’ 2007 report “Stateless and Vulnerable to Human Trafficking in Thailand.”⁶¹ As is clear from their titles, these reports focus on the vulnerabilities created or augmented by

⁶¹ Vital Voices. “Stateless and Vulnerable to Human Trafficking in Thailand” (Vital Voices Global Partnership, 2007).

statelessness. In particular, they highlight how lack of citizenship puts one at higher risk for human trafficking, exploitation, and a range of other maladies.

It is not just NGOs that focus on the relationship between statelessness and trafficking. In its Thailand country narrative, the 2011 State Department *Trafficking in Persons Report* declares: “The greatest risk factor for highland women and girls being trafficked was their lack of citizenship.”⁶² It is important to note the Physicians for Human Rights report singles out the exploitation of women and girls and makes just one parenthetical reference to the vulnerability of boys. The report is silent about the exploitation of men.⁶³ The State Department also specifies the risk to women and girls for trafficking. Further, UNESCO has identified lack of proof of citizenship as “the single greatest risk factor for a hill tribe girl or woman to be trafficked or otherwise exploited.”⁶⁴ Even in 2011, men and boys continue to be pointedly excluded from the trafficking discourse and assumed to not be affected.*

The citizenship and human rights narrative assumes and proclaims that acquiring or maintaining citizenship confers certain rights on the citizen – an Akha person in Thailand, for example – and offers them certain protections. The two key questions that flow from that assumption are whether the state actually delivers those protections and whether the population at large respects the rights of those individuals.⁶⁵ If the state cannot or will not ensure the civil liberties of its citizens or if the rest of the population does not respect the rights of the minority, then simply having an ID card becomes less important.

⁶² United States Department of State. *Trafficking in Persons Report 2011* (GPO: Washington, DC, 2011), 352.

⁶³ Physicians for Human Rights, 13.

⁶⁴ Vital Voices, 9.

* A further illustration of this exclusion can be found by looking at Shared Hope International, a prominent US-based organization that works on domestic and international sex trafficking. Shared Hope’s phone number is 1-866-HER-LIFE (1-866-437-5433), which suggests it has little or no focus on the exploitation of men or boys.

⁶⁵ Thanks to my thesis committee chair, Dr. Shawn McHale, for this important insight on December 6, 2011.

Skepticism of the State

There is an assumed, state-centric paradigm that accepts the proposition that the state is, or should be, the guardian of the people and has those people's best interests at heart. This perspective ignores the reality that an undocumented highlander's community or family might be better positioned to assist the individual than the state (this is probably often true for ethnic Thais as well). In some of the interviews that I conducted with Akha organizations in northern Thailand, it was clear they sometimes see Bangkok as far from a benign force.

One of the seven organizations at which I conducted interviews in Thailand was Chiang Mai-based Inter Mountain Peoples Education and Culture in Thailand. IMPECT's Akha staff member, Wilailuck, was explicit in her opinion of the Thai government vis a vis her highland identity. "I feel threatened by the government. They don't see the value of the hill tribes. [The government] tries to promote tourism in hill tribe villages but they don't support us to help the tourists see our true culture ... I feel like I'm just a product. They don't see the value of the product, though. They just want to sell it and abuse it."

The director of Akha Life, Turyee,* spoke one of the most memorable sentences of the entire project to me: "I consider my tribe an at risk group. We compare ourselves to a cow inside a fence. Outside is the tiger and if we go outside the tiger will eat us." He went on to say how the Thai government had destroyed the most important of objects in an Akha village, the spirit gate, in the name of development. This does not sound like someone who sees Bangkok as the guarantor of his – and the Akha people's – safety.

I had read about these Akha spirit gates during my literature review and was well aware of their significance to village life. When I visited Green Mountain, the village in which eight of my 12

* "Akha Life" and "Turyee" are pseudonyms in accordance with the wishes of the staff of this organization.

respondents were reared, my guide pointed out numerous gates around the periphery of the village. They are of enormous importance to an Akha village because they are believed to keep the forest spirits in the forest – and outside the village. Turyee told me:

So like the Thai government policy sometimes they have a big project in the mountains ... like building the road. For example, the government policy also abuses us by not respecting our culture. Like in the Akha people we have the spirit gates. This is entrance [to the forest]. Someone will come and say “we’re going to make this road” and they have to move the gate to another place. Yeah, this is an example of the government abuse us by the culture.

Moo, an Akha woman who is a project manager at the Mirror Foundation in Chiang Rai, relayed to me a few surprisingly positive facts about citizenship among highland peoples in northern Thailand. She said that overall the human rights situation has improved for hill tribe people in recent years. “About 10 years ago no more than 20 percent of hill tribe people had citizenship. Now, about 98 percent of hill tribe people who have been here a while – not recent migrants – have citizenship.” These figures seemed very high to me but she stood by them. She also told me her organization is working on one case in which a young girl’s stepfather sold her identity documents. This is type of situation is “common,” Moo said.

In the 2003 documentary *Trading Women*, an Akha woman named Bu-Der Leh-Nyi says “Before when I did not get [have] my citizenship I had many problems. When the police stopped me I had to pay them. I couldn’t visit my children.”⁶⁶ The implication is that with her ID card she can now visit her children and is no longer stopped by the police. These are major improvements. It would have been useful, however, to hear what challenges she still faces in her daily life even with her new ID card.

Let me be clear: I am not arguing that access to citizenship and ID cards should be taken off the policy agenda for NGOs, governments, and other stakeholders. Obtaining citizenship is typically

⁶⁶ *Trading Women*, 2003.

a major step toward achieving an economically and socially stable life and is critically important. My argument is simply that citizenship may not be the silver bullet that some of the literature makes it seem and this nuance is often overlooked in the literature and advocacy on statelessness and exploitation.

It would be a useful contribution for future reports on statelessness to include a caveat that citizenship, while highly important, is not a guarantee of a stable life. Accordingly, NGOs and the Thai government should make clear that obtaining citizenship is not the final step on the road to social and economic stability. If an organization has been assisting an individual for five years navigate the bureaucracy to obtain citizenship, they should not simply walk away once the client has received his ID card. The literature on statelessness and exploitation in Thailand – although it does not say so explicitly – seems to imply that once the client has the ID card, his life will change virtually overnight. There has to be some recognition of the fact that the day after receiving an ID card will probably look much like the day before. It may take years before possessing Thai citizenship translates into a more stable life. Continued support and programming for the months and even years after successfully assisting someone obtain citizenship must be considered.

Citizenship and My Respondents

I learned a great deal about young Akha men before I prepared my research design and the questions I would ask my respondents in Thailand. I knew they had faced major education challenges, barriers to employment, and at least some of them were working in the illicit sex industry – all difficulties associated with statelessness, according to Vital Voices and Physicians for Human Rights. Therefore, I assumed most or all of these young men would not have Thai citizenship. When I arrived, I found that all 12 young men in my study possessed Thai ID cards and all of the other 15 or so young men who currently attend Child Help, except one, also are Thai citizens.

Chutima, president of Inter Mountain Peoples Education and Culture in Thailand Association, estimated that 70 percent of Akha in Thailand have citizenship. Further, she told me that 20-25 percent who lack citizenship have one of the hill tribe color ID cards which entitle them to limited state benefits. Finally, about 5-10 percent of Akha in Thailand have no documents, she said.

Some of my respondents volunteered background information as to how they or their families obtained ID cards and some of the challenges they faced in attaining these documents.

Lawpha, 19, told me about the bribes some must pay in order to acquire an ID card.

I am a Thai citizen. My dad didn't have citizenship. I registered under my grandparents' house but used my dad's last name. I had to pay money for my ID card. My aunt was a local official. I spent four years going through the process. I started in sixth grade. I completed many forms and had a witness sign saying I live here. I sent this paperwork to the district official but he rejected it many times and I had to pay each time. The official at the office changed many times and every time they changed I had to re-do the paperwork. I don't know how much I paid. The final time when I got the ID card it cost 17,000 baht (\$567). These payments were all bribes. The officials don't help unless you bribe them. My aunt was the local official and I still had to pay this much. Other families who don't know anyone have to pay more than 100,000 baht (\$3,333).

Twenty-five-year-old Kichat also told me about illicit activity related to citizenship paperwork.

I have heard that people come and trick villagers regarding ID cards. Recruiters tell the villagers that they know someone in the government office and can help get an ID card. You pay 1,000 baht-2,000 baht (\$66) and then the person disappears. You don't get the ID card. This has happened to many families. The recruiter lies when they say they will go talk to the leader of the government office.

Officials at the Mirror Foundation and Mplus+ provided examples of how corruption and prejudice affects highlanders as they petition for ID cards. Mirror Foundation's Moo told me there is "a lot of corruption among district officials." Somchart, an Akha man who is a lawyer and project manager for Mirror Foundation's citizenship program told me:

Sometimes we have to go to court to force the local officials to work with us. Some officials don't want to help us because of corruption and some also have a bad attitude toward hill tribe people. Mostly this is about money because if they work with us they will not receive

bribes for assisting with the process ... Attitude also counts. Some officials don't want hill tribe people to become Thai citizens. Also, the official has to validate that the applicant migrated to Thailand from another country before a certain year. We currently have eight cases pending in court in which we are asking the court to compel the local official to cooperate. We are fighting with eight districts. Before we file a lawsuit we give notice to the district. Many times when the district receives this notice they begin considering the case. The threat of a lawsuit is usually enough to make them work with us. They just want the problem to go away. If it's not necessary we don't want to go through the courts because we know it's going to be a very long process, usually two or three years.

Supotch, the manager of Mplus+ in Chiang Mai, worked for many years previously on citizenship and statelessness issues in northern Thailand at another NGO. During the course of that work he learned there was an informal market in the trade of forged ID cards. He told me "If someone dies their card can be forged with the local official's consent after he receives a bribe." Buying an ID card can cost 50,000 baht (\$1,666), he added.

This is an area that deserves a great deal more attention and research. There are enormous challenges, including corrupt officials and predatory recruiters, which impede highlanders' application for citizenship. Still, it is paramount to remember that even once citizenship is attained, many problems and vulnerability to exploitation can remain.

The subjects in my study undeniably have more opportunity than non-citizens because of their ID cards. For example, most of them took advantage of their right to vote by participating in the July 2011 parliamentary election that led to the election of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. They can attend school and receive a diploma, if they finish twelfth grade. None of them reported harassment or detainment in their internal migration or travel. Certainly these are enormous advantages.

When we dig deeper, however, the situation does not seem so positive. Although these young Akha men can vote, there is only one highland member of Parliament – a Karen, according to Akha Life's director, Turyee. While my respondents are entitled to a high school or college diploma, none of them possess one. Finally, although these young men are allowed to freely move and travel

within their country, particularly to find work, they still have limited economic opportunities. The opportunities they have found, meanwhile, have often been highly exploitive. Freedom of movement in a country in which there are few jobs available calls into question the value of one's ID card.

The crux of my citizenship argument is this: despite holding Thai ID cards, the 12 young men in my study still face many of the same challenges faced by stateless people in Thailand. These disadvantages are rooted in their low economic status, limited formal education, imperfect Thai language skills, and exploitation at work. Obtaining citizenship is important for highland ethnic minority peoples in Thailand but all of my respondents have Thai citizenship and yet they have experienced the same kinds of exploitation warned about in these reports. I acknowledge that although citizenship appears to be of limited utility in the 12 cases I explored, it may be more important in other cases.

Rule of Law?

The array of laws on the books in Thailand pertaining to highland peoples seems to be confusing for many. Furthermore, there is the related issue of funding. Although certain legislation may exist, the funding required for implementation often does not follow, which can render the laws impotent. Also, as in most countries, the gap in Thailand between legislation and the enforcement thereof is huge. It is arguable that many of the laws simply are irrelevant on the ground and play little or no role in a highlander's daily existence.

Some of the NGO staff I interviewed told me that even though their staff members are some of the country's leading experts on hill tribe rights, they themselves are just as confused as lay

people as to the status of many of these laws. Indeed, David Feingold, an anthropologist of the Akha, has said that Thai nationality law is one of the most complicated in the world.⁶⁷

Wilailuck, from IMPECT, was extremely helpful in providing examples of unfunded mandates from the government, laws with no teeth, and vague policies from Bangkok that few seem to understand. First, she told me of a policy aimed at boosting cultural awareness of various highland groups that was well-intentioned but ill-conceived. This law says that local schools' curriculum must follow 80 percent of the national standards but the remaining 20 percent can focus on the language and culture of the largest ethnic minority group in the village or district. This is a great improvement for those students who make up the dominant ethnic minority group but is not helpful to other ethnic minorities who attend that school who then learn a language and culture of a different highland group. She viewed the law positively, however, calling it a "good start." Wilailuck went on to give me a number of other examples:

Two years ago the government renewed the law about the lifestyle of the Karen and the fishermen of the South. The fishermen have their own culture. We are glad that this policy has been passed and I want this policy to apply to each hill tribe. The bad news is the government has not given the Karen or fishermen any money. They just have a law. Abhisit promoted local teachers to teach language and culture in their local schools since they know their village the best. Now that program is finished. It was short-term. If the school still has money they will continue to employ these cultural teachers but the government does not pay anymore. The last policy is regarding the Mother Tongue Program. This policy promotes that each person learn their mother tongue. I'm not sure what exactly this policy is but I have heard about it. You will see that each policy from the government is always a short-term project.*

In addition, the political instability since the 2006 coup that deposed then-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has likely not helped the highland situation. The country has seen five

⁶⁷ Feingold, David A., Amanda Flaim, Kathleen Kerr, Wenchi Yu Perkins, and James A. Goldston. "The Highland People of Thailand – Stateless as a Source of Exclusion, Rights Violations, and Vulnerability to Human Trafficking." Presentation at Open Society Justice Initiative, New York, July 31, 2007. <http://www.soros.org/initiatives/justice/events/thailand_20070731>.

* I believe the fishermen to whom Wilailuck was referring are the Moken people, although I am not positive. Further, I was not able to find the policies that she mentioned. My thesis adviser, Dr. Christina Fink, speculated this might be part of a broader law still in the pilot stage with the Moken and Karen as test cases.

governments in five years and rights issues or clarifying the status of highland peoples has not been high on any of these governments' agenda. Relations with Muslims in the South, economic performance, an ongoing dispute with Cambodia, now in its fifth year, over the Preah Vihear temple, and attempting to soothe emotions between Thaksin supporters and pro-Royal Family factions remain at the top of each government's agenda.

Some of my respondents from organizational interviews told me the Karen garner the majority of the tiny slice of government attention to hill tribe issues since they are the largest minority group although there are likely alternative explanations for why the Karen may receive more attention from the central government. For example, the importance of the Karen in neighboring Burma combined with regular and irregular migration of Karen from Burma to Thailand could make them a more pressing policy issue. Regardless of the reason, smaller tribes like the Akha are thus further disenfranchised as they receive relatively limited attention and support from the government. Turjee, director of Akha Life, told me the Karen's numbers and access better position them to petition the government.

The Thai government treats us different from another tribe. Like compared with Karen group, there's many people that help them ... it depends who can go to the government first. The big one first. Because Karen is the biggest tribe in Thailand. Last year, the government got through a law about the Karen tribe but not about another tribe. Maybe because they have the representative [in parliament] who is Karen. Some Karen people have finished a PhD.

Wilailuck, an Akha woman who works for the Inter Mountain Peoples Education and Culture in Thailand Association (IMPECT) disagreed with Turjee's assessment. "The Thai government treats all the hill tribes the same. The Akha are not treated any better or worse than other hill tribes," she told me. Wilailuck went on to caution this policy may not be as positive as it sounds, though, warning of cultural homogenization. "It sounds good to have a law to treat everyone the same but there is a good side and a bad side. On the good side, we all have the same rights. On the bad side, every hill tribe has its own culture."

Turyee provided support for my argument about all levels of the Thai government simply not seeing highland issues as high priorities. For example, Turyee told me his organization, which seems to be well-regarded and has existed for decades, has been trying to secure permission from the Chiang Mai provincial government for four years to hold a festival celebrating area hill tribes. After four years of attempts, they just hosted the first festival during my field work. He also told me he thought former Prime Minister Thaksin and now Yingluck (during her campaign) did not “really focus on minority groups like hill tribes because they are only one percent of the population.”

This comment struck me since the popular narrative of Thaksin and Yingluck portrays them as champions of the rural poor, especially in the north. Turyee went on to say “we have a lot of things to ask from the government but we don’t know when they will respond to us. But we have a lot to ask them. So now we are fighting with the government about the land issue, about Thai citizenship and about the Thai officers taking us to the jail without any human rights.” I was surprised when he later told me that he thought if the Abhisit government had been re-elected, more progress would have been made on land rights for highland peoples.

IMPECT’s Wilailuck also had positive words for former Prime Minister Abhisit when she told me his government “tried to unite all the hill tribes and Thais together.” She seemed appreciative of the government’s efforts but issued a different policy recommendation: “It would be better if the government tried to promote us to have dignity in our country than trying to get us to become one.”

Wilailuck went on to list a number of complaints against Bangkok in its treatment of highland groups in the north. First, she said the government is not supportive of NGO programs to protect and promote hill tribe languages and dress. She also told me “the government ignores the lifestyle of the tribe in the village. The government promotes tourism to hill tribe villages but they

don't support us about education or the economy. They only want to help us a little. They don't help us preserve our culture or get education.”

