



## SEX WORKERS

FIGHT TO DECRIMINALIZATION SEX WORK  
IN THAILAND & THE SYSTEMIC CORRUPTION



PEOPLE'S  
EMPOWERMENT  
FOUNDATION  
มูลนิธิศุภนิยามฯ

*Interview Date: 27 May 2024*

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**Said, Empower**



An afternoon with the women that run "Empower" in Chiang Mai, an organization made up of strong-willed sex workers that aimed to bring substantive change to Thailand's backward law

## Fighting To De-Criminalize Sex Work In Thailand And The Systemic Corruption That Comes With It:

### A Burgeoning Sex Industry under a Thai-Style Carpet

It is believed that every corner of Thailand has at least one brothel; Thai society turned a blind eye to the existence of sex workers as it is generally considered immoral for a Thai person to work in the sex industry. As overlooked by law and society, sex workers are arbitrarily being forced to be unwilling silent accomplices to a system of corruption that outright violates and exploits them. We are at a bar in Chiang Mai that sits an organization that aims to empower all sex workers to reach out for their rights. This afternoon, before the bar would be soon open at 6.00 PM, we had a discussion of the women's experiences and aspirations as sex workers in this country and how they see and define corruption.

### Empower, A Unique Origin Out of the Red-light District of Bangkok:

The women insisted that "Empower" be called a "group" or a "get-together" rather than an organization. This is exemplary of how the women wish society to view them as a simple grassroots

network of people comprising mostly "working women" demanding the simplest of basic human rights: that their jobs be de-criminalized just like any other jobs in a functioning democratic society. In fact, the women believe that sex workers should be called "service personnel" just like any other service staff in the labor force. Their organizational structure is simple: there is no hierarchy or top-down style of management, and everyone is on the same level, helping each other out and pushing forward the same agenda. Currently, Empower employs five full-time staff with only one office space in Chiang Mai to minimize costs. They wanted a lean organization with the goal of having 90% of the funding received going directly to the sex workers while only 10% is allowed to be spent on administrative costs.

"You can say that We are wrong! You can even say that We are morally wrong! But our work should not be wrong under the Thai law!" said P'M (P = Pee, in Thai means elder sister'M), one of the leaders who took us on a tour of their Empower office, which sits on top of a bar that opens for business every night

except for Monday night. P'M movingly summarised the group's simple demand- to be recognized as "someone of equal" in Thai society. Liking to its name, the group's initial first-generational leaders get-together 30 years back in the 1990s was to empower sex workers to learn English in the notorious Patpong area the red-light district of Bangkok. In fact, the foundation was head-started by P'Noi or Miss Chantawipa Apisuk who studied social sciences and was a graduate from Boston College who began to teach English to the working women with the hope to empower and increase their survival skills by allowing these women to be able to communicate with their customers. From road-side education, the foundation grew as it gained more support not only from people in the industry who empathized with the women but also from people abroad who have heard of the foundation through various international newspapers who publicized their' stories with aspirations to the world.

### From Battling the AIDS Epidemic to Demanding Sex Workers' Rights

Unlike today, in the past, the organization then focused on the most pressing issue of that time, which was tackling the AIDS pandemic that hit Thailand very hard. Since its humble beginning, the "Empower" network has now expanded to many cities, including Chiangmai, Phuket, Maesot (Myanmar-border town), and many cities along the Thai-Laos border where many of the working women are from neighboring countries and especially in locations where tourism and sex work are in significance. The group today becomes like a second family and a safe space where working women can come together to get moral support for one another and be improved to seek language training and higher education but also be empowered to recognize their rights as working members of society that should not have been discriminated and criminalized. In the present days in Chiangmai, the group even hired a Chinese teacher on a regular basis to teach Chinese mandarin, reflecting the continual development and adaptiveness of the organization to cater to the ever-changing economic landscape of the Chiangmai area. The strong-willed women of Empower insisted that, at present, they carefully choose their donors to stay focused on their goals and agendas, which exclusively focus on promoting the rights of the working women or service personnel as they like to be called.

### Systemic Corruption that Feeds on Sex Workers through the Criminalization of Work:

Chatchalawan Muangjan, whom we affectionately call P'O, begins our discussion on the subject of systemic corruption in Thailand and how it relates to and affects all sex workers who have to directly or indirectly give bribes to Thai police officers in order to avoid "any trouble."

