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Focusing on the child, not the prostitute: shifting the emphasis in accounts of child prostitution

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FOCUSING ON THE CHILD, NOT THE PROSTITUTE: SHIFTING THE EMPHASIS IN ACCOUNTS OF CHILD PROSTITUTION

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Abstract: Most media accounts of child prostitution rely on brief vignettes describing in detail the abuse endured by children who sell sex. In contrast, ethnographic studies look more holistically at these children, discussing their families, their social and economic situation and their lives before, during and after prostitution. This article will compare the various ways of portraying these children, arguing that in focusing so much on selling sex, the children's lives away from prostitution are overlooked.

Introduction

Child prostitutes are usually portrayed as the most pitiful and victimized of all sex workers. For them, there can be no discussions about force or choice, agency or empowerment; they are simply abused and irrevocably damaged by their experiences. Prostitution steals their childhood, betrays their innocence and ruins the rest of their lives. This overwhelming emphasis on abuse and sexual degradation obscures other equally important aspects of their lives, however, in particular the complex set of familial and social relationships and responsibilities that are often of greater importance to these children than the intermittent sex work they perform. Furthermore, those whom researchers label as "child prostitutes" may themselves only see prostitution as a small, and not particularly important, part of their identity. In this article, I will look at several studies of child prostitution in Thailand, including my own ethnographic work among children who, while admitting to exchanging sex for money and other goods with

Western men, utterly rejected the term prostitution and saw themselves primarily as dutiful daughters, sisters and friends.

Discourses and Silences

Concerns about child prostitution in Asia first gained widespread international attention in the early 1990s when it was revealed that Western and Japanese men were traveling to Thailand and the Philippines specifically to buy sex from children. The subsequent international outcry and calls for action were loud and sustained and spawned a number of dedicated non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as governmental and inter-governmental initiatives, set up to combat the problem (Montgomery, 2001a). There quickly became an agreed angle on the story of children who worked as prostitutes and the narratives that were established by the media and campaigning groups tended to follow a reliable pattern of young Thai girls being tricked into leaving home, or sold by impoverished parents into a brothel, where they were repeatedly raped or terrorized into servicing many foreign clients a night, before being rescued by a charitable organization, only to be discovered to be suffering from HIV (Montgomery, 2001a; Murray, 2006). On the few occasions their Western clients were caught, they simply bribed their way out, or jumped bail and left the country (Montgomery, 2010).

There was some evidence for these claims, although systematic investigation was rare (for a notable exception see O'Connell Davidson, 2005). Children were tricked or trafficked from neighboring countries, especially China and Burma, and girls from Thailand's socially and economically marginalized hill tribes were especially vulnerable (Hantrakul, 1983; Asia Watch, 1993; Boonchalaksi and Guest, 1994). Other children were sold or debt-bonded by their parents into brothels where they were forced to stay until they had repaid the advances taken out on them (Muecke, 1992; O'Connell Davidson, 2005). The spread of HIV/AIDS was also a serious concern and children, whose bodies were not always

able to cope with penetration by adults, were at particular risk of infection through tearing (see Willis & Levy, 2002 for a full discussion of the health risks associated with child prostitution).

It is not surprising that the concept of child prostitution in general, and child sex tourism in particular, provoked a visceral horror. This was reinforced by its iconography: the back view of a small Asian child holding the hand of a much older, larger man; the young girl sitting alone on a chair sobbing to the camera sometimes, although not always, with her face obscured; the group of slim young boys lying on a beach next to a gross Westerner (for a discussion of such images see Suwanmoli, 1998; Montgomery, 2001a; Fordham, 2005; Murray, 2006). The abuse of children was bad enough but overlaid with the crass commercialism of tourism and the disjuncture between morality-free hedonism and the desperation and misery of the children, these images and their accompanying stories allowed for no possible reaction except shock, disgust and outrage.