In summary, I am not arguing that the central government is racist or malicious when it neglects highland issues; I do not believe that is the case. Rather, I think highland affairs are simply not a priority nor will they be in the foreseeable future.* Along the same lines, Bangkok is also not focused on development issues of ethnic Thais in rural areas. Until progress is made on the underlying, structural challenges that currently dominate Thai politics – the central government's relationship policy toward the Muslim-majority South, the so-called “Red Shirts vs. Yellow Shirts” battles, and boosting economic performance – highland issues, especially for a relatively small highland group like the Akha, will inevitably be an afterthought.

Conventional Wisdom 2: My Respondents are Not “Appropriate” Victims

The anti-human trafficking activist community is largely anchored by unlikely bedfellows. On one side there are anti-prostitution campaigners who approach the issue from the perspective that all prostitution is inherently exploitive and that anyone in sex work is being “prostituted.” On the other side are those feminists who advocate for sex workers' rights and call for the decriminalization of sex work. Evangelical Christians and human rights-oriented progressives have also mobilized to combat trafficking in persons. Since the eradication of human trafficking has been primarily championed by women on both sides of the prostitution debate, the discussion has largely focused on women and it has mostly centered on sex trafficking – not labor abuse, organ harvesting, or other forms of human trafficking.

* It should be noted the central government has historically paid close attention to highland groups from a national security perspective but that focus has lessened in the last few decades and the Akha have typically not been the target of government suspicion.

Due to the dynamics of the trafficking discourse, men are essentially found to be inappropriate victims and therefore excluded from the discussion. Anthropologists Pardis Mahdavi and Christine Sargent tell us:

Men are rarely seen as vulnerable to trafficking. The dominant conception of masculinity refuses the possibility that men are weak enough to end up as victims of trafficking ... When the authors asked activists in the United Arab Emirates about men who may have been trafficked, they were met with blank stares at best, or with the simple dismissal of ‘men aren’t trafficked.’⁶⁸

Sociologist Nicola Piper has also noted the trafficking discourse’s inability to recognize men as victims. “Even the concept of ‘victimhood’ hardly ever includes men as potential victims of socio-economic pressures and structures leading to their being trafficked,” she says.⁶⁹ Sociologist Julia O’Connell Davidson goes further in deconstructing the false binaries that dominate the trafficking discourse.

The point is that although analysis and policy are largely informed by an assumed radical disjuncture between forced and voluntary migration, between forced and free prostitution, between adult and child migrants, and between adult and child prostitutes, in reality these categories do not describe temporally separated, hermetically sealed and permanently fixed groups, nor can they grasp the continuum that exists between each of these poles. Attempts to squeeze the diversity of migrant prostitutes’ experience into one of two categories – either ‘forced’ or ‘voluntary’ – obscure the complex interplay between structure and human agency in shaping that experience.⁷⁰

Even acknowledging the existence of these dynamics, however, invites charges of extreme moral relativism, or worse, and illustrates why discussing the sex work of young men is more difficult than analyzing either the prostitution of young children or older adults. With young children, essentially everyone agrees that children must be protected from sexual relations with adults, commercial or non-commercial. Conversely, a 40-year-old sex worker is given some leeway,

⁶⁸ Mahdavi and Sargent, 8.

⁶⁹ Piper, 217.

⁷⁰ O’Connell Davidson, Julia. *Children in the Global Sex Trade*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 78-79.

even by anti-prostitution campaigners. An 18-year-old young man, however, inhabits a very gray area.

It is instructive how traditional gender roles permeate even the framework of young people engaged in sex work. Even though girls are involved in sex work – an inherently dangerous form of work – there are still societal norms in place to mitigate the danger to girls while boys are expected to engage in riskier behavior. For example, anthropologist Heather Montgomery found in her fieldwork in a peri-urban slum in Thailand that boys were expected to be more independent and entrepreneurial in finding clients by venturing into the city whereas girls were not expected to do this as it is considered more dangerous.⁷¹

Of the many difficult issues to discuss with respect to young male sex workers, perhaps none is as sensitive as the issue of child pimps. Still, since this phenomenon plays such a central role in the broader context of child sex work, it cannot be ignored. The popular model of a pimp or trafficker is usually a middle-aged man or woman who kidnaps a child or subjects them to sexual exploitation through force, fraud, or coercion. While many people exist who fit this description, it must be acknowledged that child pimps also exist.* Child Help staff told me they knew of two of their clients who were pimping younger boys but I found it too risky to attempt to verify these claims.

The drive for a child to “graduate” from prostitution to pimping is understandable given the importance of social hierarchy in Thailand. A child pimp’s social status rises proportionally to the number of additional children over which he has control. Indeed, one hallmark of status in Thailand is the number of people indebted to you.⁷² One anthropologist of Thailand contends this is because one’s “station in the hierarchy improves by amassing greater resources for distribution.”⁷³ Thus, it is

⁷¹ Montgomery, 125.

* For more information on this phenomenon, see Heather Montgomery’s *Modern Babylon? Prostituting Children in Thailand*.

⁷² Montgomery, 92.

⁷³ Hanks, Lucien M. “Merit and Power in the Thai Social Order.” *American Anthropologist* 64, no. 6 (1962), 1250.

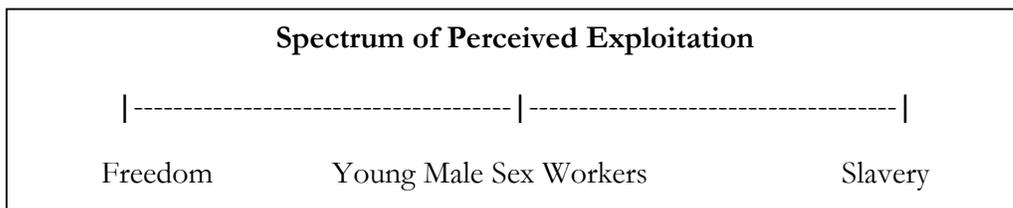
not that status itself is necessarily the end goal, but that it signifies one’s ability to distribute power or wealth.

The discussion above illustrates why the anti-human trafficking activist community may be so reluctant to take on the issue of young male sex workers. This population has fundamentally different needs than their younger or older counterparts. Activists also probably believe that girls and young women need more care and attention than young men. This is an instance where a young man’s very maleness and perceived (greater) agency works against him.

Problematic Male Sex Workers

Young male sex workers occupy a much different position on the spectrum in figure 3 than does a young girl locked in a room and forced to have sex with customers. That type of outright abuse sickens anyone who hears her story and fits unambiguously into the category of “slavery” and rape.

Fig. 3*



Conversely, the image of an 18-year-old tattooed, opium-addicted, convicted felon who engages in sex work to support his younger siblings is exceedingly more complicated. His voice is usually not heard and his story is not told because they are simply too complex for most audiences to process. This perpetuates a cycle where the common understanding of sex trafficking is limited to the four-year-old girl while the 18-year-old young man continues to be further marginalized simply

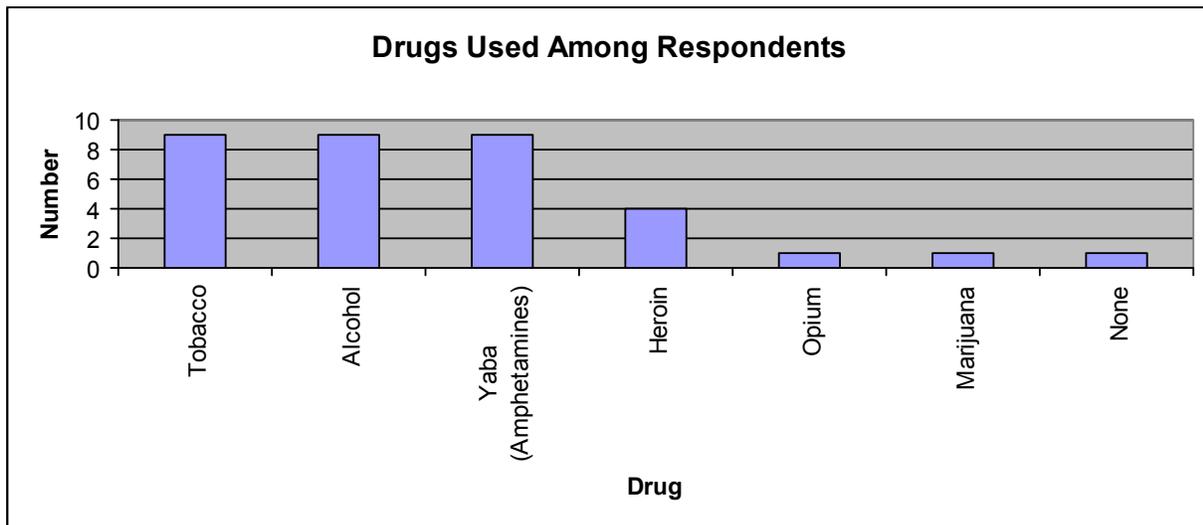
* Thanks to Professor Andrea Bertone for introducing this spectrum to me as a student in the graduate course on human trafficking which she teaches at George Washington University.

because he is too problematic to be understood since he does not meet the criteria of how a victim should act or look. Heather Montgomery sums it up well: “the media coverage of brothel raids, human trafficking, and forced debt-bondage causes a hierarchy of child prostitutes. The more innocent, unknowing, and pathetically victimized the better.”⁷⁴

Drug Usage Among My Respondents

Many of my respondents acknowledged using drugs and also gave insights into the role and prevalence of drugs in their home villages and communities. In fact, only one of the 10 young men with whom I discussed historical and current drug use told me he had never used drugs. The results underline that this population falls outside the popularly conceived notion of an “innocent victim.” A graph summarizing the type of drugs the respondents acknowledge using is below.

Fig. 4 (n=10)



My conversations with the young men regarding drug usage in their communities were especially interesting because the responses were so uniform. Six of the eight young men from Green Mountain with whom I discussed rates of drug use in their village, told me drugs were common there. Yaba estimated that 70 percent of individuals in that village use drugs. As the graph

⁷⁴ Montgomery, 28.

above shows, cigarettes, alcohol, and *yaba* are the most common drugs among the young men in my study whereas my respondents reported that older people – their parents’ age but more commonly their grandparents’ age – use opium. For example, Lawpha, 19, told me “My grandparents have done opium since they lived in Burma so I don’t know how to stop them. My grandfather is not really addicted (he uses it two-three times per week) but my grandmother is addicted.”

Four respondents noted that villagers believe opium and heroin have medicinal benefits. Three cited opium while one mentioned once when he had a leg wound a friend applied heroin to the injury to make it heal faster. Deeto, 18, told me there is a Lisu village near his village and “teenagers in my village who work for the Lisu get *yaba* for free from their bosses because it makes them work faster.” Twenty-two-year-old Sapon explained why his parents use opium: “Sometimes when my parents come back from hard work in the field they have a backache and will use opium.”

Ahloh, 20, told me he uses drugs to stay awake to work late at night at the bar: “If I work at night I have to use drugs. If I want to go to other pubs I use drugs [to stay awake]. When I do drugs my eyes are open and I can keep going. I hang out at the snooker hall, drink, and do drugs. I do mostly *yaba* and heroin [but not much of the latter]. Too much heroin gives me a headache.”

Kanok, 18, and Praiboon, 25, gave differing explanations for why they thought drug use was low in their respective villages. Kanok cited distance as the main reason for low rate of usage.

Drugs are not common in my community and I am the only person in my family who does drugs ... I do *yaba* and it’s very common for teenagers in my village to do this. If I have money I’ll do it; if I don’t have any money I won’t do it ... I think most people in my village don’t do drugs because it’s too far away from where you have to buy drugs. I have to go buy drugs from a Muser (Lahu) village about six kilometers away.

Praiboon credited local governance as responsible for the infrequency of drug use: “In my village drugs are not common. The village leader is very strict about drugs and tries to help people not do drugs. Older people do opium, though ... I tried *yaba* when I was 18 or 19 once or twice. Now I do not do it. I never tried any other drugs.”

Many in the anti-TIP community seem to have agreed on a specific construct of what a victim looks like: young, usually female, cute, innocent, and vulnerable. No one can argue that the individual in this image is indeed a victim, if she is exploited. Fundraisers and public relations professionals at anti-trafficking NGOs, governments, and international organizations use this representation because everyone recoils if that young child is abused. Ordinary people will write checks in order to stop this from happening.

Now, think about a tattooed, chain-smoking, eyes bloodshot from drugs and alcohol, leather jacket-wearing 18 year old with an arrest record and scars on his arm from cutting. Which image would most NGOs choose to use on their websites or brochures? The more the stereotype of an “acceptable” victim is propagated, the more difficult it is to recognize the exploitation of those who do not fit this archetype. By creating an echo chamber featuring a narrow construct of a victim, those who do not fit the mold are marginalized. Activists make these young men’s lives more difficult because by brushing them aside and thinking of them as anomalies, their status as exploited individuals is delegitimized.

For the very few organizations like Child Help working on behalf of this population, this makes their operations and fundraising all the more difficult. Since Child Help is advocating for a group which does not fit nicely into the dominant construction of victimhood, the staff has encountered a good deal of pushback. People have told the founder that she should be helping the “real” victims, especially young girls. Further, she has been told the Child Help participants are criminals, dirty, drug addicts, and bad kids.

The founder of Child Help told me her greatest challenge is the stigma and taboo associated with her participants. She has found ethnic Thais and organizations run by ethnic Thais to be especially resistant or unsympathetic to the work of her organization. Alternatively, Akha culture

organizations and NGOs and programs that work for migrants' rights have tended to be more positive toward Child Help's mission.

An ethnic Thai staff member at a Chiang Mai orphanage and drop-in center told Child Help's founder "Why waste your time with these boys? They're all going to get HIV and die." Another ethnic Thai worker at the same organization said "Good luck with your center. They're all going steal from you and lie to you. Nothing good comes from those boys."

Gender Roles in Akha Society

We will now turn to gender issues and arguments of gender inequality in Akha society and within the family. Like his ethnic Thai lowland counterparts, an Akha boy is raised in a culture in which the status of men appears to be higher than that of women. Only men can sit on the village council of elders, for example.⁷⁵ Also, the male head of the household decides if his family will move into or out of a particular village.⁷⁶ If a woman cannot conceive a child, it is acceptable for her husband to take a second wife.⁷⁷ Further, women should not have thicker mattresses than men, lest they be physically higher than men while sleeping.⁷⁸ Indeed, there is an Akha saying "just as the roof is above the floor, so is the man higher than the woman."⁷⁹

Among Lao Akha, anthropologists Chris Lyttleton and Douangphet Sayanouso note that the women "eat after male householders have finished their meal." They also highlight that Lao "Akha households typically value as many children as possible, particularly sons, who are necessary for appropriate ancestor rituals."⁸⁰ These two anthropologists also reference instances of gender asymmetry among Akha women in Thailand in the literature.

⁷⁵ Alting von Geusau (1983), 268.

⁷⁶ Tooker, Deborah E. "Putting the Mandala in its Place: A Practice-based Approach to the Spatialization of Power on the Southeast Asian 'Periphery' – The Case of the Akha." *Journal of Asian Studies* 55, no. 2 (May, 1996), 337.

⁷⁷ Toyota (1998), 204.

⁷⁸ Tooker (1996), 338.

⁷⁹ Alting von Geusau (1983), 271.

⁸⁰ Lyttleton and Douangphet, 179.

While social roles among the Akha are not uniformly stratified and women have various opportunities to express social status (Hanks, 1988), gender asymmetry appears in many contexts. Kammerer notes concerning Akha in Thailand: 'Not only do men have the power to influence the lives of women; so also women have the power to influence the lives of men. But I would argue in this, men and women are not equal' (1988, p. 49). Mandates expressing and reproducing male authority occur within broad spheres of social life in most cultural settings.^{81*}

As I will later demonstrate in my questioning of the conventional wisdom regarding free education, Akha boys seem to possess great agency in determining when to leave school and move out of the village. I am not sure whether Akha girls are afforded this same degree of agency since I only queried young men. I found five examples among my respondents of boys deciding for themselves at the conclusion of elementary school that they would drop out. Further, although I did not ask the question systematically to all my respondents, three of them told me their families were supportive of their decision to move from the village and look for a job. In Supoge's case, his family gave him money to help him settle in Chiang Mai. Only in one instance, Kanok's, did his family not want him to leave his village. They said they wanted him to stay and help farm but he left anyway. This last example demonstrates a significant amount of agency since an 18-year-old was able to ignore his family's express wishes. Taken together, these examples suggest that young Akha men may be granted substantial degrees of agency by their families.

Gender, Sexuality, and Masculinity in Thai Culture

Most everyone agrees that it is less than ideal for a young man to engage in sex work due to the inherent health risks and possibility of abuse. Still, many are willing to grant a young man some degree of latitude based on his gender, age, and perceived (greater) agency vis a vis a young woman. This allowance is amplified in Thailand due to the traditional gender roles at the nexus of sexuality,

⁸¹ Lyttleton and Douangphet, 172-173.

* This passage is an important reminder of the age and relative lack of literature on Akha gender and sexuality among Thai Akha. Although this passage is from a 2011 article, the authors are still quoting materials from the 1980s, because there has been so little published since then. The body of work from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, still represents the bulk of the research and ethnography of this population.

labor, and family responsibilities. More generally, young men in the developing world are understood to have challenges and responsibilities that would be hard for those in the West to imagine today. Thai society has typically made wide allowances for Thai expressions of masculinity and sexuality.

