

The Spirit Of A Fighter —Women And Prostitution In Thailand

ANY account of the position of women in Thailand must mention Hinayana Buddhism which, over the past 700 years, has been exerting a powerful influence on 95 percent of the population. Buddhists believe that one's life is a link in a chain of lives, each conditioned by volitional acts committed in previous existences. *Karma* is thus believed to determine sex as well. Being born a woman in this life means that the woman has an inadequate store of merit in her previous lives.

Buddhists aspire to attain perfection through Nirvana, an immutable state unconditioned by desire, suffering or further rebirth. The most efficient way to attain it is to become a *bhikku*, a man who enters the Buddhist order of monkhood. He abandons lay life, and stays in a monastery where he abides by 227 precepts.; A *bhikkuni*, the female equivalent of a *bhikku*, has to follow 311 precepts according to the regulation, but this tradition lapsed into obscurity after about 300 years of practice. The Buddha was reluctant to allow women to enter the Buddhist order and was recorded as having said: "If, Ananda, women had not received permission to go out from household life and enter the homeless state under the doctrine and discipline proclaimed by the Tathagata, then would the pure religion, Ananda, have lasted long, the good law would have stood fast for 1,000 years. But since, Ananda, women have now received that permission, the good law will now stand fast for only 500 years." Also, a *bhikkuni*, even if she has 100 years of religious activity to her credit, must pay respect to a *bhikku* who has just joined a day ago. Women, says the Buddha, are the enemies of purification efforts.

Thus women are deprived of the most efficient way of altering one's balance of merit and improving one's status in the religious hierarchy. Their allocated religious roles consist of providing monastic necessities to men and relieving them from anxiety regarding worldly matters during their monkhood. The ordination of a son is believed to redeem a mother's demerit and uplift her moral integrity. A sonless mother is naturally

Despite the differences between the situation in Thailand and in India, we feel that there are important similarities between the social environment out of which prostitution arises in the two countries. In view of the prevalent tendency of middle class people to display self righteous indignation and demand a ban on prostitution, or the "reform and re-habilitation" of prostitutes in the name of morality, we feel it is important to view the profession from the point of view of the women who practise it. This article attempts to move in that direction.

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deprived of this opportunity.

In everyday life, there are customs which attribute defilement to the female sex. A woman's clothes should not be washed together with those of a man, neither should they be hung in areas where a man might pass below. A woman is generally not allowed to touch sacred Buddha images. Since female presence is a threat to monkhood, women had no access to education at the time when it was conducted in monasteries. Monasteries remained centres of basic education until nationwide primary education was made compulsory regardless of sex in 1921. However the lack of formal schools and teachers, especially in rural areas, has kept intact the significant role of monasteries in education. It is clear that as between a boy and a girl of a poor rural family, the boy is endowed with more access to education. Apart from the fact that a daughter is less beneficial to parents in religious order, she can do many more things to embarrass the family. Having a daughter born in the family is even compared to having a toilet room built in front of the house, where great caution will be needed to keep it clean and odourless.

Legislative History

The revised legal code of 1805 did not give the right to a woman having no protection to lodge a complaint against a

man who molested her. While this code absolutely barred women from sexual adventure both before and after marriage, it endorsed polygamy. Wives were divided into three categories—the principal wife, the minor wife who was married to an already married man, and the slave wife. A man was endowed with the right to sell or give away or pawn his wife without her consent. The rights of parents to sell their children and of a husband to sell his wives were abolished only in 1905.

Only members of wealthy classes could afford to take advantage of the polygamy law. The practice was seen as a sign of prosperity, mystical power and magical virility. In 1935 monogamy was made the only legal marriage contract. Even today a large number of men still register their marriages with different women one at a time. Although the subsequent registrations can be declared null and void, the culprit cannot be penalised. All the children conceived by a man can be recognised as legitimate, regardless of the mother, if he chooses to register them. This shows that the polygamous legacy- is very much alive. Culturally, Thai society flatters men for their promiscuity and polygamy. Articles on the subject in women's magazines always advise women to tolerate the situation and accommodate themselves to it.

On the other hand, old sayings such as “Don’t let more than one man gain access to your body” are constantly drummed into the heads of women, especially those of the middle class. Even among the lower economic classes, premarital sexual relationships or female promiscuity are certainly not encouraged or accepted. With the rising power of middle class values in many spheres of life, the working class women’s sexuality is more and more defined and shaped by middle class values.