However, this paradigm of victimhood and abuse effectively closed off other areas of research and analysis. While debates over adult prostitution provoked discussions over terminology, levels of control, and the nature of sex work performed, most activists argued that discussions of agency could not, and should not, apply to children in these circumstances. One document, written for the UK's Save the Children, for example, claimed, "…wherever possible the terms 'child prostitute' and 'child prostitution' have been avoided, as they imply a sense of decision and control on behalf of the child. All children under the age of 18 who are in prostitution are considered, *de facto*, to be sexually exploited" (Ireland, 1993, p. 3).

Obviously, the phrase "child sex worker", in a context of sex tourism, was a deeply troubling one, implying that the selling of sex by children was a legitimate way of earning money and ignoring the obvious, and very large, power imbalances between

children and adults and the vast disparities in social, structural, political and economic resources between prostitute and client. It overlooked the often-abject poverty of the children and their families and their marginalization in the Thai political economy. Yet framing the discussion only in terms of victimhood and exploitation made it very hard to analyze these children's lives through a different lens and to look at their coping strategies or the resilience they showed. It also made it hard to talk about or understand children's, and their families, own views and thoughts on what they did.

The particular accounts of child prostitution that generated so much attention in the early 1990s were very successful in raising awareness of the problem, producing outrage and calls for action but they also helped impose a straitjacket on portrayals of child prostitution, which continue to have important implications for the ways in which the subject has been understood ever since. Child prostitution and child sex tourism have, in relation to Southeast Asia at least, become synonymous. Almost all discussions of child prostitution in Thailand refer not to child prostitution in general but to the use of child prostitutes by foreigners. This is despite the fact that the majority of young prostitutes are not found in the tourist bars of Bangkok, Pattaya or Phuket but in the brothels of rural Thailand or the back streets of Bangkok.

Life in such brothels can be extremely harsh and abusive and there are several documented cases of such places burning down, killing the girls inside who have been chained up to prevent escape (Rattachumpoth, 1994; Sakhon, 1994). These brothels do not, however, cater for tourists and children with Western clients do not usually work in these places (Black, 1994). In the slums round the port area of Bangkok and on the Burmese border where there is a large population of transient, undocumented laborers from neighboring countries, child prostitution flourishes, often with the connivance of the police (Asia Watch, 1993; Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2008). The vast majority of

clients of these child prostitutes are local men, not because they are more depraved than Westerners, but because it is often much cheaper than to have sex with a child with an adult woman. Judith Ennew has cogently argued that:

> Children are not necessarily at the high price range of prostitution as something exotic and hard to find. Often they are the cheapest ... they are sought out by the most poor and marginalized as something they can have power over. They do not know the price of their own sexuality and will sell themselves for a cigarette...The attraction of children [for the very poor] may be simply that they are social failures and that the child's social status and small size provides a means of exercising power which is otherwise not available to them (1986, p. 83).

As well as focusing almost exclusively on foreigners, the strictness of the parameters of the narrative obscured much of the reality of children's experience. Although most media stories apparently emphasized the girls individuality by giving her a name (or a pseudonym), were published with a picture and relied on humanizing details to carry the human interest angle, in fact they adhered to a strict, stereotypical pattern which allowed no room for nuance or personality. Nothing was told of the child's home life, her relationships with her parents or friends or her daily life before prostitution. Poverty was usually given as the root cause of her pathway into prostitution but parental indifference, or sometimes greed, were also listed as factors. Having become a prostitute the emphasis was placed, sometimes quite pruriently, on the acts she had to perform, how often and with whom, and her path out of prostitution was usually one of degradation, illness, abuse or death. Either she contracted HIV and would therefore soon be dead or, in the words of one campaigner, as good as. "When boys and girls have been forced to receive several customers a night seven days a week, they will be so traumatized that very little can be done to

help them resume anything like a normal life" (O'Grady, 1992, p. 1).