It is relatively easy to point to some key day-to-day differences for young boys and girls in Thailand. These significant gendered dimensions are apparent from a young age and serve as strong socializing factors which influence how Thai men and women see themselves and the opposite sex throughout their lives. Anthropologist Chris Lyttleton tells us that as children:

Girls receive attention in terms of the duties they must learn, males receive attention for their very maleness. Girls' behavior is marked by attention, boys' by the notion of operating outside, or cultivating the potential to transcend, bounds. This tailoring of privilege and scrutiny has marked implications for how male and female sexual behavior is adjudicated within Thai social order.⁸²

It is important to remember that until the early twentieth century, education was reserved for boys at the monastery while girls' education was limited to household chores performed with her mother. Conversely, boys have traditionally been excluded from household responsibilities.⁸³

Ministry of Education-issued textbooks for public schools reinforce these gender differences through exercises which feature the daughter assisting in household chores. In the textbooks for Years 1 and 2, a girl sweeps, mops, and cooks while her brother helps their father with gardening.⁸⁴

As one might expect, sexual freedoms have traditionally been much different for men and women throughout Thai history. Historically, elite or wealthy men have typically been expected to express their sexuality including through polygamy or more recently by patronizing commercial sex

⁸² Lyttleton, Chris. *Endangered Relations: Negotiating Sex and AIDS in Thailand* (Bangkok, Thailand: White Lotus Press, 2000), 130.

⁸³ Lyttleton (2000), 128.

⁸⁴ Baker, Simon. *'Child Labour' and Child Prostitution in Thailand: Changing Realities*. (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2007), 57.

workers.⁸⁵ Although polygamy is now rare, having a legal wife and a second wife or mistress, or sometimes even registering two marriages in different provinces is not that uncommon among wealthy men or civil servants who are transferred to different provinces.⁸⁶ King Mongkut (reigned 1851-1868), for example, reportedly had a harem of 600 wives and concubines.⁸⁷ Women, alternatively, have generally been expected to repress their sexuality and to maintain their virginal status until marriage.⁸⁸

Constructing Male and Female Sexuality

Male and female sexuality are viewed in fundamentally different ways in Thailand with different attributes ascribed to each. Men are believed to have much greater sex drives in need of more frequent release whereas women are seen as possessing weaker sex drives and also being in greater control of their sexuality. The inherent corollary to these ideas is that women – either the man’s partner or a commercial sex worker – exist largely to satisfy a man’s sexual needs.⁸⁹

The degree to which gender norms have become engrained in Thai culture can be seen in a number of polls. For example, one 1990 Thai study from an urban area showed that 80 percent of men and 75 percent of women agreed with the statement “it is natural for a man to pursue sex at every opportunity.”⁹⁰ Indeed, the idea of suppressing sexual desires, except for Buddhist monks who have renounced all worldly involvement, is not a part of traditional male sexual culture in Thailand.⁹¹

⁸⁵ Knodel, John, et al. “Sexuality, Sexual Experience, and the Good Spouse: Views of Married Thai Men and Women.” In *Gender & Sexualities in Modern Thailand*, edited by Peter A. Jackson and Nerida M. Cook, 93-113 (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999), 94.

⁸⁶ Thanks to my thesis adviser, Dr. Christina Fink, for sharing with me this information on November 23, 2011.

⁸⁷ Lyttleton (2000), 228.

⁸⁸ Knodel, et al, 99.

⁸⁹ Knodel, et al, 96-97.

⁹⁰ Knodel, et al 96.

⁹¹ Jackson (1995), 48.

Leslie Ann Jeffrey observes that “women remain responsible for ensuring that men adhere to moral restraints.”⁹² One manifestation of this can be seen when in 1998 administrators at Chulalongkorn University threatened to dock female students’ grades if they did not cease wearing short skirts. School officials told the student body that short skirts “go against Thailand’s customs” and “damage Chula’s dignity” and even tempt men to perpetrate sexual assault. Additionally, many of the female respondents in one study stated that it was important for wives to please their husbands sexually. Further, the women rarely said that sexual gratification was important for themselves.⁹³ This hesitance to seek gratification may have some correlation with the colloquial admonition young women – but not young men – are told that “walls have ears, the doors have eyes, and the spirits and angels will see any sexual exhibition.”⁹⁴

Heterosexual Thai men have traditionally had three options for sexual relations. The first is the most traditional method of marrying a woman and most often subsequently having children with her. The second option, taking a *mia noi* (minor wife) or concubine,⁹⁵ ostensibly involves less investment and responsibility than the first option; however, men often do have children with their *mia noi* – but perhaps not by choice. The man may not want to have children with her but she may say it was an “accident” in order to compel the man to support her longer than he may have planned.⁹⁶ Finally, a man can choose to remain single but have sex with commercial sex workers. It is important to note that choosing any of the three categories above does not preclude involvement in one or both of the others.⁹⁷

⁹² Jeffrey, Leslie Ann. *Sex and Borders: Gender, National Identity, and Prostitution Policy in Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 134.

⁹³ Knodel, et al, 99.

⁹⁴ Lyttleton (2000), 164.

⁹⁵ Jackson (1995), 50.

⁹⁶ Thanks to my thesis adviser, Dr. Christina Fink, for this insight on December 6, 2011.

⁹⁷ Jackson (1995), 50.

Male Patronage of Female Commercial Sex Workers

Men are assumed to periodically engage in extramarital sex, often with sex workers. Most Thai women, especially those of higher classes, are expected to be virgins at marriage while men are expected to seek sexual gratification. If a woman has sex before marriage, she is said to be “ruined” or “spoiled” as pre-marital sex is thought to be debasing or defiling for the woman – but not for the man. This dynamic sets up demand for female sex workers who are already thought to be defiled and can provide this essential sexual service to men.

Since female sex workers serve an important societal function, they are sometimes seen in a positive light. In some northern districts of the country, they suffer little or no stigma from local men who see them as “worldly” and “successful.” In addition, female sex workers sometimes make substantial financial contributions to local temples and thus accrue merit. Remittances to families also help support education for siblings and repay parents. Therefore, any sexual “deviance” is balanced by the significant contributions the woman makes to her family and community.⁹⁸ It is unclear whether attitudes toward young male sex workers are shaped along similar lines, assuming he sends remittances and makes similar donations to the village temple and community.

Patronizing sex workers has traditionally been one of the liberties afforded to men of higher status in Thai culture although it is more acceptable for a single man to engage a sex worker than one who is married. Second wives are often too expensive for men with lower incomes but sex workers serve clients at all income levels.⁹⁹ There appears to be more understanding from the perspective of the female partner if her male partner sleeps with a sex worker for a special occasion

⁹⁸ Lyttleton, Chris. “The Good People of Isan: Commercial Sex in Northeast Thailand.” *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 5, no. 3 (1994), 259.

⁹⁹ Thanks to my thesis adviser, Dr. Christina Fink, for bringing to my attention on November 23, 2011 this obvious but important point that I had overlooked.

or out drinking with a group of friends.¹⁰⁰ Also, Peter Jackson notes that since patronizing a sex worker is seen more as entertainment that meets a natural male compulsion and because there is little or no emotional link between the sex worker and client, often neither men nor women view this act as a significant affront to the marriage.¹⁰¹

Competing Views on Akha Sexuality

In their recent field research among the Akha in Laos, anthropologists Chris Lyttleton and Douangphet Sayanouso found there was no prohibition on sex before marriage and that sexual relations are an “important stepping-stone to marital alliance.” Further, in a review of missionary descriptions of Akha life in mid-twentieth century Thailand and Burma, Lyttleton and Douangphet reported that sexual relations were also important signs of adulthood at that time.”¹⁰²

In Mae Sai, a border town between Thailand and Burma, I interviewed three young Akha women in their 20s who all work at the Development and Education Programme for Daughters and Communities (DEPDC), an NGO working on issues of child exploitation in northern Thailand. This small focus group had different views on Akha culture and sexuality.

One of the women, Pavina, said that gossip is an issue in Akha communities and said specifically that if two people have sex before marriage the village “will not accept them.” She went on to tell me “people mostly gossip about girls’ [sexual indiscretions] and are more accepting of guys.” Further, she told me “Villagers will not accept female Akha sex workers in their village. Village people will look at women who move to the city as prostitutes, regardless of their actual job. If an Akha boy goes to be a sex worker in the city the villagers will not know about this since they focus mostly on girls.”

¹⁰⁰ Knodel, et al, 98.

¹⁰¹ Knodel et al, 98-99.

¹⁰² Lyttleton and Douangphet, 174.

If a young man is the head of the household, there may be a subconscious allowance by others that it would be understandable for him to do whatever it takes, including sex work, to provide for his family. As Heather Montgomery has stated, “it is ridiculous in most Third World contexts to demand that a child stay economically inactive until he or she is eighteen.”¹⁰³ It is critical to note that sex and work are directly linked to adulthood and maturity in Thailand but the age of either the sex or work is not as important. The ability to financially or emotionally provide for others is the most important – regardless at what age.¹⁰⁴

Among the Akha in Laos, Lyttleton and Douangphet identified axes along which their research subjects would discuss sexual experiences. First, they found “while unmarried women are reticent to detail intimate relations, men of all ages and married women are forthcoming in their descriptions of their experiences.”¹⁰⁵ This is an important reminder that age and marital status are significant dimensions, in addition to gender.

Legal and Policy Framework

Thailand appears to have signed the appropriate conventions, promulgated laudable laws, and included key provisions in its constitution to curb human trafficking and protect children from various forms of exploitation. Thailand passed the Measures in Prevention and Suppression of Trafficking in *Women and Children* Act (my emphasis added) in 1997 and revised and renamed it the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act in 2008. The latter version defines a child as “any person under eighteen years of age” and states that engaging in “procuring, buying, selling, vending, bringing from or sending to, detaining or confining, harboring, or receiving a child [for the purpose of exploitation – sexual or otherwise] is guilty of trafficking in persons.” Therefore, paying for sex with a boy under

¹⁰³ Montgomery, 54.

¹⁰⁴ Montgomery, 61.

¹⁰⁵ Lyttleton and Douangphet, 174.

the age of 18 is *de jure* human trafficking under Thai law.¹⁰⁶ This is in keeping with the 2000 UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, *Especially Women and Children* (my emphasis added) which Thailand has signed, but not ratified.¹⁰⁷

Thailand passed the Child Protection Act of 2003 and in 2007 the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security promulgated a Memorandum of Understanding on Operational Procedures for Concerned Agencies in Prevention, Suppression, and Solution for Human Trafficking Problem in 17 Northern Provinces. Finally, Thailand has signed regional commitments to fight trafficking, as well. In 2004, Thailand and the nine other member states of the Association of the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), signed the ASEAN Declaration Against Trafficking in Persons *Particularly Women and Children* (my emphasis added). The foregoing documents are a small percentage of the dozens of national, regional, and international laws and agreements Thailand has signed to signal its seriousness about combating all forms of exploitation, especially human trafficking and sexual abuse.

It is remarkable when one begins to look closely at these laws – or even just their titles – how much they focus on women and children. In fact in each of the major international, Thai, and regional laws or commitments to fight human trafficking, protecting or assisting men is expressly not a priority. The hegemonic gender discourse has made it politically incorrect to attempt to protect men from exploitation such as human trafficking. Nicola Piper observes that men are usually “treated as ‘smuggled’ labor migrants while the trafficking category is reserved for women (and children).”¹⁰⁸ Thus, men are granted agency and assumed to be active in their “smuggling” while women and children are helpless victims.

¹⁰⁶ Kingdom of Thailand. *The Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act B.E. 2551* (2008), January 30, 2008, 2-3.

¹⁰⁷ United States Department of State. *Trafficking in Persons Report 2010* (GPO: Washington, DC, 2010), 364.

¹⁰⁸ Piper, 217.

Esoteric discussions about international law and norms are not uncommon in the anti-human trafficking community. However, what a law says on paper may have little relevance to one's day-to-day life in northern Thailand. The most blatant example of all is regarding prostitution. Due to the country's reputation as a "haven" for sex tourists, many people are under the mistaken impression that prostitution is legal in Thailand. In fact Thailand passed the Suppression of Prostitution Act in 1960 and it held legal force until 1996 when it was replaced with the Prevention and Suppression of Prostitution Act.

It is therefore illegal for my respondents to be selling sex – and for customers to be purchasing it from them. Similarly, a few streets over from where the young men work, is Loi Krah. This street hosts more than 40 bars in a row wherein a few young women work in each. This is not hidden or underground. It is in plain sight and there is no question what happens in these bars. This activity is illegal, but the law does not seem to be relevant.

The legal situation is another reason why the respondents in my study fall outside the construct of an "appropriate" victim. They are criminals, according to the law. Every time they go off with a customer, they are breaking Thai law. Although this is the same for Thai women working in Bangkok's famous Patpong district or freelancing as sex workers in Chiang Mai, sex work of young men seems to be a much more taboo issue. It is therefore highly problematic for NGOs, governments, and international organizations to have any engagement with these young sex workers, or even to fund programs like Child Help, which are dedicated to providing services to this population. Many aid organizations and donors would prefer to "play it safe" and help prevent abuse of and offer protection for undeniable and unproblematic victims – like very young girls.

From an advocacy perspective it has always been easier to convince donors, policymakers, and other stakeholders of the need to "protect" women and "children," whereas the latter is commonly understood to be a code word for girls. This flows from traditional paternalistic attitudes

regarding the relative weakness and inferiority of women and girls and their need for protection by the state, civil society, or other (usually male) actors. Indeed, the conflation of “women and children” underlines the ludicrous assumption that a 40-year-old woman possesses the same degree of agency as a four-year-old girl and thus is in need of the same degree of protection. “This phrase ‘women and children’ consistently dominates the issue, to the point where the continuous repetition has turned it into ‘womenandchildren,’ which can easily collapse into ‘women as children.’”¹⁰⁹

Conventional Wisdom 3: “Free Education” Reduces Human Trafficking

This section will demonstrate that in my study, education – especially one’s Thai language ability – appears to be related to one’s risk for exploitation. The anti-trafficking community accepts that education is one of the most important criteria for determining how “at risk” one is; this is evidenced by the great number of anti-trafficking organizations that count increasing education as a key factor in reducing vulnerability. Recommendations for “free education” are common but what exactly does this mean, and how does it translate into policy? Is free tuition enough? For elementary school or all the way through high school? I asked each of my 12 respondents a lengthy set of detailed questions about his educational background and the expenses associated therewith. * The results deserve to be detailed at length here.

By far the most important finding that resulted from my conversations about education with the 12 young men in my study was that marginal increases in cost – by Western standards – played a large role in forcing them to drop out of school. This decision came in spite of the fact that these young men enjoyed free tuition. The policy implications, which will be detailed at the end of the thesis, are enormous: free tuition was not enough to keep students in school in my study – especially

¹⁰⁹ Mahdavi and Sargent, 15-16.

* I am grateful to my thesis adviser, Dr. Christina Fink, for helping me develop this important section of my questionnaire.

from the poorest families. I do not extrapolate this finding beyond my study but that does not lessen its importance.

As figure 5 shows, five of the 12 respondents possess an elementary school education. Two more dropped out during middle school while three completed middle school. Only two young men in my study attended some high school although neither graduated. Two recurring themes jumped out during my conversations about education background with these 12 young men: marginal expenses caused continued education to be unaffordable; and a willingness to sacrifice their education for the sake of their generally poor families and to allow their younger siblings the opportunity to go to school. I should make clear that while the evidence I collected in my study suggests that limited educational opportunities increases one’s risk for an array of forms of exploitation, certainly there are cases where students drop out of school at early ages and never face any kind of exploitation.

Formal Education Level (n=12)
Fig. 5

Highest Formal Education Level Attained	Number Self-Identified	Note
Sixth grade	5	Final year of elementary school
Seventh grade	1	First year of middle school
Eighth grade	1	Second year of middle school
Ninth grade	3	Final year of middle school
Tenth grade	1	First year of high school
Eleventh grade	1	Penultimate year of high school

For the most part, elementary school was affordable for even the poorest families in my study. As I noted earlier, eight of the 12 respondents grew up in Green Mountain, the same small

village in northern Thailand. Two others attended a boarding school near Chiang Mai, one attended school in Chiang Mai, while the last young man grew up in different village in northern Thailand.

For the eight who grew up in Green Mountain, they attended the village elementary school. None of them paid any tuition fees to attend the school and they told me that it was free for all students. Although it was never fully clear from the interviews, it seemed likely that the government subsidized the tuition. Since the village is so small and all students could walk to the school, there were no transportation expenses. Some students purchased their own uniforms while others reported receiving donated ones. Only one young man, eighteen-year-old Yapa, suggested that the uniform cost of 300-350 baht (approximately \$11) was a challenge. “My family had a tough, terrible life,” he told me. “We were poor.” Most respondents reported requiring 1-5 baht (3 – 16 cents) per day for snacks but none noted any difficulty paying for this expense.

Lawpha, 19, and Ahloh, 20, attended a boarding school for elementary school on the outskirts of Chiang Mai city and both reported that all expenses – tuition, food, and uniforms were provided by the school. Twenty-five-year-old Praiboon, who attended an elementary school in another village in rural Chiang Mai province, said that he had to pay for his uniform and books while his tuition was free. He rode a bike to school so there were no transportation expenses. Praiboon told me it was difficult for his family to afford the combined expenses of uniform, books, and snacks. Finally, Kanok, 18, who grew up in a different village than any of the other young men in my study, also attended his village elementary school which precluded transportation expenses. Unlike any of the other respondents, though, he paid 1,000 baht (\$33) per semester in tuition plus being required to purchase his uniform.