*"Generally, many of the working women that work in a brothel don't even know that they are being taken advantage of and are indirectly paying for the bribes. They just know that if they abide by the establishment rules, their salary won't be deducted for misconduct. However, our research showed that the money that goes to the corrupted police and government agencies is almost the same amount that the brothel makes per service given by each of the working women!"*



When asked whether the women have any power to negotiate on the amount of bribe money, P'O answered, *"Imagine that I am working on the street, the police would demand a bribe of 100 baht (approx.3US\$) in exchange for me not getting caught. If I haven't had any customers that night, I would negotiate to pay 50 baht first and ask the officer to return later and get the rest at 10 pm that night."* That's the only negotiation power that women hold when dealing with people of authority. Answering the same question, P'M explained: *"If we don't pay the amount the police officers have asked for, that very night, the patrol police car would have driven around the premises all night intimidating customers to be too scared to even enter the place and we can not carry-on our business. Occasionally, we are even required to give them liquor at least twice a year, be it the New Year Festival or the Thai New Year (Songkran festival) in April. We even have to give them liquor on special occasions like when a new chief police officer is coming to town to take a position. The liquor or beer must be of a particular brand the police officers request! we can not give them any other brand that we wish."*

Four of the Empower women that sat across our interview team described the bribe system on working women so matter-of-factly that showed the in-grained mafia police culture that is so deeply rooted in Thai society like it's a tradition or an accepted normal part of everyday life for the working women. The women then went on to explain that brothels of all sizes have to give bribes to persons who claimed to be, or involved with, police officers, immigration or magistrate, and the provincial authority belonging to at least twenty-three government agencies that benefited from the illegality of sex work in Thailand. According to the women's information,

each brothel will have to pay around 2,000- 80,000 THA (approx. 57 USD- 2,285 USD) per month depending on the size of the brothel, how many working women the brothel employed (80,000 bath for large brothels with women in the approximate number of 30-40), how many undocumented women are currently working, location of the business, the number of complaints received from the public and the operating business hours that the brothels operated. *"The bribes go to the local police stations where brothels are located. The police don't normally cross each others' dominion"*, One of the women explained. The monthly fees described above do not include the local patrol officer who may demand 500-1,000 baht (approx. 14-28USD) each time they visit or do not include the daily fees some brothels must pay to exist. The structure is rather complex, with no fixed standardized terms depending on the agreement between the police and the establishment, but all of the women see that all this corruption money is at the expense of leeching off the working womens.

### **the Billion Dollars Blood Gold- the Reason why Some Thai Elites Do Not Want to De-Criminalize The Oldest Profession**

On the illegality of sex work in Thailand, Empower believes that sex work should be de-criminalized, while they do not believe in the need for extra registration of sex workers in order to avoid stigmatization and discrimination. The women believes in the motto that **"sex work is work"** and felt that they should not be classified under any other special category. They consider they should be treated and protected under the available labor law like any other worker under the Thai Social Security Act or Section 33, provided that they work for an employer, i.e., a registered brothel, whom the women believe should be administered under the Ministry of Labor and the Ministry of Interior.



On the rampant systemic corruption that forced the working women (and brothels) to regularly give bribes, Miss Chatchalawan (P'O) said that there were apparently many highly publicized cases where brothels were raided and the **"List of Briberies"** were leaked to the public containing information that detailed the amount of money, the frequency of briberies and the government agencies that were involved. However, Miss Chatchalawan then strongly and defiantly complained that there had never been any investigation or criminal proceedings against the corrupt practices committed by police officers and government agencies. All charges and blame were merely laid on the working women.

The womens went on to explain how, in the past, they had to go and rescue working womens who also happened to be undocumented migrant workers who were detained after the police raided their brothels. We were told of the inhumane and unforgivable practices conducted by the police when raiding brothels. The women described how the police officers usually see and treat the "working women" as perpetrators of crimes. Once raided, migrant women are always detained as "witnesses" to crimes of human trafficking or unproven charges of under-age prostitution. The women who were detained as "witnesses" were themselves treated nothing less than prisoners. The women described how the brothel owners usually got off scot-free and were back in business as usual in just 2-3 days, while the migrant women, on average, would have to spend not less than 1-2 weeks in detention at the immigration detention center, of which the conditions are not that much different from a prison. Many women had their phones confiscated while in detention, had little or no access to medication if they fell sick, and were given limited access to communication to get outside help.