If such tales said little about the children themselves, they suggested something more unsettling about media and public attitudes towards child sex. As Maggie Black has written, "There is, for good or bad, a public appetite for information, particularly of the most sensational kind, which confers a special commodity status on the subject of 'child sex'" (1995, p. 6). While supposedly expressing a desire to help child prostitutes, the sensational and sometimes titillating ways in which child prostitution was reported suggested that behind the outrage there was also voyeurism and prurience. Reading about the sexual exploitation of children, especially when they were overseas, and safely distanced, allowed the reader the opportunity for satisfactory outrage while also being able to pore over the details of the crime. One of the most obvious examples of such ambivalence came, perhaps surprisingly, from feminist magazine *Ms*., which in 1999 reported on the case of an Australian man who was prosecuted for abusing, and photographing, a 12-year-old girl and her 6-year-old sister. He was caught having taken the photographs to be developed. The journalist reported that the director of an NGO she was interviewing

> … opens a box and flips through bundles of photographs that document physical abuse suffered by young girls in Thailand's sex trade. He hands me a series of a Burmese girl covered with swollen bruises and slash marks formed into oozing scabs. Next he offers me a picture of a wasting young AIDS victim, reduced to a canvas of skin stretched across her skeletal frame. "This AIDS disease makes everything more crisis," he says. Finally he locates the pictures taken by the Australian. The children, tears streaming down their cheeks, perform oral sex on the foreigner as he photographs them. In another photo, he has stuck a banknote in the younger girl's vagina. And then

> there's one where her sister is face down with her arms handcuffed behind her back and her legs forced open.
>
> I see the delicate beauty of the two moon-shaped faces with translucent skin. I see fear in their eyes. The 12-year-old has her hair pulled into a ponytail and wears a gingham dress with puffed sleeves. The 6-year-old stares out from underneath long bangs and straight black hair that curves below her chin. Her head reaches only as high as her older sister's thin shoulder (Rogers, 1999).

In this, as in so many other instances, the reader was told nothing about the girls involved other than the details of the abuse they suffered. The emphasis on faces and body parts was supposed to bring home the horror of the abuse but it also objectified the girls to a worrying extent. Were such details really necessary to raise awareness or create empathy or did they also allow the reader to experience a vicarious thrill?

Ethnographic Studies of Child Prostitution

In contrast to the media and NGO reports, studies of child prostitution by academics, especially by anthropologists, revealed very different patterns and a much more complex picture of the motivations and experiences of girls who worked as prostitutes. One of the first articles to look at the social, cultural and economic background of prostitution in Thailand was Marjorie Muecke's 1992 article, *Mother sold food, daughter sells her body*. She argued that prostitution mapped easily onto long-standing patterns in Thai culture, most importantly the cultural premium placed on girls supporting their families. While previous generations would have done this by selling food or through other forms of street trading, the contemporary climate pushed them into more lucrative sex work. These young women remained dutiful daughters however, sending home remittances to their families and remaining the financial lynchpin of their families. Muecke observes that,

> in Northern villages, remittances from prostitutes often mean that parents and siblings do not have to work in the dry season, and have to plant only one rice crop a year. The labor of a daughter-sister who prostitutes herself can spare her family from work as well as provide them with otherwise unattainable consumer goods. Thus prostitutes invest heavily in the conservation of their families and homes. In doing so, they carry out traditional obligations of women to take care of aging parents and younger siblings (Muecke, 1992, p. 897).

In Muecke's account, not only did parents condone and encourage their daughters' work as prostitutes, but so did the local Buddhist clergy, who were happy to accept donations to the temple from these women, thereby "laundering" the money that was "impurely" obtained through prostitution. The women Muecke interviewed gave a variety of reasons why they worked as prostitutes but never claimed to have been deceived or trafficked into prostitution. Both parents and children were aware of what they were expected to do and while some girls resented it, they nevertheless continued to go into sex work. Equally important was the fact that several of the women that Muecke interviewed had returned to their villages after they had worked as prostitutes. Instead of being so traumatized by sex work that they had no future, they had in fact returned in their mid 20s, after 10 years or so working as a prostitute. If they were successful, had sent money home regularly and provided houses and consumer goods for their parents, they were welcomed. It was only those who failed to send money home or were unsuccessful financially that were stigmatized as selfish, thereby suggesting that prostitution itself was not considered morally indefensible or even inherently corrupting to teenage girls. It was the lack of success as a prostitute that was negatively viewed.