A Spike in Expenses Between Elementary and Middle School

As we have just seen, overall expenses associated with elementary school tended to be quite low – although still onerous for some of my respondents’ families. Middle school proved to be very

different. I will show in figure 6 that something significant occurs between elementary and middle school which caused five of the 12 to drop out at that point. That “something” is transportation expenses.

There is no middle school in Green Mountain. To continue to sixth grade, the student must travel 4-5 kilometers to a middle school that serves the entire district. Although tuition was also free for the middle school, it was too far for the students to walk and so they had to use some type of transportation in order to attend. Most young men from Green Mountain told me they traveled to school via minibus and that it cost 150-200 baht (\$5-7) per month. Another respondent told me he drove his own motorbike while another said he rode his bicycle. One young man told me the cost of the minibus was actually 400 baht per month but the school paid half. No one else reported this arrangement so I am unsure of its accuracy. Whereas some of the young men who attended Green Mountain elementary school received free uniforms, no one said they received or would have received, if they had continued, a free uniform at middle school. Further, Deeto, 18, told me the required snack money would have jumped to 20 baht per day, up from 1-5 baht in elementary school.

Outside Green Mountain, the situation was slightly different. Kanok’s village had elementary and middle schools and thus he had no transportation expenses for either. His expenses, although already relatively high, did not change from elementary to middle school. Similarly, Praiboon continued to attend middle school in Chiang Mai, as he had for elementary school. There was no difference in cost between elementary and middle school. Ahloh, 20, continued to attend the same boarding school he attended for elementary school near Chiang Mai and experienced no difference in expenses. Nineteen-year-old Lawpha, however, only attended the boarding school for elementary school and then went back to Green Mountain, where he grew up, and attended middle school in the district, a few kilometers away.

Although the findings relayed in the foregoing section are limited to my study, the potential policy implications for education costs are profound. First, generalized policy prescriptions such as “greater access to education” or even “free education” are insufficient. What exactly is “free education?” This recommendation typically refers to tuition, assuming that it is the greatest expense and therefore the greatest barrier, although many governments and organizations are now subsidizing the cost of school lunch in an attempt to keep children in school. It is much rarer, however, to find policy recommendations that specifically mention supposedly incidental expenses such as transportation and school supplies.

I understand that it is easy for me as a graduate student to sit in Washington, DC and say that the Thai government or international organizations should subsidize all students’ transportation, miscellaneous supplies, and uniforms in order to keep students in school. I realize money is not an infinite supply. I am simply reporting my respondents’ barriers to staying in school as I found in my study.

Reasons for Dropping Out

As this thesis has shown, some Thais and foreigners hold numerous negative assumptions about the population I surveyed. In my interviews at organizations in Thailand it was common for the respondents to tell me these 12 young men had left school at relatively young ages because they were greedy or materialistic.

For example, Turyee, at Akha Life, told me young Akha people – boys and girls both – “are greedy and they want more and more ... it’s personal thinking ... materialism ... They saw people have stuff [motorbikes and cell phones] and they want it too. People know they will have to sell themselves when they go to the bars.” Wilailuck at IMPECT echoed Turyee’s sentiments. “I think the guys are working like this because of materialism.” My interviews with all 12 young men proved these assumptions to be false in the cases of my respondents.

Who Made the Decision to Drop Out (n=11)
Fig. 6

Reason	Number Self-Identified
I decided by myself	6
I decided by myself but my parents wanted me to continue school	4
My parents told me I had to drop out	1

Figure 6 combined with quotes from these 11 young men reveals numerous important data and challenges some key myths. First, this simple table and the respondents’ subsequent explanations suggest enormous selflessness. We will see details below, but in most cases, the young man decided to drop out of school because he knew it was a hardship for his family to pay for his education. To be more accurate, he knew it was a hardship for his family to pay for education-related expenses such as transportation, uniforms, and snacks – not the tuition itself, in many cases. Second, this data demonstrates the great degree of agency these young men – even at very young ages – possess, or are granted. In almost every one of these cases, a boy in his early teenage years made a huge decision, largely on his own, that would dramatically alter the rest of his life – and help set in motion the labor and sexual exploitation he would endure just a few years later.

These findings should give pause to those who propagate a narrative of parents who “sell their children into sex.” For the most part, these young men made the decision themselves to quit school to help their family conserve money. In four cases, the young man made this decision but his parents tried to convince him to stay in school, even at great financial difficulty to the family. This is a long way from the portrayal of the callous, greedy family so depraved that they sell their son to be a “sex slave.”

My respondents' attitudes toward their families are even more understandable given their responses to a set of questions I posed regarding domestic violence. Only one of the young men I asked acknowledged experiencing domestic violence. Ahloh, 20, told me that one of his stepmothers – it was not clear whether it was his official stepmother or his father's minor wife – “hit me and abused me with words.” All other respondents stated they had never experienced or witnessed any domestic violence in their families. Some said a parent would get angry and throw things when drunk or seeking drugs but they never inflicted violence on anyone. Similarly, respondents reported knowing of domestic violence in other families in their community but everyone agreed it was relatively rare.

Leaving School

Sopon, 22, and Kichat, 25, both dropped out of school because they wanted their younger siblings to have a chance at education. Sopon told me “I stopped going to school because I had many sisters and brothers so I wanted to let them go to school.” Kichat echoed this decision.

I stopped going to school because my family was poor. I wanted to continue school but we didn't have any money. I decided myself that I would drop out since my family was poor ... I felt sorry for my family and wanted my younger brothers to go to school instead. We didn't have enough money for us all to go to school. Some families who have money could afford to send all kids to school but not my family.

Most respondents in my study reported dropping out because of general concern for their family's financial situation. Praiboon, 25, said “The reason I stopped going to school was money difficulties. I decided on my own to quit school. At first they [my parents] told me not to drop out but after that I decided myself to quit in order to help my mom.” Eighteen-year-old Yapa told me “I stopped school after sixth grade because we didn't have money. I decided myself to stop going to school. My dad didn't tell me to drop out. I could see that my family couldn't afford the uniform, bus, books, and snacks.” Prasit, 24, said “I decided to drop out but my dad wanted me to continue school. I didn't want them to have to pay for it.” Finally, 18-year-old Deeto told me “I wanted to

continue school but our family was too poor so I couldn't go to school. I decided myself to quit school because I felt sorry for my family.”

Three other respondents each stopped attending school for a mix of reasons, but the one constant was financial challenges. Jamlong, 23, said “I stopped going to school because I was bored at school and wanted to come to Chiang Mai. Secondly, I saw that if I kept going it would be more expensive and I didn't want to cause trouble for my family.” Eighteen-year-old Kanok told me:

I stopped going to school because I was following my friends who didn't go to school. The other reason why I stopped going to school is that my family was very poor and I have a lot of brothers and sisters. I decided myself to drop out of school. My parents wanted me to continue school. Maybe it's too late for me now to go back to school. Now I realize I should go back to school.

Twenty-year-old Ahloh explained:

I stopped going to school after tenth grade after having a fight with my dad. Sometimes I would get off school at 7:00 or 8:00 pm because of school activities and my dad complained a lot since we only had one *moto*. I was supposed to pick him up from work and I would be late and didn't have a cell phone. He was mad about waiting and went home. I was tired of his complaining. I had no inspiration to go. I had many family problems but my quitting solved one problem [the transportation/single *moto* issue]. My aunt said after finishing middle school I could decide whether I wanted to continue school. My dad wanted me to continue. I wanted to finish school but family issues prevented this.

Lawpha, 19, was forced to discontinue his formal education due to compensation his family had to pay on his behalf for a *moto* accident in which he was involved.

My family is richer than all the boys at Child Help. When I was in ninth grade I got into a *moto* accident and hit another student. The money that my mom gave to my grandparents all had to go to the student's medical bills ... I had to pay 18,000 baht (\$600). We had to pay another 20,000 since the dad couldn't work and had to stay home with the student. I had planned to finish school at an agriculture technical school in Chiang Rai. My grandfather told me we had no more money and I had to stop going to school.

This example demonstrates how an unexpected, large bill for even a relatively well-off family can have crippling effects, even causing children to have to drop out of school.

The final narrative is from the one respondent, 22-two-year-old Supoge, whose family told him he had to drop out. “My family didn't want me to continue going to school because they

thought I was a bad kid. Now I'm so sorry I had a chance to go to school and didn't go. This taught me a lesson," he told me.

Although the reasons for suspending their formal education are varied, there is one constant variable: money. Further, as we saw earlier, tuition is not the main expense. Therefore, other, so-called nominal or marginal expenses are actually the factors forcing the respondents in my study out of school.

Thai Language Ability and Self-Esteem

Of the limited attention paid to the exploitation of highland peoples in northern Thailand, most of the risk factors commonly listed include unsurprising causes like low socioeconomic status, limited education, gender inequalities, and lack of citizenship. It is rare to find anyone who identifies limited Thai language ability or low-self esteem as risk factors, although that may be because these two issues are often intrinsically linked to education. Low self-esteem can be a result of exploitation while limited Thai is a risk factor for exploitation, as the responses given by my respondents indicate. Crucially, Thai language skills and one's self-esteem are closely linked to the number of years one attended school. Thus, the sooner one drops out of school, the more problems they will have with language ability and self-esteem. The reason for this is straightforward.

For the respondents who grew up in villages, their teachers were often ethnic Thai and included both local teachers – I met one Green Mountain elementary school teacher who lived a few kilometers away – and ones who had been sent by the provincial education office to teach in more remote schools. Those teachers assigned from further away usually stay for a few years and live in apartments at the school. Since the teachers at Green Mountain elementary were all ethnic Thai, all classes were taught in central Thai and there were no Akha language or culture courses – despite the fact the school was in an Akha village and most students were Akha. There were a handful of other highland students such as Thai Yai (Shan), Thai Lue, and Lahu. Therefore, the only time the Akha

students are learning or speaking Thai is in school. Even between classes or at lunch, they generally speak Akha with their friends.

Since their families often speak limited Thai – and because it is at least their second language – very little Thai is spoken at home. Thus, if a young man drops out of school at a young age, that is often the end of his formal Thai language learning. If he leaves school before graduating high school, his Thai has simply not reached a point where it is good enough to obtain a job that requires professional-grade Thai.

It should be noted that I asked 10 of my respondents if they had ever had any harassment or discrimination from their ethnic Thai teachers because they were highland students whose first language was not Thai. Overall their responses were encouraging. Nine of the young men categorically stated they had never had any problems from their teachers and felt respected by their teachers. For example, 25-year-old Kichat told me “The teachers were Thai and loved all the students the same.” Sapon, 22, said “The teachers never looked down on us because we were hill tribe kids.” Only Yapa, 18, had a different perspective. “Some teachers liked Thai students more than Akha. I have experienced harassment or discrimination based on my ethnicity. Sometimes I’m teased because I don’t speak Thai clearly. This came from teachers, older students, and other people I know and friends,” he told me.

Although the responses above were mostly positive, some ethnic Thais display some prejudices toward or misunderstanding of their highland compatriots. A newspaper article in the English language August 1-15, 2011 *Chiang Mai Post* edition I read while in Thailand was entitled “Hilltribes Want Roads to Prosperity.” This two-paragraph article was based on an interview with one “hilltribe villager” from the northern province of Mae Hong Son who stated that his district needed better roads. The journalist did not feel it necessary to specify to which ethnic minority

group the man interviewed belonged; the fact that he was “hilltribe” was sufficient.¹¹⁰ It was remarkable that the writer felt comfortable with using the experience of one “hilltribe villager” to say that all approximately one million highland people in Thailand wanted the same thing.

At the end of my conversation with the three female Akha employees at DEPDC, one of them, Angkana, expressed surprise, but pleasure that I, an American, had taken an interest in Akha rights issues and had come to Thailand to conduct this research. She said “Even many people in Bangkok don’t know what are Akha people but you came from very far away and know about us. I went to the hospital once and they thought Akha, Hmong, and Yao were the same thing.”

David Feingold, a US anthropologist of the Akha, tells a story of a time in the past (unfortunately he does not specify when) that he was at a party at Chiang Mai University talking with two young, female professors – one who had attended school in the United States and the other in France. When they learned that he had conducted extensive fieldwork in Akha villages and had lived in one for two years, one asked him if he had ever seen anyone with tails in the highland areas. Feingold thought she was joking but she went on to say that her (educated) mother had told her some people in the hills had tails;¹¹¹ she evidently believed the story.

It is against this backdrop that my respondents live their daily lives. It is against this backdrop they receive explicit and implicit messages they are unequal and unimportant. It is against this backdrop they are forced to make calculations about their work and life that may seem terrible and unthinkable to the privileged reader but that are less than ideal, yet still rational, to young men in this situation.

¹¹⁰ Khajon Boonpath. “Hilltribes Want Roads to Prosperity.” *Chiang Mai Post*, August 1-15, 2011, pp. 2.

¹¹¹ Feingold, David A., Amanda Flaim, Kathleen Kerr, Wenchi Yu Perkins, and James A. Goldston. “The Highland People of Thailand – Stateless as a Source of Exclusion, Rights Violations, and Vulnerability to Human Trafficking.”

Thai Language Ability – In Their Own Words

Four of the young men I interviewed reported having limited Thai language skills. Eighteen-year-old Deeto told me “When I speak Thai I have an accent and do not sound absolutely Thai. When I apply for a job, I cannot speak Thai as clearly as a Thai person.” Yapa, 18, said “Sometimes I’m teased because I don’t speak Thai clearly. This came from teachers, older students, and other people I know and friends.” Sapon, 22, also reported teasing and harassment because of his Thai language skills: “I have been teased because I don’t speak Thai clearly. This was from my co-workers and Thai friends. I feel I am less than them a little bit. I think if a Thai person and an Akha person apply for the same job the boss would choose a Thai person before an Akha.” Finally, 18-year-old Kanok said “I can’t speak Thai very clearly like a Thai person. My parents barely speak Thai. Some people make fun of me because I can’t speak very well.”

A fifth respondent, 20-year-old Ahloh, suggested that he had good Thai language skills and understood the connection between language ability and employment. “I think I have an equal chance of getting a job as a Thai if I can speak Thai well,” he said. A sixth, 25-year-old Kichat, said that his northern Thai was good but when he worked in Bangkok and had to speak central Thai, he faced challenges. “In Chiang Mai I speak northern Thai but in Bangkok I had to speak central dialect. When I would speak Northern with friends and a customer heard, they would look down on me.”

These few sentences suggest an enormous amount about the importance of Thai language ability on one’s employment prospects, self-esteem, and station in Thai society in the minds of my respondents. Both Deeto and Sapon directly linked their low Thai ability to their employment opportunities. Yapa, Sapon, and Kanok all reported teasing or harassment based on their language skills. Sapon directly stated that he felt lower than ethnic Thais while Kanok linked his language level to his parents’ limited Thai skills. Of course this situation is not unique to Thailand. In most

countries, if one cannot speak the main language, his or her employment opportunities will be severely diminished. The ubiquity of this problem throughout the world does not reduce its impact on my respondents' lives.

Overall, my 12 respondents addressed my questions regarding especially sensitive topics matter-of-factly and without shame or embarrassment. When discussing their limited Thai language skills, however, these four subjects seemed more uncomfortable and embarrassed than with most other topics. Whereas they looked me in the eye when responding to especially sensitive questions about sex, drugs, and arrests, they tended to avert their eyes and look at the floor when explaining their Thai language ability.

As important as Thai language is, its transformative impact should not be overstated. Even if one of my respondents becomes fluent in Thai but still has only a sixth or ninth grade education, this still represents an enormous barrier to employment. An applicant must take his academic transcript or diploma to a job interview in Thailand. In order to secure a good job, one must have superior Thai language skills as well as high formal education.¹¹²

Helping these young men improve their Thai language skills is critical, but fraught with difficulty. Most of my respondents told me they wanted to boost their Thai ability and understood the importance of doing so. Some also communicated this desire to Child Help and asked for Thai language instruction. In response to this programming request, the center once tried teaching basic Thai but the program was unsuccessful.

There were two main reasons why the Thai language lessons ended prematurely. First, the instructor was an expatriate staff member of Child Help. The young woman, a Filipina, has lived in Thailand for about three years and seems to speak the language well. Still, she does not have a

¹¹² I am indebted to my thesis adviser, Dr. Christina Fink, for this critical insight on September 16, 2011.

degree in teaching and Thai is not her native tongue. This is not a prescription for a successful Thai language program. Secondly, there was not buy-in from all the participants. The founder of Child Help estimated to me that about half of the young men wanted Thai language lessons while the other half did not. Soon after the course began, there was a marked decline in attendance at the center, which the founder attributed to many of the young men not being interested in the course – and the work involved. After two weeks the center suspended the Thai language course.

As in many other countries and cultures, self-esteem profoundly affects my respondents' health. One of my respondents had numerous scars from cutting on the underside of his forearm. He told me he was ashamed of this and wished he could heal the scars. Another respondent volunteered that he “almost” committed suicide at age 20. It is unclear whether he attempted suicide or whether he just considered it. I did not systemically ask my respondents about suicide since I felt I did not possess sufficient anthropological understanding of Akha culture to broach this topic.