The women explained the usual pattern of how male police officers pretended to be regular paying customers, coming to pay for the same women to buy her trust (many times having sex with these women) before eventually revealing themselves as police officers during the raid. The women considered these practices to be dehumanizing and violate their basic human rights through acts of lies and trickery. Many "forced-to-be witnesses" were not compensated for their time in detention and were given a mere sum of 3,000 baht (approx. 86 USD), which could be less than their traveling expenses back home. The women believe that the only reason for such raids was for the Thai government to showcase "statistical numbers" in order to move up the grading tier on the international stage, not really providing any real solutions to real problems.

### **The Solution" to Ending Systemic Corruption that's Leeching on the Thai Sex Industry, from Empower's Perspective**

Through self-empowerment and peer-to-peer education, the women at Empower learned of their full rights as working tax-paying citizens who demanded to be treated equally as members of society. They are adamant that it is the law's fault that de-criminalizes their work, and the problem is not because of them but arises from **"a certain part of Thai society not accepting reality."** They are campaigning to push forward a bill that would end the criminalization of their



work, something that they knew had successfully been done in developed and democratic countries. In a Buddhist Society, but are known worldwide for its rampant sex-tourisms and sex industry, however, Thai elites and the ruling class are still largely conservative or at least wish to portray a front that Thailand and Thai people have high moral standards that can never accept prostitution to be legal. The women at Empower think this "idealistic moral high ground" is imaginative as the elites themselves could not live up to it, being some of the most frequent patrons in using the services of the working women themselves. The moral high ground is, at best, an excuse for the corrupted officials and Thai elites to use as a tool to maintain the status quo of the parasitic system that feeds on the working women. The women have described how many times they have tried to lobby with political parties that publicly agreed with the de-criminalization of sex work; however, when push came to shove, they were told that the bill would have to take a back-seat to more important bills that were given higher priority. Although both parties are two of the parties that hold the most number of MP seats in parliament, the women felt that their needs and security would once again be the last place on a list of priorities, a feeling that they have always felt as if they are at the bottom rung of the Thai pyramid and so the last to get anything. They felt that their plight had become a political agenda that no political parties dared to be brave enough to lead in fear of political backlash or strong resistance from the powerful conservatives, especially those who are pulling the strings behind closed doors in Thailand.

The highest wish of the women at Empower for the future is to see a motion for a bill to decriminalize sex work to be put forward in the Thai parliament. Although not hopeful that it will pass anytime soon, Empower thinks that it is a first step for Thailand to get serious and really discuss, talk, and even debate the issue of sex workers' rights publicly for a change. They said that if this happens, it would be a historic win for the working women of Thailand- something that they have always been told would be impossible to achieve as the people in power will never stop this flow of money to the men and women upstairs.

#### How do the Women at Empower See and Define Corruption?

When asked whether the women are involved in corruption, they explicitly stated again that they are unwilling accomplices in a corruption system where they have no say and are being outright exploited.

*"We are not wrong. It is the law that is wrong. It is the law that forced us to be illegal workers! The power that the authority used to criminalize us, therefore, is unjust. We do not pay these bribe money out of our own free will, and we have absolutely zero power to negotiate. We have no choice but have to pay because if we don't pay, we will be intimidated to the point where we can not do our work. These unfair practices have become normalized because the law allows the authority to discriminate, violate and take advantage of us. The Prevention and Suppression of Prostitution Act (1996) is a law that violates human rights. When this act was drafted, it wasn't based upon the principles of human rights but rather on the mentality of the need to control, suppress and criminalize sex work. Based on this mentality, sex workers, therefore, are looked down upon by society and are treated as criminals and offenders, which is wrong",* summarized by Miss Chatchalawan.

Miss Chatchalawan then went onto say: *"We were told that the de-criminalization act that Empower is campaigning will never be able to materialize because the extent of corruption is so large, and ending it will cut the artery of the money supply to certain groups of people. We know the huge amount of money involved in this corruption and there is some sort of hidden power that we can not even see or touch. This hidden power is scarier than those conservatives who are against us on the grounds of family institutions and children. Sometimes, we don't even know who we are fighting with. The police officers often tell us that they actually don't want to criminalize and exploit us. If that is the case, who are we paying? and where does all this money go? So, whose artery are we cutting exactly? We don't even know who it is that we are fighting and facing with."*



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"Can Do" has a record and history by a group of sex workers from Bangkok  
It begins in 2004 when we started to provide our experience and knowledge  
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"Can Do" is a great place to help you. You can get a job in the field,  
get a job in the field, get a job in the field.

It's also a working model of an employment program with the best  
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For more information, please contact us at the office and we will  
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