More recently and from a different theoretical perspective – that of behavioral ecology - Lisa Rende Taylor comes to very similar

conclusions (2005). She looks in particular at which children in any family are more likely to become prostitutes. The oldest daughter in Thai families has long taken on heavy responsibilities around the house as the principle caregiver for younger siblings. Rende Taylor claims that because her work is so valuable at home, first-born girls are less likely to enter sex work, while their younger sisters, especially last-born girls, are at much greater risk. She makes the point that it is not poverty or lack of education *per se* that affects the likelihood of girls becoming prostitutes but family structures and the order in which girls are born that is important. This conclusion suggests once more that neither parental ignorance nor deceit are as widespread as has been assumed.

Rende Taylor also tackles the issue of what happens to children once they leave prostitution. While Muecke was writing at a time when the full impact of AIDS had yet to be known, Rende Taylor points out that although HIV infection rates are indeed tragically high in certain Northern Thai provinces, not all child prostitutes become infected. There is a life for children after prostitution, and those who can save enough money or who return to their home villages are not necessarily stigmatized by their neighbors or traumatized by their experiences. They can still marry, have children, and settle back into their communities. Their lives are not irredeemably ruined by prostitution, even though Rende Taylor acknowledges that prostitution can be a very hazardous form of labor. However, the degrees of hazard also depend of the type of establishment in which the girls work, the control they have over their working conditions and whether or not they have been trafficked.

> Most commercial sex work in Thailand does not typically involve streetwalking, beatings by pimps, or scuffling with deviant customers, nor does most involve trafficking. Commercial sex workers in the seediest brothels likely do not get to exercise any choice in their clients and work in

> extremely hazardous conditions, but many Thai commercial sex workers work in cafes, karaoke bars, and massage parlors, where they do have the freedom to choose and reject clients (Taylor, 2005, p. 417).

As Rende Taylor goes on to argue, even trafficking and debt bondage, which do pose much greater risks to girls, are decreasing as migratory networks grow and the risks are becoming better known.

Like the women interviewed by Muecke, some girls justify prostitution on the grounds that it is the least harmful out of a series of bad options. She notes that, "The parents here say, 'The problem isn't that our daughter sells her body (*khai tua*), it's that we have no food to eat" (Taylor, 2005, p. 416). Others she interviewed admitted that there are aspects of sex work that they like, such as the woman who noted, "I had a very good income, worked short hours, indoors, it wasn't hot, I could shop with my friends during the day, and my skin stayed white. I don't really think it was bad" (Taylor, 2005, p. 416). As I will go on to argue about my own informants, this is an aspect of child prostitutes' lives that is often unexplored. Certainly prostitution does pose risks but it may also be seen as easier (and certainly better paid) work than factory or agricultural labor.

The importance of these two studies lies in the fact that they present a holistic picture of the children's lives. These are children with parents, siblings and friends, whose actions have an impact on those around them. They are vital family members, necessary for the support and survival of their parents and communities. Sex work is only one aspect of their identity and in depicting them solely through their income-earning activities, their other roles are easily overlooked. The child prostitute of popular imagination is alone and betrayed, passively awaiting rescue. She has no life before prostitution and none afterwards. Yet these studies show that girls do leave prostitution, sometimes voluntarily when they

have made money and sometimes when they have had enough and give up. They can then return to their home villages without too great a stigma. Indeed, Rende Taylor suggests that working as a prostitute and therefore having money may actually increase their desirability as marriage partners.

Baan Nua

The findings of both these articles resonate entirely with my own research. I too have conducted ethnographic fieldwork, albeit based in a different geographical area and using different methods, among young prostitutes in Thailand (Montgomery, 2001a; Montgomery, 2007). Although the children I worked with were younger than in the other studies, they too talked of familial obligations as a way of making sense of prostitution. I undertook ethnographic fieldwork in a small slum community, which I have called Baan Nua, situated on the edge of a larger tourist resort in Thailand (for a full discussion of methods and ethical dilemmas, as well as issues of access see Montgomery, 2007). It was a poor community that survived through the prostitution of some of its children. The children's clients were exclusively Western and their parents were well aware of, and even encouraged, what they did. There were 65 children in Baan Nua, around 35 of whom worked regularly or occasionally as prostitutes; this number included both boys and girls aged between six and fourteen. I spent fifteen months doing this research, interviewing the children, gathering life histories and acting as a participant observer in their lives.