NGOs in Thailand dedicated to preserving the cultural heritage of highland groups note the importance of Thai language ability as well as strengthening one's sense of pride in being Akha. Turyee, the director of Chiang Rai-based Akha Life, singled out low Thai reading and speaking ability as especially problematic because it makes it difficult for Akha people to understand, implement, or follow laws specifically aimed at highland peoples. He also told me a major goal for Akha Life is to increase community members' pride in their Akha heritage. Turyee told me:

It's very difficult because if you dress up like an Akha and then go to a big city, the mall or with a crowd, they don't want to do it. Because they are afraid for people to know they are Akha or the hill tribe ... the Thai people look down on them. Something like that. So like when they are from the mountains and go to the city, no Akha wants to tell everyone “I'm Akha” and yell in the city “I'm Akha!”

Wilaliluck, of IMPECT, echoed Turyee's comments. “Now the kids have problems because they don't know their identity. They come to the city and don't fit in with city people; if they go back to the mountain village they don't fit in there anymore. They lost their identity,” she told me.

Akha Life had an impressive array of audio, visual, and written materials to help teach Akha, especially young people, about their culture. There were at least 20 books and DVDs that Akha Life had published on Akha customs ranging from funeral rites, to medicinal herbs, to handicrafts. They also had materials on current issues such as climate change, HIV/AIDS, and ecological protection. Importantly, the books were all written phonetically in the Romanized English script since there is no written Akha language or alphabet. This way, the reader can not only learn about Akha culture, but can also practice their English skills. Although these media were interesting to me as an outsider, it is unclear how interesting these materials would be to the young men in my study.

Savings, Debt, Gambling, and Remittances

From the first interview it was clear the interplay between saving, gambling, and debt was key to gaining an understanding of my respondents' daily lives. The policy recommendations in this regard are clear and profound and will be detailed at the end of this thesis. Further, as I demonstrated in the earlier section on education, my respondents' attitudes toward remittances for their families undermine the assumption that they are greedy and only out to make money for themselves.

I only discussed gambling directly with four of my respondents but some of their responses were astonishing. Twenty-four-year-old Prasit told me when he was 17 he lived with co-workers who all gambled. "I started to learn and became addicted." Earlier, Deeto, 18, had told me that he did not work but said his rent cost 1,200 baht (\$40) per month. When I asked how he paid the rent without working he answered "I don't drink, smoke, or do drugs so I don't need that much money. Also, I gamble at the snooker hall."

The night before I left Thailand, I went to the bars to say goodbye to the young men. I was talking with Sirichok, 22, who was bartending, and I asked him what he was doing later that night after he finished work. He told me he was going to place a 9,000 baht (\$300) bet on a football game.

I told him that seemed risky and asked what would happen if he lost the sum. “I probably will lose,” he told me, “but if I win it’s so much money.”

Jamlong, 23, told me a surprising story about gambling in elementary and middle school. “I had a scholarship for fifth through eighth grade from the government. I feel like I wasted it and didn’t use it in the right way. I used it for gambling. The money was deposited into my bank and I withdrew it and used it for gambling.” It was remarkable to learn that the Thai government had no controls over these education subsidies and directly deposited them into the recipient’s bank account and evidently required no accounting of how the funds were spent. I do not know how widespread that practice was or still is. Learning of Jamlong’s scholarship was encouraging, though, as it demonstrated that the central government does have some concern for Akha students and has appropriated some funds for their formal education.

Jamlong also told me how gambling has more recently affected his life. “Our rent is 3,500 baht (\$117) per month including electricity and water. I don’t currently work. I have some savings from previous work. I used to gamble and I lost 10,000 baht (\$333) per night. I stopped gambling and use my savings to pay rent.” I asked how he planned to pay rent or eat when his savings ran out and he responded “I don’t have a plan for how to pay for stuff when my savings runs out.”

The questions I posed regarding remittances to families revealed a range of answers. It was in this category that shame, sadness, and regret were exhibited – a rare occurrence during my interviews. Kanok, 18, told me he had never sent money to his family because he kept getting arrested soon after starting a new job. Indeed, he was arrested three times for *yaba* (amphetamines). Jamlong simply told me “I never gave money to my family,” and did not elaborate. I understood that he did not wish to discuss the matter further.

Most of the respondents told me they would send a little money to their families if they had any left over. Sopon, 22, told me “I sent money to my family when I was working. No one forced

me to do this; I did it by myself. It depended on how much money I made each month. If I had extra I would send some to my parents. My dad never asked me for any money.” Eighteen-year-old Deeto provided a similar answer: “I sent some money to my family but not every month. Sometimes 1,000 baht (\$33), sometimes 1,500. I want to help my dad. He is getting old – he’s 55 years old.” Yapa, 18, also cited wanting to help his father: “I have sent some money to my family. It depends if I have a lot of money. I send money because I want to. I feel sorry for my dad. No one forces me to send money.” Prasit, 24, told me

I want my dad to not have to work hard and have a good life. I will work hard instead. I decided to study when [Child Help] offered because I had low education [so I can get a better job that pays more]. When I stayed at the snooker place I never sent money to my family or called them. While working at the restaurant I was able to send money to my family, save other money, and buy a cell phone. If I make 5,000 baht (\$167) I give my dad 2,000. It depends, though, on when he calls and how much he asks. He asks for money for food ... My dad expects me to make money for the family. Everything is on me. I don’t know who can help me. There is a lot of pressure on me. Every day I am very stressed.

Nineteen-year-old Lawpha told me about sending his father money to “invest” into selling drugs. “Last time I gave him 2,000 baht (\$66) to invest to sell *yaba*. Normally I don’t return my dad’s calls. He called me every day for two weeks until I returned his call. I transferred him 500 baht and then gave him another 2,000 when I went to the village.” Supoge’s response was the most guilt-ridden:

I can’t take care of myself well so how am I going to take good care of my son? I don’t want to think about my son. Even myself – look at me. Don’t worry about my son. Many people will take care of him. I want to be a daddy for my son, though. I had my son at 20; my wife got pregnant at 19. I started being a daddy when I was still a teenager. I now feel like a foolish teenager and am a little ashamed I didn’t take care of my son. I never give money to my son or dad. I only get a little money. I get like 500 baht [per day]. If I got 4,000 or 5,000 then I might give them money. If I get 500 baht today then I have to use that for today and tomorrow.” My wife does not take care of our son. She lives in Phuket because we broke up. She also does not send money to our son. I don’t want to talk about my wife. This is personal.

These accounts tell a story of a group of young men, struggling to make a living wage in a big city, and not having much left over to remit to their families. Many of my respondents clearly

have a strong sense of not just duty – but love – for their families and want to help. They are simply not in a financial position to make this happen at the moment – often due to gambling or other money-management challenges. These responses were also significant because they revealed that no one forced the respondents to send money home to their families. This again shows the degree of latitude these young men possess, perhaps the lack of control some Akha parents have over their sons, or maybe a combination of the two.

The threat gambling poses cannot be overstated. Jamlong told me at one point he was losing 10,000 baht *per night*. This is an absolutely staggering sum of money in northern Thailand where my deluxe hotel room which included hot water, air conditioning, satellite TV, breakfast, and a beautiful pool under a coconut tree cost 500 baht per night and a roundtrip flight from Chiang Mai to Bangkok cost 3,380.

If Child Help’s clients are losing thousands, or even hundreds, of baht per night, it inevitably increases their risk to various forms of exploitation. Indebtedness can lead to taking greater risks to make money to pay off such debts. In sex work, a young man would probably be more likely to forego condom usage since clients often pay more to have sex without a condom. He may also pursue a role in the lucrative northern Thailand drug trade. A respondent may also be less scrupulous when accepting licit jobs simply because he desperately needs the cash – and then could be subject to labor exploitation in that job by a boss who knows his new employee is at his mercy.

Conventional Wisdom 4: Labor Exploitation and Commercial Sexual Exploitation are Decoupled

Commercial sexual exploitation and labor exploitation are often presented as though they occupy two separate spheres. For example, a CNN article highlighting the release of the UN Office of Drugs and Crime’s 2009 *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons* said “The most common form of human trafficking is sexual exploitation, at 79 percent ... The second most common form of human trafficking is forced labor, or slavery, making up 18 percent of the total, although the writers of the

report say it may be underreported.”¹¹³ There was no acknowledgment that the two might be at all related or that there could be any overlap. Reports on sex trafficking typically focus solely on sex while labor trafficking usually only examines labor abuses. Rarely are connections drawn between the two. While I will not use data from a qualitative study with 12 respondents in an attempt to draw a causal link, the responses given suggest a relationship between these two types of exploitation. The data suggests that prior labor abuse increases the probability of later commercial sexual exploitation.

As I noted earlier, during my interviews with Thai organizations, it became apparent some of their staff hold biases and prejudices against the young men who work in Chiang Mai’s bars. The most common refrain was that they were greedy and materialistic and therefore had decided to quit school and become sex workers. I also heard that these young men must do this work because they lack ID cards or because they want to shed their highland identity and become like ethnic Thais by owning big-ticket items. For example, Wilailuck, the IMPECT Akha staff member said:

I think the guys are working like this because materialism. No one has told these kids about Akha culture and how to be proud of themselves and their background. Also, they don’t have ID cards. I think it’s about materialism ... they still want money to buy a house and car. Maybe a few people are from very poor families or maybe they don’t have land with which to make money. Maybe they have land but never were trained how to farm it. The media shows them city people, civilized people. Their parents are from another generation and are unable to explain right from wrong. The TV communicates with them. They want to be like city people. If they speak Thai, if they have a house and car then they will be accepted by the village.

After she finished speaking I told her in fact each young man I interviewed had a Thai ID card but she was not fazed. She reiterated that they must be materialistic. I responded to her assertion that the respondents neither know about their Akha heritage nor are proud of it. Most of them spent the majority of their lives in small Akha villages and are well-versed in Akha traditions.

¹¹³ CNN. “Sex Trade, Forced Labor Top UN Human Trafficking List.” February 26, 2009
<<http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/asiapcf/02/16/un.trafficking/>>.

None of my respondents seemed at all ashamed of being Akha and in fact four of them volunteered how proud they were of their heritage.

Although Wilailuck's statement revealed much to be analyzed, perhaps the most important statement she made was their parents "are unable to explain right from wrong." She, and many others, clearly approach the entire issue of these young men working in the bars from a moralistic perspective. Without coming off as particularly judgmental, she still is passing judgment on the young men and their work. On the contrary, I argue that my respondents undertake their bar work within an environment of limited job opportunities in which various types of exploitation abound

In addition to the quotations above, Simon Baker's research from 2000 showed that Thai language media focuses more on the role of materialism in driving young people into sex work as compared to English language media in Thailand.

Within the Thai language press, materialism is seen as an important factor in explaining why children are entering prostitution and particularly so for students. Verachai (2000) even claims that poverty is no longer the reason why children enter prostitution, but instead it is materialism. However, in the [English language] *Bangkok Post*, materialism is hardly mentioned at all.¹¹⁴

As conventional wisdom 3 on education showed, it was not selfishness – but *selflessness* – that drove most of the young men I interviewed to quit school. They generally left school out of concern for their family's ability to pay the various fees. Moreover, they quit school specifically to allow their younger siblings to have the opportunity to attend school.

It was not uncommon for my respondents to tell me they helped their families farm their plot of land for one or two years after dropping out of school. Again, these young men did not drop out of school one morning and go to Chiang Mai that night to begin engaging in sex work, as some outsiders seemed to assume. They initially remained at home to help their families practice

¹¹⁴ Baker, 17.

subsistence agriculture. After a few years the young men typically became bored with working in the fields and wanted a new experience. This is even more understandable because so many of their peers had already left the village to migrate to other areas, usually large cities, for work. It is here that they unwittingly embarked on a path to exploitation.

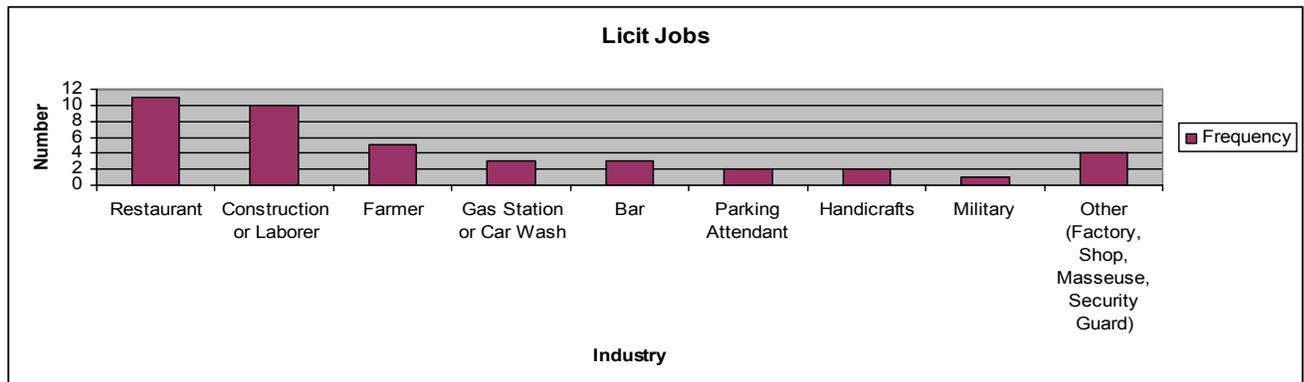
Pre-Bar Work Licit Employment

When interviewing these 12 young men, I was struck by how many jobs many had already worked, despite only being in their early 20s or even 18 years old. Due to their limited formal education and the fact that none of them possess a high school diploma, their limited Thai language skills, and their ethnic minority hill tribe status, very few jobs are available to them – despite all being Thai citizens. The types of jobs they can access are marginal and pay poorly: day laborer, construction worker, busboy, parking attendant, or factory worker.

As the next section will make clear, all of my respondents worked a variety of licit jobs available to them. They took advantage of all the limited economic opportunities Thai society makes available to them – and in the course of these marginal, but licit jobs, some of the respondents faced labor abuse and outright human trafficking. As the former UN Resident Coordinator in Thailand, Robert England, has said, “Ultimately, trafficking is about poverty – poverty of opportunity – and cannot be addressed by a moralistic approach alone.”¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ *Trading Women*, 2003.

Licit Jobs Worked by Respondents Prior to Night Bazaar Bar Work
Fig. 7



As the graph above shows, the young men in my study have worked a range of menial, low-paying jobs. Some of them expressed satisfaction in certain jobs and reported decent wages and kind supervisors and co-workers. I note these stories to acknowledge that some of my respondents have reported positive past labor experiences. Unfortunately, this is the exception as I will soon show.

Twenty-two-year-old Sapon told me “The best job I had was as a waiter. That is why I want to study more English so I can be a waiter. I liked this job because I like serving people.” Deeto, 18, said:

I came to Chiang Mai four years ago to see my older brother. I came to work in hotel construction. My brother helped me find that job. I decided by myself to come because I could make more money in Chiang Mai than by staying home in Green Mountain. I no longer work as a laborer. I did that for 10 months. I was not just a laborer; I also worked as an electrician. I worked 8:00 am to 5:00 pm. Sometimes I worked overtime until 10:00 pm. These were good jobs and I was treated well. I made 170 baht (\$5.67) per day; overtime was an additional 30 baht (\$1) per hour. I quit because I wanted a new job. After, I worked as a TV satellite installation specialist. I made 5,500 baht (\$183) per month. I quit this because although it was not a hard job it took a lot of time. I went to work at 9:00 am and sometimes did not finish until 2:00 am.

It was more common to hear reports of labor exploitation during my interviews than to hear positive accounts of work. In addition, my respondents reported harassment, bullying, and discrimination in their workplaces by supervisors, co-workers, and customers based on their

ethnicity or language ability. Finally, three young men did tell me they had been victims of explicit labor trafficking.

Despite Deeto telling me that he had a positive experience at the job above, he also told me “In the past people have teased me and called me Igaw. My boss and co-workers teased me and called me Igaw.”* Supoge, 22, told me “I think ethnic Thais look down on me because I am Akha. Acquaintances and co-workers from the bar look down on me. They tease me.” Twenty-five-year-old Kichat explained to me the difference in northern Thai versus central Thai dialect and how this led to harassment. “My boss at the gas station did not look down on me because I was Akha. Customers sometimes looked down on me. In Chiang Mai I speak Northern Thai but in Bangkok I had to speak the Central dialect. When I would speak Northern with friends and a customer heard, they would look down on me.”

Labor Trafficking Through Recruiters

The three examples that follow were among the most difficult stories I heard during my time in Thailand. They are vital because they illustrate the range of forms of human trafficking and remind us that the trafficking discourse needs to more readily acknowledge these types of exploitation and not just focus on the archetype of the young female victim of commercial sexual abuse. Further, they highlight the role that recruiters play in labor trafficking. A fourth respondent was invited to go with a recruiter for work but his parents thought he was too young and disallowed him from going.

Prasit, 24, told me about two cases in his life when he encountered labor exploitation. The first happened when he was working as a parking attendant at a popular club in Chiang Mai. He told

* My adviser, Dr. Christina Fink, explained to me on November 8, 2011 that “Igaw” is the Thai language term for “Akha.” However, Akha people preferred to be called “Akha” in Thai as well. “Igaw” itself is not inherently derogatory but the tone of voice or context can convey a pejorative nature. Deeto certainly seems to have been offended by the term in the context he cited above.

me he worked for three months without getting paid. He was nervous about confronting his boss and waited until the third month of no pay to do so. “My boss told me I had to wait” to be paid, Prasit said.