The people of Baan Nua had migrated to this resort approximately fifteen years earlier, to look for work in the informal economy, and had put up makeshift houses made out of corrugated iron and scrap wood. It was a poor community without running water and only intermittent electricity, which the inhabitants patched into illegally from the supply of a local supermarket. The number of households fluctuated throughout the year as partners changed, children moved out or houses collapsed. One of the most striking facts about the

children in Baan Nua was that they lived with their parents. In contrast to the image presented in the media, they had not been trafficked, debt bonded or tricked and were therefore technically able to exercise a certain amount of control over their clients. There was no formal organization for prostitution in Baan Nua; children entered it through the encouragement of friends or older siblings. The clients of these children were from a variety of European countries with three in particular having the most contact with the children. These three men had been visiting Baan Nua for many years and had formed relationships with many of the families. The men often sent money when they were not in the country, or paid for large, finite-cost projects such as rebuilding houses or paying off debts.

For the children, the length of time that the men had been coming to them, and the help they had given them meant that they could be classified as friends rather than as clients. They never viewed time spent with these clients as work. Instead they would say that their "guests" were in town or that they were "visiting friends" and while sex and money may have been exchanged, these were claimed as incidental to wider ties of friendship and obligation. One of the ways this was made easier for them was that there was no fixed rate for prostitution. The men paid them after sex, but this was given as a gift or a tip, never as a direct payment for services rendered (see Cohen, 1982 for a discussion of the "incomplete commercialization" of prostitute/client relationships in Thailand; also ten Brummelhuis, 1993; Black, 1994). The sums of money they received were relatively substantial; often enough to re-roof family houses or buy televisions or stereos. The children could then claim that this money was proof of their guests' regard for them and a sign of friendship rather than prostitution. The fact that they were sometimes given money when they had not exchanged sex meant that this claim was easier to substantiate.

Viewing these clients as friends also made it easier to ignore issues surrounding safe sex. Although pregnancy and sexually transmitted

diseases were the two of the most obvious physical dangers of child prostitution, the children took no steps to avoid them. Both the Pill and condoms were readily available over the counter in pharmacies and even supermarkets in the city; but they were rarely used. Cost was one consideration but more important was the fact that most of the children were very fatalistic about both pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. They argued that if it was their fate to get pregnant or become infected they would and that condoms were of limited use (see Montgomery, 2001b for a fuller discussion of these issues and Fordham, 2006 for an examination of Thai views on risk and AIDs prevention). Two children also argued that not taking precautions showed a faith that their "friends" would look after them if pregnant. They also hoped that they might be able to use pregnancy as a bargaining chip.

The children justified visiting these "friends" because it was by doing so they raised enough money to support their families and fulfill their perceived filial obligations. Whereas the generalized pattern in Western societies is that parents support their children and, if necessary, sacrifice for them, in Thailand, the reverse is true and the concept of filial duty and support of parents is a fundamental one throughout Thai society (Mulder, 1979; Tantiwiramanond & Pandey, 1987). Although this has been gradually changing and the emergence of a Westernized Thai middle-class has transformed understandings of the family and of parent/child relations, in more rural areas, or those away from the metropolitan centre, children's obligations to their parents remain strong and are highly valued (see Mahoney, 2010 for a discussion of recent transformations among the Thai middle-classes regarding notions of reciprocity and familial obligation).

As Tantiwiramanond and Pandey have argued, "according to the Thai Buddhist moral scale, parents are entitled to be "moral creditors' … because of their presumably self-sacrificing labour of bearing and rearing children... while children are 'moral debtors'. Children are obliged to express their gratitude by serving and

obeying their parents till the end of their lives" (Tantiwiramanond & Pandey, 1987, p. 134). It is seen as a child's duty to provide financial support to their parents as soon as they are able and to repay the care that has been given them by their parents. This may take the form of working on the family farm, caring for parents as they get older, or working in a factory and sending back remittances (Mills, 1999; van Esterik, 2000). In contemporary Thailand it may also mean working as a prostitute and supporting the family through sex work (Muecke, 1992).

The ideal of family obligation and support remained strong in Baan Nua and a powerful mitigating factor for many of the children was that their income supported their parents. The children in Baan Nua felt that by earning money for their parents and keeping the family together they were acting in socially sanctioned roles as dutiful daughters and sons and that prostituting themselves with the "right" intentions meant that there was little moral opprobrium on what they did. In the children's own analysis prostitution was not primarily about selling sex but concerned the maintenance of social relationships and the fulfillment of filial obligations. In all the conversations I had with the children about what they did and their feelings about it, it was this point to which they kept referring. Prostitution was not necessarily a pleasant thing but done with the very best of intentions: as one 12-year-old informant put it, "it's only my body but this is my family" (Montgomery, 2001a, p. 84).

The majority of the children had been born in Baan Nua, referred to it as home, and knew of no other way of life. They had almost no contact with relatives outside Baan Nua and communication with the wider world was limited to a few children from neighboring slums and the workers from a local church-based group. Kinship relations and community obligations took on a special significance and the concepts of gratitude and obedience towards parents were taken seriously. The children's lives were centered on the notion of reciprocal relationships and the

obligations that they had to others and that others had to them. It was telling that although they would accept almost all potential clients, the children disliked and were very critical of those men who refused to enter into longer-term relationships with them, or who simply paid for sex and left, failing to respond to subsequent requests for help (Montgomery, 2007). By fulfilling filial duties while earning money for their parents and creating new relationships with the potential for future help by exchanging sex with clients, the sexual transaction could be taken out of the world of economics and re-categorized as a realization of social obligations. Prostitution became a way of turning the unacceptable into the acceptable, the immoral into the moral.

Another point to note is that while outsiders tend to see a child selling sex as the ultimate horror and one that must be avoided at all costs, the children themselves often viewed it as yet another hazard to be negotiated in a life full of difficulties and poverty. Faced with disease, stigma and a deprived environment, all the options were bleak, and some were worse than others. With so few opportunities to change their lives, and with the alternatives to prostitution so limited, it was not surprising that children claimed to choose it above other options. It is a controversial point to make but prostitution was not the worst, or most feared, option open to these children.

As I have argued elsewhere (Montgomery, 2008), children in Baan Nua turned to prostitution only after they had tried a variety of other jobs such as scavenging, working in sweat shops or begging. Prostitution paid them considerably more than these jobs and they perceived it as less physically demanding. Compared with the wages other work brought in, prostitution was relatively well paid. Younger children who scavenged in a nearby garbage dump could expect to earn twenty baht (U.S. $0.80[2]) for a full day of work, whereas one boy earned between 750 and 3000 *baht* (U.S. $30-120) a month as a prostitute while another girl earned around 2000 *baht* (U.S. $80) a month pimping other children from Baan Nua to

clients. In contrast, on a good day in the tourist season, children could make up to 500 *baht* (U.S. $20) by begging, but during the rainy season, when there were fewer tourists, they could sometimes come back with nothing. Begging also brought with it the risks of being arrested by the police or having their money stolen by older street children. Scavenging had further drawbacks and children did not like to do it because of their fear about rats and concerns that they would hurt themselves on broken glass or metal on the dump.

While they never claimed to like prostitution (and would sometimes reproach me when I asked directly about it, saying "why do you want to talk about such ugly things?"), they often described "having guests" to me as better and easier than other jobs they had tried and, although they seemed willfully ignorant of the threats of pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases, they argued that prostitution gave them access to benefits such as staying in good hotels or apartments, eating well and being given large, occasional payments. Most importantly it was seen as a means to an end and there was a satisfaction in being able to fulfill filial obligations. After one client's visit, when he left a large gift for her, one of the girls told me that she was able to buy her mother a new roof. "I built it all by myself" she told me proudly. She had repaid some of the filial obligations that, as a daughter, she owed her mother and was able to derive a great deal of satisfaction from doing this.