Prasit also told me about being recruited to work at a car wash in Bangkok at which he was paid less than promised.

When I was 16 one day a neighbor came to recruit people to work at a Bangkok car wash. I worked there for two months. The recruiter recruited three boys and two girls from Green Mountain to work at the car wash. The boys washed the car exterior and the girls cleaned the inside. I went home for a year and then came back to Bangkok after a recruiter from a neighboring village recruited people to work at a Bangkok jewelry store. I received a salary of 2,000 baht (\$67) per month at both the car wash and jewelry store. I did not have to pay a fee to either recruiter. They told me I would get 5,000 baht (\$167) to work at the car wash but I only got 2,000. She told me I would be working as window washer [which pays 5,000] but I actually was a hose sprayer [which only pays 2,000].

This is the most uncertain of the three cases I will present. This could simply be a case where Prasit was recruited to work as a car window washer but all of those jobs were full so he was reassigned as a hose sprayer, which pays less. This explanation sounds flimsy, though. If it was a case of deception, in which a recruiter lied to Prasit and said he would be making 5,000 baht per month and when he arrived the wage had fallen by 60 percent, however, this is human trafficking. Prasit’s earlier case of working as a parking attendant without pay for three months, though, is obviously criminal. It should be noted that many ethnic Thai migrant workers, often those who migrate to Bangkok from rural areas, face similar abuses.

One of the hallmarks of a textbook labor human trafficking case is when the person controlling the situation unilaterally creates expenses and deducts these invented fees from the worker’s monthly wage. This wage theft happened to 25-year-old Kichat.

Recruiters come to my village. I went with them to Bangkok to work at a gas station but I did not get good money. I worked there for six months when I was 17. The person I went with was a stranger but my older friends knew them so I went with them. The recruiter told me I would get 6,000 baht (\$200) per month and free room and food but I did not get anything like that. I made about 3,000 baht. They deducted money for this and that. I worked there for six months and only came back with 2,000 baht. I paid for room and food.

[*Matt asks if his room and food was deducted from the 6,000 baht*]. I do not know what they took out money for but I still had to pay for room and food. If I came late they deducted my pay. I had to walk far to work and if I was one minute late they took money out of my pay. I felt tricked by the recruiter but I did not call my family for help. I stayed for six months because I did not know what else to do. I was in Bangkok and had followed my friends. I went with 10 other people who were recruited. We all had the same experience. I would tell my friends not to go with a recruiter.

The final case was relayed to me by Sirichok, 22. This is the clearest example of human trafficking of the three since it involves violence, intimidation, wage theft, and criminal confinement.

I have heard of recruiters coming to Green Mountain, mostly about labor – especially construction. They also try to recruit people to work at pubs or discos. Most recruiters are men. A man asked me to go with him and I went once. I worked as a security guard in Bangkok. My boss did not pay me what he told me before. I worked there for three months. The first month I got 2,000 baht (\$67) but they had told me I would get 9,000 baht per month. That is why I went with them. They told me they would give me the rest at the end but they did not give me the money so I went back home. In the second and third months I got 2,000 baht each month. I went with my 10 friends from Green Mountain. Every day a car picked us up from the place at which we stayed and dropped us off at work. All my friends and I went back home.

I was the first to leave because I knew exactly that they had lied to me. My boss threatened me when I said I was leaving and then I ran away. This was almost 10 years ago since I worked with him. I had only about 400 baht (\$13) in my pocket and I took the train which cost 183 baht. I remember exactly how much it cost. I was around 13 years old [when I was working in Bangkok] because I had just finished sixth grade and had no job to do. I was too young to work other jobs so I went with the recruiter because I wanted a job. The first month when I got 2,000 baht I asked why I had only received this much and the boss threatened me and punched me and abused me in the room. Some of my friends who were larger did not get beat up but because I was small I got beat up. They called us in one by one to get our salary and I asked why I was only getting 2,000 baht. I told him I would leave if I did not get paid the full amount because I wanted the money to help my family. Then he beat me.

I did not have time to go anywhere. I had to work, work, work. At that time I felt like I was in prison. I had nowhere to go. I did not know anything. I never had a day off. All 10 of us were security guards. I worked at the Baiyoke Tower, the tallest building in Bangkok. I liked to go up in the elevator and then look out. It was very high and felt free. Some people [asked me how old I was] but my boss had told me I had to say I was 18 years old. The recruiter was a stranger and he said many good things. He spoke very well with my parents and they believed him. At that time I was very young. I did not know how to call, I did not know anything. My heart said I want to go home, I want to go home and I knew they would not pay me. So I saved some money to go home.

It is amazing that the parents of a 13-year-old boy entrusted him with a recruiter and allowed their son to go to Bangkok to work at this young age. This further illustrates Heather Montgomery's quotation I used earlier in the paper: "it is ridiculous in most Third World contexts to demand that a child stay economically inactive until he or she is eighteen." Examples like this validate efforts on the part of NGOs and governments to provide domestic and international migrant workers with information such as phone numbers for workers who find themselves in similar situations. Finally, the only positive item found in this story is that people did ask the small, 13-year-old guard at Thailand's tallest building how old he was and why he was working there. Although Sirichok had been instructed to lie about his age, it shows that some people are paying attention to their surroundings and inquiring about things that look out of place. This suggests that human trafficking public awareness campaigns do have a place in combating this exploitation. If members of the public can be trained as to what type of follow-up questions to ask, instead of just accepting that this small boy is in fact 18 years old, Sirichok's ordeal may have not lasted as long as it did.

Praiboon, 25, was approached by a recruiter when he was a teenager but his parents refused the individual's offer. "I have heard of recruiters coming to my village," Praiboon told me. "They invited me to work. I was 14 or 15 years old. The person was a stranger but they knew someone in the village. I did not go because I was too young. I think my parents did not really want me to go because I was so young."

Beyond Prasit, Kichat, and Sirichok, who each endured situations of labor trafficking themselves, and a recruiter's attempt to recruit Praiboon, five other respondents told me they had heard of recruiters coming to their community. Two other respondents told me they knew of times when recruiters had attempted to hire people from their village. They both told me they thought these were legitimate jobs although they probably did not pay well.

Yapa, 18, told me “recruiters come to my village a lot for factory work, construction, waiters and waitresses, and to work at gas stations. I have heard a lot of stories of people going with the recruiter and not getting any pay and then they do not have money to go home since it is far away. Some people go with recruiters and then they do not come home – they disappear.”

Deeto, also 18, said “I have heard of recruiters coming to the village to take people to the city to work but then they do not get paid. These jobs are for factory work, construction, and labor. I have not heard of many cases of this because most people in the village stay there and do not move.”

Sopon, 22, reported:

There are a lot of recruiters who come to my village. They recruit for construction, factory work, and other jobs. When the recruiter comes to the village they invite us to move everywhere in Thailand. A lot of these examples are tricking us into work. They often tell us we will get a lot of money but we get less ... mostly the recruiters are people from my village but sometimes they are strangers.

I was surprised when Sopon told me the recruiters were “mostly” from his village. I visited Green Mountain and it is very small – approximately 100 households. Everyone seems to know everyone very well. There is nothing there except an elementary school, a small store, and a decrepit, “royal project” greenhouse. I asked what happens to that villager if he or she acts as a recruiter and helps traffic a neighbor’s family member. He seemed to not really grasp the question. He simply responded “I don’t know. Maybe the people who go with them will decide what to do to them.”

Not Point A to B

As I have shown, some individuals at Thai and outside organizations hold a range of assumptions and biases about the young men in my study and the others who work in Chiang Mai’s bars. Some staff at other organizations however, have a more realistic viewpoint. The director and social worker at ChildLife, an organization in Mae Sai, one of the main border crossings between

Thailand and Burma, told me there are some boys in Mae Sai who sell sex. Most, they said, have moved to live and work in Chiang Mai.

I asked how they thought these boys started selling sex and if it was their decision to do so. Songkran, the director, said “Maybe it starts with kids selling flowers. There was a kid who lived at ChildLife and then went to Chiang Mai. He told us he met friends who used to live at ChildLife and they work now at the Chiang Mai night bazaar [bars].” This opinion matches what I learned from my 12 respondents. Some started working a marginal job such as selling flowers to tourists in the night bazaar and ended up in the bars because that is where their friends work and hang out.

Still, some NGOs’ staff point to materialism as the reason why my respondents supposedly dropped out of school and began engaging in sex work. The examples in the preceding section regarding the number and range of licit jobs these young men have had since leaving school help challenge this incorrect assumption, at least as it pertains to my respondents. Despite what some NGO staff in Thailand may say, it is not so simple as going from point A to B.

Upon dropping out of school to help alleviate family financial pressures and to allow their younger siblings the opportunity to attend school, the young men in my study often stayed and worked on their family’s plots for a year or two. Afterward, they migrated elsewhere in the country and often worked many jobs before their eighteenth birthday. In numerous cases, they endured teasing, harassment, or discrimination from co-workers and customers because of their ethnicity or Thai language skills. It was only after working a series of these jobs at which they faced an array of challenges and labor exploitation that they eventually began working in the bars – whether specifically selling sex or drinking with customers for tips. In other cases, after leaving school and entering the workforce they were trafficked outright.

In his PhD dissertation, Thomas Shulich lays out how the Chiang Mai night bazaar bar scene could actually represent a place in which some ethnic minority hill tribe young men feel more comfortable or accepted than elsewhere in Thai society.

Among *farang* expatriates, the erotic appeal of [hill tribe young men] ranges from those who make no distinction between Thai and non-Thai men as love objects, to a distinct preference for [hill tribe] among some *farang*, making this a smaller niche market within the larger male-male sex markets. Some foreigners have told me they much prefer to socialize with hill tribe youths because they find their dispositions sweeter than local Thai nationals, and they tend to be less materialistic. Tourists who are passing through on vacation, not being attuned to differences in spoken language or racial types, typically have no basis to differentiate between Thai nationals and hill tribe youths. So, from the perspective of some [hill tribe] youths, the possibility of hanging out with foreigners in the Night Bazaar gay bar scene offers a place where they are not looked down on as any different from other local youths.¹¹⁶

My Respondents' Living Situations

It is critical here to present a more descriptive picture of the lives of these young men in Chiang Mai. Although Chiang Mai is one of Thailand's largest cities, the young men in my study exist in a small slice of this city. From my discussions with them, it appears as though they largely stick together with friends they knew from growing up in the village, or other Akha. This is as unsurprising as it is significant.

Their living situations are highly unstable and it is difficult to present definitive data as to the number of those who are homeless, semi-homeless, or living in stable housing situations. I was quickly faced with this difficulty when, in my interviews, the respondents would give highly conflicting answers.

For example, when I asked 19-year-old Lawpha about his housing situation he told me "I currently stay with my grandparents." However, 30 minutes later in response to a different question he said "I stay with a friend and sometimes with my girlfriend. My girlfriend pays the rent." When I

¹¹⁶ Shulich, 289.

pointed out that earlier he had told me he stayed with his grandparents but now he was saying he lived with either his friend or girlfriend, he did not seem to understand why I was confused.

A similar encounter happened in my interview with Ahloh, 20. “I currently live with a friend. My rent is 1,500 baht (\$50) per month.” A few minutes later he told me he does not have a specific apartment. Instead, he floats around friends’ apartments or goes back to his village. Like in my conversation with Lawpha, Ahloh did not see any contradiction in his first statement that he paid rent for a specific apartment with a friend followed by his second statement that he did not have an apartment and instead, moved from place to place.

Prasit’s response to a question about past jobs and housing situations sum up the reality and fluidity of my respondents’ living situations.

I came to Chiang Mai at 18 years old to stay with my aunt for two or three months. I then stayed with my friend and his pregnant wife. I then stayed with my aunt for one week. I slept on the stairs, in the bathroom, or in the garage. I could not stay in my friend’s room because there are so many people in there. I did not know anything about Chiang Mai – where to get a job, how to meet friends – since I had moved straight from Green Mountain to Bangkok. When I started working construction at the hotel I stayed at my friend’s house sleeping on the stairs. At that time I had no money and thought my life was terrible. I asked for an advance of 300 baht (\$10) on the third day from the boss so I could rent a room with three friends ... They were drinking and doing drugs in my room ... I lost all my savings from the factory on these two rooms. I couldn’t ask help from anyone. I couldn’t ask help from my aunt so I slept on stairs around the city. I slept on a couch at a snooker hall for two years. When I would play snooker I would see that some people would get tired and take a nap on the couch. They would play, sleep, play, sleep. I didn’t know where to go so I started doing this. I felt very ashamed and embarrassed in front of the people who work there.

The fluid nature of my respondents’ housing situations holds policy and programming implications. Programs working with this type of transitory population need to recognize this is not contradictory in the minds of their clients. Expatriate staff, in particular, who approach the situation from the same type of mindset that I initially had, cannot just ask a yes or no question: “are you homeless?” and move on. Program staff must develop a well-rounded set of questions to accurately ascertain a client’s living situation. Only with a holistic, complete understanding of one’s housing situation can an organization or aid agency provide the most effective and appropriate assistance. A

drop-in center, like the one that Child Help maintains, is a reasonable way of best serving this population. From a policy standpoint, recognizing the complex, contradictory notion of self-perception of one's housing situation, renders a one-size-fits-all policy such as "free housing" – like "free education" – inadequate and unhelpful.

Point F

Although some of my respondents currently work licit jobs or have in the past, their social circle is made up largely of friends – young Akha men who are sex workers at, or at least hang out in, the night bazaar bars in Chiang Mai. Let us try to put ourselves in the place of one of these young men for a moment. I have woven together pieces from my respondents' stories to create the following narrative.

A young man has just moved from the village to Chiang Mai and goes to his new job at a restaurant for his first shift. In the first few hours, his boss and some co-workers tease and harass him for his Thai language skills and identity as a "mountain person." He drops a dish in the kitchen and his boss says that he will have to work 12 hours a day for the next three days with no pay to make up for the broken plate. A few hours further into his shift, he is clearing the table of a group of wealthy, ethnic Thai businessmen visiting from Bangkok. They ask him a question and then make fun of his imperfect, northern Thai. Finally, his shift is over at 2:00 am.

The young man heads straight to the tourist area and meets up with his Akha friends who work and hang out at the bar. He has never been here but he knows what goes on at the bar. He knows what the rainbow flags signify in this otherwise non-descript bar. He cannot help but notice and be slightly embarrassed by the posters of shirtless farang men and Asian men in their underwear. Still, he does not really care. He just needs to drink, hopefully get some yaba, and forget about his unkind boss, co-workers, and customers.

As he drinks his beers, he sees both farang and Thai men – and a few women – in the bar propositioning his friends and acquaintances. He can hear the negotiations about price and what his friend will and will not do with the client. He finds the entire situation uncomfortable, but he understands why his friends do this work.

As he plays snooker with two of his friends, a man walks over and puts his hand on the young man's leg. He asks the young man how much he charges. Embarrassed, the young man says he does not go off and walks away. This scenario repeats itself many nights for the next few weeks or months. The young man continues working in the restaurant where he faces labor exploitation – illegal garnishing of his wages – and taunting and harassment by co-workers and customers. He is sad that he has not yet been able to save enough money to send back to help take care of his sick sister. After 12-hour days and not really having a place to sleep or shower, the one thing he really has to look forward to is hanging out with his friends at the bar.

One night, at some point in the future after his first drink at the bar, a man approaches him. He asks for his price and the young man makes an impulsive decision: "1,000 baht," he says. The two of them leave. His friends are neither pleased nor disappointed by this decision; it is just a natural progression of how things work in this bar.

This is the reality. It is not as simple as going from point A to B, as many people in Thailand told me. My respondents did not wake up one day and decide to become sex workers. They go from point A to B to C to D to E to F. The young man drops out of school – not out of greed – but out of selflessness. He then stays and farms with his family for a year or two. Afterward, he works nearly every job available to him given his station in the Thai hierarchy. He works jobs in Pattaya, Bangkok, and Chiang Mai. He faces various forms of harassment or exploitation in these jobs. Perhaps he is even a victim of labor trafficking. All the while, he knows how some of his friends make money. He knows they do not have to put up with bosses who sometimes force them to work for reduced or no wages. He knows they do not have to put up with co-workers who make fun of their ethnicity.

This is point F. There comes a moment when some of the respondents in my survey made a decision. They realized that if they did something that they did not want to do and had sex for money, they would not have to deal with bosses, co-workers, and customers who might discriminate against them, make fun of them, and steal their money. They would not have to spend 10 hours a day in the sun performing manual labor to help build the Shangri-La (\$150 per night) and Le Meridien (\$103 per night) hotels. They would have a better chance of earning enough money to financially support their parents, siblings, extended family, wives, girlfriends, and children.

As I read a recent qualitative study from anthropologist Pardis Mahdavi about interviewing female Iranian sex workers in Dubai, the words of one of her respondents stood out: “This kind of work is better for me because it has hope and possibility. I could have gone and worked as maid or cleaned toilets somewhere, but this business is good, especially in [Dubai], where I get to meet all kinds of people.”¹¹⁷ Although my respondents mostly did not frame their experience in terms of

¹¹⁷ Mahdavi, Pardis. “The ‘Trafficking’ of Persians: Labor, Migration, and Traffic in Dubayy.” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 30, no. 3 (2010), 541.

hope, they did make it clear they could have – and had – worked in other menial jobs but this opportunity was better.