Discussion and Conclusions

It needs to be emphasized that despite these children's interpretations of what they did and why they did it, their views should be treated with some caution. There undoubtedly was a strong sense of duty, which helped the children to explain and understand prostitution and allowed them to view it in culturally acceptable ways. This is not, however to condone the situation or to argue that child prostitution is an intrinsic part of Thai culture.

One of the most important driving forces for these children was undoubtedly their poverty and their socioeconomic marginalization. Yet poverty does not always produce prostitution and I would argue that it was the combination of culturally sanctioned filial obligations and extreme poverty that pushed the children into sex work as well as into claiming some choice and agency. Certainly the expectation of reciprocity was often ambiguous. Both parents and children anticipated some sort of mutual indebtedness and obligation, but it could be manipulated or misunderstood to the extent that neither side was clear about exactly what they had to do. I asked one mother, who regularly sent her 8-year-old son to clients, why she allowed him to go. She replied, "I am his mother. If I ask my son to make money for me, he will go. I don't send him [out to earn money], he wants to go for me".

On the other hand, one of the youngest children in my survey told me, "I don't want to go with foreigners, but my grandmother asks me to so I feel I must." Both parents and children were working within the same cultural framework of reciprocity, but it was clear that there was uncertainty on both sides. Furthermore, it was obvious that only rarely was the money actually used for the good of the family. Occasionally, a new roof would be put on the house, or a television bought but generally mothers seemed to spend the money on gambling or drinking. Yet I never heard any children comment on this, or criticize their parents. Rather children consistently spoke of their pride in being to help their parents. They had seen for themselves that the family was in difficulties and they wanted to help, even if this help appeared to do nothing to alleviate their family's problems.

The children's attitudes towards safe sex, both in terms of contraception and the prevention of diseases, was also very problematic and ran counter to their claims of agency and having the ability to negotiate. While they claimed to know about HIV and AIDS, they also assumed precautions to be largely irrelevant – if it

was their fate to become infected there was nothing they could do about it. Similarly when I asked several of the older girls if they were worried about pregnancy, none believed that they had any control over it. If it was their fate to be pregnant, then it would happen. None of them was interested in being tested for HIV – indeed what was the point? If they did test positive, they had no access to medical help and they would not insist on condom use. To inform a client of their status or to give up prostitution would mean losing their only source of income.

In their daily lives, other diseases were of greater concern than HIV infections. Many of the children appeared in poor health generally and had open sores on their arms and faces. They regularly complained of suffering from gastro-intestinal diseases. Many were addicted to glue sniffing and appeared to have breathing problems as a consequence. Over half appeared to be underweight or malnourished. I suspected that several suffered from tuberculosis and at least two had measles. It would also be reasonable to suppose that many suffered from sexually transmitted diseases. When one sixteen year old girl was taken to the public hospital, she was found to be suffering from gonorrhea, chlamydia and syphilis. Given that she shared clients with other children in Baan Nua, sexually transmitted diseases must have been endemic. Yet hospital visits were the exception rather than the rule. The people of Baan Nua did not like going to the hospital because they were afraid of being reported for letting their children work as prostitutes or for illegal land use. Hence they relied on pharmacies for medication and only took antibiotics when they could afford them and were in serious pain, rarely finishing a complete course of medication. More often they simply ignored the diseases until they went away or became asymptomatic.

The psychological effects of sex on the children were never discussed. When asked about whether or not she was worried because her son was a prostitute, one woman replied, “It’s just for one hour. What harm can happen to him in one hour?” Even

though a child's body is too small for penetration by an adult and some of the harm done by these men was evident in the bleeding and tearing that occurred during these encounters, this aspect tended to be ignored. It was extremely easy and very tempting to read denial and willful ignorance into such an attitude. For me, such physical evidence seemed proof that these encounters were exploitative and abusive and yet my informants rejected this opinion. Mothers did condemn such acts and did whatever they could to help their children overcome the pain of such encounters. But the understanding of the effects and consequences was very different. Mothers did not see it as psychologically damaging to their children and such occurrences were viewed entirely in a physical, rather than in psychological terms; no one appeared to believe that long-term damage could be inflicted on a child in "just one hour".