This is the definition of agency. These young men are not forced to do this work. They all told me they do not have pimps. They negotiate the price with the client and keep the earnings. No percentage goes to the bar management. These young men choose this work – albeit within an environment of highly constrained economic opportunities. Few, if any, would choose this work if they had more plentiful opportunities. This is point F.

Even Turjee, the Akha Life director who pointed to greediness as the main reason for young Akha men and women selling sex, accepts this argument. Although he spoke at length about greed and selfishness, at the end he left open the possibility of another explanation. Turjee told me:

For example, they have to do it because they don't have an ID card so they have very few options for jobs and no education. No [education] certificate. Plus they are poor. Low education and poor. So if this person has low education and is poor, the only jobs they can do are the bottom jobs. So what they are thinking is "how can I make my life better?" So that will lead them to human trafficking ... something pushed them into that human trafficking.

Masculinity Re-Examined

This section will likely be the most counter-intuitive and provocative of the entire thesis. Although likely to incite debate, the proposition is so paradoxical that it must be explored. The thesis is this: one further reason why some of these young men may have made the decision to begin sex work is to partially reclaim their masculinity. In the Thai cultural context, it is possible due to reasons of Thai notions of sexuality, masculinity, and patron-client ties, that a straight man who engages in homosexual commercial sex could enhance, or at least maintain, his masculinity. I recognize this section, while rooted in fact, is speculative. However, I have reviewed the evidence and feel comfortable putting forth such a claim.

As like so many contexts in Thailand, ideas of class and social hierarchy play a critical role in shaping Thai attitudes toward masculinity and homosexuality. Thai language provides a strong

indication of how important social status is in everyday relations and speech. Thai possesses one of the most elaborate pronoun systems of any language and includes multiple first, second, and third person pronouns. Usage of these pronouns is governed by the relative status of speakers, listeners, and persons referred to in speech rather than by grammar. Further, “equality” appears to be simply inconceivable: even twins are separated into older and younger siblings so there is no confusion about status.¹¹⁸

Historically, patron-client ties took on the form of serf-like relations between peasants and their lords. In modern Thailand as in many other areas of Southeast Asia, patron-client relationships take the form of a poorer or socially inferior person voluntarily associating himself or herself with a richer or socially superior individual. These relationships are pervasive in Thai culture, common both in urban office settings and rural workplaces. These relationships are seen as a type of social insurance given the lack of a strong social welfare system in Thailand.¹¹⁹ The pervasiveness can best be seen in Hanks and Hanks’ observation that “wherever two people meet, an inequality in wealth, power, or knowledge must be found, so that one can be patron and the other client.”¹²⁰ In other words, patron-client relationships must be utilized in the Thai context in order to navigate all social interactions.

Peter Jackson reminds us that standards for masculinity vary among social classes and what is acceptable in one class may not be acceptable in another (usually higher) one. For example, a working-class male sex worker can often retain his masculinity while engaging in homosexual sex whereas middle or upper-class males might be demasculated by such activity. Economic imperatives

¹¹⁸ Montgomery, 107.

¹¹⁹ Jackson (1995), 127-128.

¹²⁰ Hanks, Jane and Lucien M. Hanks, Jr. “Thailand: Equality Between the Sexes.” In *Women in the New Asia*, edited by Barbara Ward, 424-451 (Amsterdam: UNESCO, 1963), 433.

necessitated by poverty and the historic and entrenched system of patron-client ties in Thailand help balance against masculinity issues.¹²¹

Social hierarchy rules govern the sexual relations within a patron-client relationship. In most cases, it is assumed the socially superior person will take the penetrative role in anal or oral sex. The inferior individual will not interpret his receptive sexual behavior as “feminine;” rather, he will understand it through a context that he occupies the relatively weak, dependent position.¹²²

Sexual Identity as Understood through Positionality

In Thailand, homosexual sex can often be seen as separate from any self-identity of homosexuality. For example, if a Thai man has sex with another Thai man, that act does not necessarily make him homosexual, according to Thai thinking. This is partially due to the Thai concept of *arom*.

There is a prevailing belief in Thailand that homosexual desire is simply one of many various sexual “moods” (*arom*) that men may utilize to let off sexual steam. After all, as described in an earlier section of this thesis, there is widespread belief among both men and women in Thailand that men experience far greater and more frequent sexual urges and that it is appropriate to seek sexual release in a number of different ways. Jackson states that “homosexuality is often regarded as a sexual option that anyone can use if they wish, or if circumstances rule out other forms of sexual satisfaction.”¹²³

A 1990 Thai Red Cross Society survey of 141 adult male bar workers in Bangkok found that 82 percent had taken the job due to unemployment. A majority of the respondents self-identified as

¹²¹ Jackson (1995), 60.

¹²² De Lind van Wijngaarden, Jan. “Between Money, Morality, and Masculinity: Bar-Based Male Sex Work in Chiang Mai.” In *Lady Boys, Tom Boys, Rent Boys: Male and Female Homosexualities in Contemporary Thailand*, edited by Peter A. Jackson and Gerard Sullivan, 193-218 (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1999), 200.

¹²³ Jackson (1995), 180.

heterosexual and further stated that they maintained heterosexual relationships. Still, all 141 of the workers interviewed reported having sex with male clients sometime in the previous two weeks.¹²⁴

The concept of “Men Who Have Sex with Men” has quickly become a key element of gender studies and the sexual and public health discourse in recent years. Counter-intuitive to the casual observer, “MSM” and “gay” are effectively antonymous. Whereas “gay” or “homosexual” have connotations of innate homosexuality and also imply emotional attraction to the same sex, MSM is a category defined solely by sexual activity – not psychology or emotion. The two main types of actors in MSM are commercial sex workers and men who have sex with men but do not self-identify as gay. They also often do not see themselves as gay if they take the penetrative role in anal or oral sex.

MSM in Thailand, including male sex workers, can avoid having their masculinity challenged in Thai culture if they maintain publicly they are always the sexually insertive, or masculine, partner. Most interestingly, traditional Thai beliefs are relatively agnostic about the gender of two individuals in a sexual relationship. Instead, it is the position that each assumes during sex that marks who retains his masculinity and who is demasculated. In this sense, Jan De Lind van Wijngaarden makes clear that “gender role is important ... although it can never be seen in isolation from social hierarchy.”¹²⁵ Implicit in this calculus is that the socially inferior individual has been socialized to accept that someone of higher status has the right to be the insertive partner just as a higher status person elsewhere in society would enjoy a wide array of liberties he could take relative to the lower person.

MSM is often problematic to translate (literally and figuratively) into many cultures and languages – Thailand and Thai among them. “Men who have sex with men” is commonly translated

¹²⁴ Jackson (1995), 239.

¹²⁵ De Lind van Wijngaarden, 196.

into Thai as “men who love men.” This is a significant problem because, as noted above, MSM by definition does not include love and is effectively limited to casual or commercial sex, a concept the Thai translation does not recognize.¹²⁶

An Alarming Interview

I read about this translation problem in spring 2011 when I was carrying out my pre-field work research and literature review and assumed this problem had been rectified, at least among the organizations and practitioners who work with MSM on a daily basis. After all, the report from which I learned of this issue was published in 2006. Once in Thailand, however, I found the misconception was still alive and well – at least at Mplus+.

The most shocking conversation I had during my field work was with Supotch, the manager of Mplus+. According to its website:

Mplus+ is a non-profit organization based in Chiang Mai which works primarily to promote sexual health for men who have sex with men (MSM) ... Although male sex workers (self-identified as gay or heterosexual) are their most important target group, Mplus+ also serves the gay, bisexual, lesbian and transgender communities.

This interview was hugely alarming because not only did this man – the manager of the entire organization – not understand the concept of MSM, he expressly dismissed it. Further, he was clearly very prejudiced against the very population he ostensibly served. Finally, the US government is underwriting this incompetence and bias since Mplus+ is a subgrantee under a USAID-funded program at Pact International.

I told Supotch about the translation problem of MSM in Thai and asked if this was still an issue or if experts in the Thai public health community had devised an alternate way of expressing the MSM phenomenon. He answered:

¹²⁶ Cameron, Liz. *Sexual Health and Rights: Sex Workers, Transgender People, and Men Who Have Sex with Men* (Thailand: Open Society Institute, 2006), 33.

Normally a man who has sex with a man has to be gay. A *real man* (my emphasis added) cannot have sex with men. For example, I am a man so if you ask me to have sex with a man I will not do it. I will not even have sex with a man who has already had gender reassignment surgery. I think a man who has sex with a man has to be gay. MSM is a man who loves men. For me this person is gay. Maybe we have to review about the titles MSM and gay because for me I think the man who has sex with a man is gay.

This man oversees one of the few organizations in one of Thailand's largest cities that works specifically on public health and HIV/AIDS issues for MSM. In fact, at the very beginning of our conversation when he told me the three groups that Mplus+ targets, he noted MSM first. An hour later he was telling me he did even believe such a group exists. He also explicitly stated that any man who has sex with a man is not a "real man."

After we discussed the stark difference between gay men and MSM at length, he insisted that he now understood. To demonstrate that he now grasped the difference he asked me "I have one staff who ... lives with a man – his boyfriend. So this person is an MSM?" I told him, no, this person would appear be gay since he seems to be in a romantic relationship with the other man.

I tried asking the question another way. I asked Supotch: "if a Thai person sees your literature or website and calls you to ask what MSM means, how do you answer?" Without hesitating he responded "I tell them it means a man who loves a man." A few seconds later he corrected himself to say "a man who has sex with men." I pointed out that he initially used "love" instead of "sex." In an apologetic tone, he responded "Because I used to say that. I used that word all the time. Now I understand. Thai people misunderstand about MSM." The key issue is not that Supotch did not know a certain definition or concept. Rather, he flatly denied the existence of MSM despite the fact that Mplus+'s website declares that the organization provides sexual health services to them.

Besides being ignorant of the difference between MSM and gay men, Supotch also exhibited significant prejudice against both populations and transgendered people. Six times during our conversation he referred to these groups as "liars." For example:

In my opinion, the gay group asks a lot from the government and I feel like it's not necessary to ask that much. The government already gives the gay group the same rights as other people but they still ask for more. They ask for a lot. HIV-positive gays want a T-Cell count test and ask for medicine and they want better care. The government has already given them everything they're supposed to have. They tell lies. They're liars.

Also, for someone who administers a public health program, instead of referring to sex between men with a professional term like anal sex, he used a cruder, more explicit expression that my embarrassed interpreter refused to translate.

For my last question, I asked what his greatest challenge was in carrying out the work of Mplus+. Supotch answered "The biggest obstacle in my work is guessing the gay mind. What do you really want and need? They like to lie. They say they want something and I try to do it but they lied. So I can't meet their needs."

As he walked my interpreter and me out of his office, he briefly introduced us to the staff who were in the office, all of whom were gay men, he told me. As we reached the front door, he gestured to the receptionist, a male-female transgendered person – a *kathoey*. He told me her name but fumbled for the correct pronoun. He initially said "he" and then laughingly said "he-she." The receptionist was not amused and cut him off, correcting her manager that she in fact was a "she."

Structural Vulnerabilities

Male commercial sex workers are subjected to high rates of psychological, physical, and sexual violence by their male clients. The abuse ranges from emotional violence to rape, although male rape does not exist in Thai law, as I will soon show. Male commercial sex workers have told researchers that sexual assault and the lack of legal recourses for such crimes are major concerns.¹²⁷ One can argue that male under-reporting of physical or sexual violence is a significant problem in Thailand where focus on masculinity would be likely to suppress a man's desire to self-report abuse.

¹²⁷ Cameron, 57.

Thai law does not recognize the possibility of the rape of boys, men, or *kathoey* as the definition of rape under section 276 is limited to the penis entering the vagina.¹²⁸ Instead, anal rape, rape by object, forced oral sex, and other forms of sexual assault are not classified as rape or sexual assault, but as physical assault. However, even physical assault cannot always be used to classify the crime since the assault must “draw blood” in order for the legal threshold of physical assault to be met. These gaps in the law are not an esoteric discussion: a rape conviction carries a prison sentence of 4-20 years and a fine of 8,000 (\$266) to 40,000 baht (\$1,333). Alternatively, physical assault can result in up to two years in prison and a maximum 4,000 baht fine.¹²⁹

In addition to the actual violence to which male sex workers are subjected, they also engage their male clients within the parameters of Thai social hierarchy which can create additional vulnerabilities. For example, sex workers may be unlikely or unable to challenge a Thai client who did not want to use a condom as the client would usually assume a socially superior rank and demand compliance. For this reason, almost all male sex workers in the Pattaya study said they preferred *farang* or foreign (non-Thai Asians) clients to Thais.¹³⁰ It also stands to reason that many sex workers might prefer *farang* clients because they presumably have the means to often pay more for sex than Thai men.

One question I wanted to ask my 12 respondents was about any kind of abuse or violence they had experienced in the course of their work at the bars – whether in going off with clients or just working in the bar itself. Since this was such a sensitive question and could be interpreted as a challenge to their masculinity, I only asked some of the 12 young men. I felt it would be counterproductive – not to mention inappropriate – to ask the others.

¹²⁸ Cameron, 7.

¹²⁹ Cameron, 27.

¹³⁰ McCamish, 178.

Jamlong, 23, told me he had been victimized when going off with clients. “Some of my customers were nice but some abused me. Sometimes they forced me to do things I did not want to do but I am a person with limits. I have boundaries and would not go with the customer in this case.” Yapa, 18, said “I have never experienced a customer hurting me but I have often seen some of my friends get hurt. Sometimes the *farang* is drunk and beats them.” It was more common, however, for respondents to tell me that either they had attacked clients or had heard of their peers doing so.

Eighteen-year-old Kanok pointed to money as the reason friends hurt clients. “No customer every treated me badly in the bar. They would not get angry when I said I would not go off with them. I have heard three or four friends saying they hurt the *farang* because of money disputes.”

Sirichok, 22, provided similar information. “In the past I have heard of some of the boys hurting a *farang* if they do not get paid enough or they will steal their cell phone. I have never heard of a *farang* hurting a boy.”

Twenty-two-year-old Supoge told me in a boastful tone: “My customers have never hurt me. If they’re going to hurt me I’ll hurt them first. The guys who come to the bar look like tough men but since they’re gay, when we go to the room, they act like a girl.”

The response that Kichat, 25, gave was the most illuminating. “I have some experience with it [physical abuse]. I am not gay but some *farang* forced me perform oral sex on them and I did not want to do it so I beat them because I was so angry. I had to beat him because I am not gay. If [another sex worker] is gay he can do everything, such as oral sex, but I cannot.”

These insights from some of my respondents combined with an understanding of the interplay among social status, patron-client ties, and sexual positionality in Thai culture, demonstrate that self-perception of masculinity is paramount in determining how the young men I interviewed arrive at Point F – selling sex. As long as the young man publicly maintains his sexually dominant

position in the course of his sex work, his low status in the Thai hierarchy and economic imperative for engaging in this type of sex could protect his masculinity to a great degree. It stands to reason that in fact a young man may be forced to take the sexually submissive position, especially with a Thai male client, for reasons just outlined above. However, as long as he publicly maintains that he is always the dominant partner when he goes off, then his masculinity remains relatively intact in the public sphere. In fact, his position as a busboy in a restaurant at which he is bullied or harassed by his boss, co-workers, and customers and where his boss financially exploits him can be constructed both in his mind and in the minds of others as a more submissive, demasculated job than sex work.

It is this notion of masculinity that lies at the heart of my challenge to the conventional wisdom that labor and sexual exploitation are unrelated. Many of my respondents who ended up working as sex workers or at least becoming denizens of the night bazaar bars (which increases the likelihood of them one day accepting a commercial sexual proposition), earlier had worked in licit jobs at which they were subject to labor exploitation. I argue that these jobs at least partially took away a sense of control over their lives since they were at the mercy of bosses, co-workers, and customers who withheld their wages, coerced them into working long, unpaid hours, and who made fun of them because of their ethnicity and language skills. Immersing themselves in the bar scene was a way to get away from this one kind of exploitive situation and regain a sense of control over their lives and re-establish their masculinity.

The Future

This thesis has relayed distressing, first-hand accounts of a variety of exploitation: sexual, physical, economic, and psychological. Still, on my flight home from Thailand, I was not focusing on the terrible stories I had heard in the preceding month. Instead, I reflected on the stories of hope, courage, and selflessness I heard from my respondents. That is the note on which I wish to conclude my thesis.

Parliamentary elections were held while I was in Thailand so I asked 10 of the 12 respondents if they voted and if so, for whom. Seven of the 10 voted for the victorious Pheu Thai party, headed by Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. One respondent told me he had lost his ID card and could not vote; another said he could not afford the bus fare to his home village to cast his ballot; and the tenth simply stated that he did not vote.

Despite the numerous inequities and injustices these young men have experienced over their lives – including sometimes at the hands of the government – I was struck by how optimistic they were about Prime Minister Yingluck’s ability or interest in helping their communities. Only one respondent told me he thought politics and politicians were “bad” while another said he voted for Yingluck but did not really expect her to do anything. Many of the others, however, had high hopes. Almost all stated they voted for Yingluck because she was Thaksin’s sister.

Sopon, 22, told me “I voted for Pheu Thai because since Thaksin was the prime minister our village has developed. Before we had a dirt road and now it’s paved. I think Yingluck will come help and continue these policies.” Lawpha, 19, told me he supported Thaksin’s strong anti-drugs programs. “I voted for Yingluck. I like Thaksin and his strong anti-drug policy. Yingluck ... will have the same drug policy. If there is a strong policy then no one can sell and I won’t have any drugs to use.” Lawpha added that last sentence after I asked why he would support a government that was tough on drugs since he uses drugs himself. Twenty-four-year-old Prasit singled out Thaksin’s popular universal health program, the “30 baht scheme” as his main reason for supporting Yingluck. “I voted for Yingluck. I like her because she is Thaksin’s sister. When he was prime minister he helped Chiang Mai and everywhere. He introduced the 30 baht card and helped many people. [Former Prime Minister] Abhisit hasn’t really helped people.”

Following on my question about voting, I asked some of the respondents what they would ask from Yingluck if she invited them to dinner. It is noteworthy none of the young men said they

would ask for any personal assistance. Instead, they all listed priorities for their communities or Thailand as a whole.

Deeto, 18, said “I want the prime minister to help my village with land rights issues because we don’t have documents. In my village no one has land documents. In the past the government has taken land away from the people because they cut down the trees and invaded the forest.” Kichat and Praiboon, both 25, singled out economic concerns. “I would ask the prime minister to help the economy because everything is more expensive now. Rich people can buy expensive things but poor people cannot. Even though the minimum wage has been raised to 300 baht (\$10) per day poor people still cannot buy expensive things,” Kichat said. Praiboon told me “I would ask her to help develop Chiang Mai. I wouldn’t ask her to help just Chiang Mai but the whole country: the economy, jobs, and increasing tourism.” Finally, 18-year-old Kanok specified education as one of his main requests. “I would ask the prime minister to help my village, especially the school. It’s a very bad school and has old books. Also the village floods a lot. I want the government to take education very seriously and make students finish school.”

My penultimate question was where the young men visualized their lives in the next few years. Their goals and dreams ranged from modest (joining the military) to perhaps unrealistic (a professional football player). Yapa simply stated “I want to have a stable job. I want a better job – like in a hotel. Any kind of work that is stable.” This unassuming goal is understandable given the forms of exploitation and range of hardships to which he has been subjected in his 18 years.

Similarly, Kichat told me about his plan to open a garage: “If it’s possible, I want to be a mechanic and open a garage. I know how to fix a car.”

Lawpha explained why he wanted to move home.

I can’t make any plans for life since I live day by day. In the past I used to want to have a small business in my village because I don’t want to be away from home. I want to take care of my grandparents. I want to live in my village because all my relatives are there. They are

sincere – not like city people. This is still my plan. I want to grow fruits and vegetables and sell them in my own shop.

Supoge, 22, said he hopes to have a life outside the bar scene.

Now I'm looking for a new job. I don't want to keep working at the bar. I know that I'm wasting every minute, every hour - drinking, wasting time. I came to Chiang Mai in June and now it's August. I don't even have money to have my own room. I just hang out and eat. If possible, I want to study more and get more education. I'm really sorry I missed that opportunity. I wanted to study more but I had a wife so had to work. In the past I thought my life was perfect since I had a family. I didn't think my life would turn out like this. I want to be a barber. I just started thinking about having a career as a barber. I'm growing up and want to be in a peaceful, quiet area. The barber shop is very peaceful.

Of all the goals I heard, Deeto's stood alone in a separate category. "[My plan] is that in 1-2 years I will go sell stuff in Phuket. That's my plan. Normally the people who go to Phuket make a lot of money." He did not say he wanted to sell sex; instead, he simply said vaguely that he planned to sell "stuff."

My final question was very open-ended. I asked each respondent if there was anything he wanted to say directly to the readers of this thesis or anything he thought my readers should know about him or his life. Most of them seemed either taken aback by the question or at a loss for what to say. After a bit of encouragement, most gave an answer. I posed this question to 11 of the 12 respondents; I had to cut the twelfth interview short because the respondent wanted to stop talking and thus I could not ask this question. Although not all of these responses are profound, I will quote all of them since I told my respondents these would be read by my readers. Some are quite moving.

Kanok: I want to tell the reader that even though I don't have a lot of opportunities like someone from a rich family would have I still have a dream to be a professional football player. I know this is very far from the fact of what I have now. I'm still here, I still care about my family, I still want my brothers and sisters to go to school and have more education than me. Also, my parents work so hard. I'm so worried about them, and they're getting old now.

Praiboon: I want to say that even though I'm from the mountain we have the same rights. I work in the city and I work to live, too.

Sopon: I am so proud to be born Akha because wherever you are born you are a human being.

Kichat: Even though I'm not real Thai, I have an ID card. I'm like a Thai person. I don't want anyone to look down on mountain people. I know that people are bad and look down on Akha but not everyone is bad. I don't like it when people look down on Akha.

Yapa: I want your readers to know that even though I'm from a hill tribe, a minority group, I'm a human just like you; I can do whatever you can.

Lawpha: I want to tell people not to look down at mountain people because everyone has the same rights. We live in Thailand, have ID cards, and speak Thai. Mountain people also have everything: we have hands and feet and can do the same thing as you can. Sometimes you talk about me in front of people and it makes me feel very small.

Supoge: I want your reader to know that at the same time while everything is beautiful in America, everything is so convenient, I can't even imagine. I have only seen on TV. America is another world – everything is so hi-tech. I want you to know that there is a group of people still on the ground while you're flying in your plane and having everything so luxurious. Even in America you have so many good things but I don't know about their hearts. What are they looking for? Do they have peace in their lives? If you're interested to come, you can come and we'll exchange knowledge.

Ahloh: I don't know. It depends on them. I will do my job and continue what I'm doing.

Prasit: I don't expect anything from your readers but if they see my information and want to help then I would be thankful. I want to thank them for reading.

Deeto: I want your readers to know that we are here. There is a group of boys that are here in Chiang Mai and we have fewer opportunities than Thai and *farang* and we want to have a better life.

Jamlong: I don't expect anything from the reader but the reason why Akha people work at the bar is because we have low education. Second, we're young and want to have fun and don't think too much. Third, we think our future is limited so we can do whatever we want because we have no future anyway. There are many hill tribes that have more problems than us – especially Thai Yai (Shan). I think a lot of groups have more problems than me. You guys should go help them instead of me; I'm fine.

Many of these quotations are extraordinary on several levels. I vividly remember the moment when Jamlong told me other highland groups, especially Thai Yai, had greater problems than Akha and thus I should be doing this research with them. In fact, he seemed to admonish me and insist that I go help them and abandon my project with the Akha young men. He was so concerned for this other group and possessed the incredible self-awareness to compare his situation with the Thai Yai to tell me they needed more support. Lawpha's comment about "feeling small" when hearing

people talk about hill tribe people also stands out as one of the most honest and vulnerable moments during my conversations with my 12 respondents. Finally, Supoge's wondering aloud about peace in the hearts of wealthy Americans continues to resonate with me. He was not being trite. I could tell he truly wondered if we rich Americans have peace and joy.

Conclusion

The arguments and findings from this paper are derived from 12 qualitative interviews with young Akha men who work or hang out in the night bazaar bars; informal and formal participant observation; staff at seven Thai organizations; and an extensive desktop review of the academic and policy literature relevant to these issues. Even though I believe some findings have larger-scale implications, I do not make any attempt here to extrapolate my data or conclusions onto all Akha or Thais. I am aware of the limited size of this study and can only speak for the findings directly derived from these respondents.

This thesis set out to problematize four key instances of conventional wisdom about sex work, exploitation, and labor affecting young Akha men in northern Thailand. First, access to Thai citizenship is important but had limited bearing on my respondents' lives. Second, my respondents possess great agency but are also affected by exploitation. Third, free public education itself is crucial but does not reduce human trafficking if it does not cover ancillary – but potentially prohibitive expenses – such as transportation to and from school. Fourth, labor exploitation and commercial sexual exploitation appear to be linked.

The fundamental finding underlying this entire research project was that some young men do sell sex – and a subset of that population faces various kinds of exploitation and abuse in this work. Five respondents acknowledged selling sex while the other seven either acknowledged drinking in the bars with customers for tips or I observed them in the bars. Five of the six queried do not view this work favorably and would not recommend it to a friend.

For the most part, this work is not human trafficking in the commonly understood form. These young men have not been forced to do this, kidnapped, or locked in a room – nor do they have pimps. They have made this choice in an environment of highly constrained economic opportunities. There were a few cases, however, that meet the definition of human trafficking since commercial sexual exploitation occurred prior to their eighteenth birthday.

Besides working in the night bazaar bars in Chiang Mai, two of the young men also danced in gay clubs in Pattaya at which they went off with clients. Further, as I learned from my respondents and also at my karaoke bar experience in Chiang Mai Land, there is no single profile of who purchases sex from my respondents. Customers include Thai men, Thai women, *farang* men, and *farang* women. I learned about the guys' going rate and the fact they actually receive a commission from the bar owners for soliciting sex in their bars since they attract customers. Finally, I found great variation as to whether the respondents' families knew what kind of work they were doing.

Next, I found that Thai citizenship was not a panacea for alleviating my respondents' day-to-day struggles. Some of the literature – particularly from the human rights and advocacy communities – suggests that highland people in northern Thailand are trafficked because they lack citizenship. Certainly this happens. The implicit assumption that flows from that assertion, however, is that obtaining citizenship will reduce or even eliminate one's vulnerability trafficking or exploitation. This was the first myth I faced soon after arriving in Chiang Mai and learning that all 12 of my respondents were Thai citizens.

Despite having Thai ID cards – and having had them their entire lives, in many cases – my respondents were facing the very same perils associated with stateless people: low education, unemployment or marginal employment, and labor or sexual exploitation. In my study, I found that citizenship was not the “silver bullet” it is usually portrayed to be in the discourse. I do

acknowledge, however, citizenship may make a more concrete impact in the lives of other highlanders not included in my research. Further, my interviews with Akha staff from IMPECT and Akha Life revealed that these respondents perceive the central government as a threat. Many of the 12 young men I interviewed, though, seemed to appreciate some state services, such as public education and recently-paved roads.

Second, I demonstrated that my respondents, although possessing enormous agency, are exploited but do not fit neatly into the hegemonic imagining of “victimhood.” As Child Help has found, it is extremely difficult to garner sympathy in either Thailand or the United States for a group of chain-smoking, drug-using, arrest record-possessing ethnic minority young men who sell sex in bars. Child Help, representing this population, is almost always going to lose the public relations war and the grants to organizations that advocate on behalf of more “appropriate” victims, such as young girls.

The more the stereotype of an “acceptable” victim is propagated, the more difficult it is to recognize the exploitation of those who do not fit this archetype. By creating an echo chamber featuring a narrow construct of a victim, those who do not fit the mold are marginalized. Activists make these young men’s lives more difficult because by brushing them aside and thinking of them as anomalies, their status as exploited individuals is delegitimized.

Third, “free education” did not reduce human trafficking in my study. The most problematic element of this conventional wisdom is the oft-undefined “free education” term itself. One-size-fits-all policy recommendations from Washington or Brussels for all manner of international development issues often include diktats to make education free to everyone – especially girls. It is presumed these recommendations are meant to offset the most onerous education-related expenses – the school building itself and tuition, perhaps.

My research has shown, though, that tuition is not the reason why none of my respondents finished high school. Instead, it is the little expenses that add up and make it impossible for a family living on the margins to be able to keep their child in school. School uniforms, snack money, school supplies, and books all added together can represent an insurmountable hurdle for poor families. Further, five of the 12 have only an elementary school education because they could not afford the \$6 per month bus to access the middle school, a few kilometers outside the village.

Fourth, this thesis suggests there are links between labor exploitation and commercial sexual exploitation among my respondents. Contrary to some popular wisdom, my respondents did not drop out of school because they were materialistic and wanted to become sex workers in Chiang Mai. In fact, they largely left school because they feared the hardship the continued expense would cause for their families; many also reported wanting to give their younger siblings an opportunity at education. After leaving school, they worked a variety of marginal jobs at which some experienced labor and financial abuse, teasing, and discrimination. It was only after enduring these situations did some reassess their situation and make a calculation that selling sex could be a less bad – although not necessarily “better” – choice. Therefore, because of their earlier labor exploitation, some ended up subject to commercial sexual exploitation.

Recommendations to Child Help

Studies like mine tend to include recommendations to relevant governments, NGOs, or even the international community at large. I find this strategy to be questionable given the likelihood of those entities implementing the recommendations – or even reading the study. Instead, I will lay out a few straightforward recommendations to the organization that helped facilitate my research since I know they are truly interested in the study’s findings and my recommendations. I believe these recommendations have clear application to organizations doing similar work, especially with ethnic minority clients.

First and foremost, it is imperative that Child Help hire an Akha staff member immediately. This must be the organization's top priority. It is enormously problematic to run a center and program for a population and have no one on staff who can communicate with the clients in their native language. This huge oversight must be rectified as soon as possible for a number of basic, pragmatic reasons. Although the young men surely have positive male and female Akha role models in their home villages, it would be good to have a positive Akha role model they see every day in Chiang Mai. That individual would also be in a better position than the expatriate and ethnic Thai staff at Child Help to connect the young men to potential jobs, services, etc. since they presumably would be better connected in the Akha and highland communities.

Second, Child Help should establish better collaborative relationships with Akha heritage organizations like Akha Life and with Akha staff from other highlander NGOs like IMPECT. Those NGOs have resources that they are willing to share with Child Help and its clients. During my meetings with these NGO staff, they expressed eagerness to support Child Help's efforts with its Akha clients and spoke of their disappointment that Child Help had never reached out to them before. Specifically, I recommend that Child Help incorporate some of Akha Life's Akha language materials into its curriculum in order to help reinforce a sense of Akha identity and pride in their clients.

Third, Child Help should recognize the beneficial effect that high Thai language ability has on its clients and seek opportunities to assist in boosting the young men's Thai skills. Not only can a high language level boost their self-esteem, it directly correlates to their ability to obtain good employment. Child Help is well aware of the importance of Thai language training, as evidenced through the Thai language course it briefly offered in the past. As I mentioned in the thesis, this course failed because of lack of buy-in from Child Help's clients and also because it was taught by an expatriate whose first language was not Thai. With the right Akha or Thai teacher and securing more

broad-based support from the young men, a Thai language course could be a positive addition to Child Help's programming.

However, as noted in the thesis, Child Help cannot focus solely on improving its clients' Thai language skills at the expense of their formal education. Even if one speaks Thai fluently, if a Child Help client does not possess a high school diploma, he will still be faced with severely constrained job prospects. The organization therefore must identify opportunities for its clients to complete their secondary education as well as increase their Thai language skills.

Finally, Child Help should also take note of the significant gambling problem affecting its clients and examine programmatic responses to this issue. Regardless of Thai language skills or formal education, without improved practices on money management Child Help's clients face a highly uncertain future. As I outlined in the thesis, some of them have lost staggering sums of money through gambling. I recommend Child Help meet with Akha-specific NGOs, or organizations like ChildLife who serve similar populations, to discuss best practices or curricular options such as life skills programming.

Recommendations for Further Research

My thesis has highlighted a number of areas in need of further research. Most importantly, additional studies like mine need to be undertaken. My research is a solid start and hopefully will alert researchers to the complexity of this population. Because so little is known about young Akha men engaging in bar-based sex work, I recommend the initial further studies take a similarly ethnographic approach. Large-end studies will be called for at some point but their scale crowds out the voices of those in this type of work and often do not yield a contoured, textured picture of the bars, the young men's lives, and their reasoning for engaging – or not – in certain types of work.

Of course I am not recommending that all further research be limited to young Akha men in Chiang Mai. The entire rationale for conducting this research and writing this thesis was that there is

virtually nothing like it in the academic literature. The overwhelming attention and interest is devoted to women and girls. These studies of young men engaging in commercial sex work need to be replicated in virtually every country, culture, and ethnicity. I certainly have not answered every question regarding young Akha men in Thailand and would welcome additional studies of that population but would like to see similar research from elsewhere in the world. Indeed, that was one of the problems in conducting my literature review: there were so few comparable studies of young men from any country.

Next, the role of female – both Thai and foreign – customers who purchase sex from my respondents is a pressing research question. I was pleased to glean some of this information from my respondents but a much more systematic study devoted solely to this issue is needed. The fact that women purchase sex from sex workers is known intuitively but there is so little empirical data that few conclusions can yet be drawn. I am proud to be able to contribute a small amount of new data but this is an area of the literature that is hugely lacking. As with the earlier research need I identified, while I call for additional studies on the role of female customers in Thailand, this research needs to be replicated in many other countries as well.

Finally, the varying payment structures within the different types of boy bars is an issue that needs to be further understood. My research demonstrated that the young men who work in the Chiang Mai night bazaar bars do not have to pay any sort of fee to the bar management in exchange for freelancing there. However, the clubs at which Supoge and Kichat danced in Pattaya diverged from each other and also from the Chiang Mai case in terms of how they paid their dancers. What factors determine which payment structure is instituted? Does it depend on if there are go-go dancers, the average number of nightly customers, or location within Thailand, for example? A more solid understanding of these establishments and their pay structures may lend itself to understanding

why young choose to work in some establishments instead of others and the relative disadvantages and advantages of each.

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