Listening to, and analyzing, the children's responses to prostitution poses a large number of problems, the most significant being the clash between the researcher and the children's views on what constitutes prostitution and its effects. One easy way out of this dilemma is to argue that the children are victims of false consciousness and are unable to see their own oppression, or, if they are aware of their exploitation, refuse to acknowledge it. Their justifications and rationalizations of prostitution, as well as their fatalism about their reproductive health, did not sit comfortably with their continued poverty, their use of drugs, their refusal to discuss any form of safe sex and what, to almost all outsiders' eyes, was abject exploitation. Their rejection of the term "prostitute" could also be seen as a denial of their true feelings and their use of euphemisms, less a strategic way of exerting some control and agency in their lives, and more as a way of refusing to face the unpalatable facts of their existence. Yet I remain unhappy about seeing these children only as victims, exploited by both Western men and their own blindness to their true situation. The children themselves specifically rejected this categorization and although their choices were extremely restricted, they did struggle

to take control and make conscious decisions about their lives. I feel that it is important to believe the children when they talk about their attempts to control certain aspects of their lives as active and informed choices among very limited, and very hard, options.

Perhaps the biggest problem of all with my analysis however is that it foregrounds prostitution in a way that distorts the reality of their lives. The children spent, in fact, very little time working as prostitutes (or talking about it) and even if this category is stretched to mean all the time they spent with their clients, it was still an insignificant part of their days and weeks. They spent the vast majority of their time in Baan Nua, playing with friends, attending classes in the makeshift school that the local church-based group had set up, playing handheld computer games or talking to me. Indeed most of my best interviews with the girls were done not by sitting down with a notebook and interviewing them but by letting them play with my hair, paint my finger nails and discussing my love life with them and vice versa. One of the reasons that I found it more difficult to talk to the boys rather than the girls was not only that they found it harder to talk about prostitution but because it was not as important to them as it was to me. Much more salient to them was the fact that I could not play soccer and knew very little about the British soccer stars (especially those who played for Manchester United) who were their most intense subjects of interest. They remained very much children, often getting bored or irritated with me or laughing at my attempts to play their games or speak their language, sometimes being quite spiteful and sometimes very affectionate.

It remains hard to write about these children because I am the one calling them prostitutes, analyzing their lives in terms of prostitution and giving it a significance that it did not necessarily have for them. Asking children slightly esoteric questions about their identities is always problematic and I rarely attempted it, but if they had been able to answer such questions, I suspect they would have replied that they were sons and daughters, sisters and

friends, residents of Baan Nua, Buddhists, Thai, supporters of the King and Queen, followers of David Beckham etc. If they mentioned prostitution ("having guests") as part of their identity, it would, I am sure, have come down very low on their scale of priorities. And yet to almost everyone else, the only important fact about them was that they sometimes exchanged sex for money.

Discussing these children remains fraught with difficulties. On the one hand, I do not wish to justify child prostitution or offer any sort of excuses for their clients. Regardless of the children's feelings and understandings, the Western men that went to Baan Nua clearly knew that what they were doing was wrong and that they were taking advantage of the children's poverty and vulnerabilities to fulfill their own desires, whatever the consequences. Similarly, the campaigning groups that agitated for the prosecution of these men and called for an end to all forms of child prostitution were motivated by the best of intentions and a justified anger. These children undoubtedly needed and deserved help and support, but they did not need to be written off as irreparably damaged and without hope. They did not necessarily have their childhood stolen by prostitution, as other studies have shown that they could go on to lead perfectly normal, productive lives, marrying and spending the rest of their lives within their communities. My intention in this article has not been to condone child prostitution but to celebrate these children's resilience and admire their strong sense of obligation to their families and to argue that labeling and analyzing them only as prostitutes, and not also as children, does them a further disservice.

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[2] One U.S. dollar could be exchanged for 25 Thai *baht* at the time of my research.