Buddhism determines implicitly, if not explicitly, the religious and moral inferiority of women which has created concrete socio economic disadvantages..Buddha neither condemned nor condoned polygamy. However he did forbid sexual relationships with wives of other men. This teaching is open to the interpretation that as long as the woman is not a wife of somebody, it is not a demerit to have a sexual relationship with her.

From legislative sources before 1905, the year in which slavery was abolished, it appears that prostitutes were recruited from the slave market. In 1909 the monarch, King Chulalongkorn passed an act to prevent venereal diseases. He stated that he was worried about the ever increasing number of prostitutes and the spread of venereal diseases. The sudden growth of prostitution at the time was directly related to the abolition of slavery. A lot of former slave women who had been freed, had become prostitutes. The objectives of the 1909 act were to collect taxes from the prostitutes, to prevent quarrels among clients, and to solve the problems arising from deception of girls and entrapment of them . into prostitution. It demanded that places of prostitution be discreet and it forbade soliciting on the streets.

Under the slavery regime, the only difference between a slave wife and a slave woman who was also acquired on purchase and gave sexual service to her master, was that a slave wife was completely monopolised by her master while a slave woman was only semi monopolised as she would have to entertain other men as well if ordered by

her master. Both were distinguished from the prostitute on the basis that the latter was commonly shared by all men.

Being a wife was and has been related to the woman’s type of sexual relations which is a monopoly type. Culturally, as soon as a woman steps out of the sexual monopoly type relationship she deserves to be labelled a prostitute even though she may have genuine affection for another man, and no money transaction may be involved. Female promiscuity for money is generally better accepted and excused than that for mere pleasure.

Even under the system of monogamous law Thai society still maintains its cultural foundation on a polygamous system. Thus a man who seduces a minor wife or a slave

only one man can rightfully and culturally carry the honourable title of a virtuous wife. It is clear that the financial aspect of prostitution is not so serious as is agreeing to have sexual relations with several men.

Prostitution also came under the personal view of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, former prime minister of Thailand. He thought that it encourages crime and is a threat to the family institution. The fact that he had over a 100 wives was not seen as inconsistent with his contempt for prostitution. Minor wives are considered part of the family institution by most Thais.

In 1960 the Prostitution Prohibition Act made brothels illegal and made prostitution a criminal offence. In 1966 the



Thai bhikkunis

wife is subject to a fine in proportion to her rank. However adulterous wives have to face the same public humiliations regardless of their rank.

It is important to make clear the enormous difference between the status of a minor wife and that of a prostitute. Although both accept money for sexual relations, a minor wife has a better status. According to the Prostitution Prohibition Act, 1960, the act of prostitution is completed if a woman agrees to give sexual services on a regular basis to several men, thus implying that a woman who agrees to give sexual services on a regular basis to

Entertainment Places Act made prostitution flourish in all forms other than in traditional brothels. Whorehouses disguised as entertainment places made some major towns seem merely like vast brothels.

Why Women Migrate

In her 1982 thesis on female migration, Dr Pawadee Tongudai found that women who work in nightclubs, massage parlours, and houses of prostitution earn a monthly average of about 5,000 baht while a large majority of female migrants in other occupations earn less than 840 baht a month. In 1970

although men dominated most of the migration streams, the stream toward the metropolitan area was an important exception. There were less than four men for every five women among the migrants to Bangkok from the, northern and north eastern regions,

Explaining why the women dominated migration flows from these two regions, Dr Pasuk Phongpaichit has elaborated facts and figures from several primary and secondary sources. She went on many field trips to the villages of origin of some of the masseuses she interviewed in Bangkok. All the villages she visited were in the north and the north east. These two regions contain approximately 31 percent of the Thai population who lived below the poverty line calculated according to an international standard by the World Bank survey in 1975-76. The last census taken in 1970 found that the rate of migration had increased by two thirds since the previous count a decade before and that the north east had experienced the largest net outflow of migrants. Dr Pasuk concluded that the reason which the overwhelming majority of girls gave ; as the cause of migration was the desire to find work to alleviate pressing problems of poverty in the family.

The economic incentive is definitely clear. "You are in the wrong business", a masseuse said to an interviewer who earned about 3,000 baht a month, after 15 years of "hooning. With four years of compulsory schooling or none at all, the masseuse knew she would earn ' hardly 500 to 700 baht a month if she turned to other jobs such as domestic service or manual labour. All the masseuses interviewed by Dr Pasuk and her team were regularly sending money to their families. The dependents listed by the 46 women always included their parents and in 18 cases also included their own children. Most claimed to send about one third to one half of their earnings, and the average amount was in the range of 1,000 to 1,000 baht.

I have started by giving a general picture of masseuses whose legal status of "special service women" allowed access

to interviewers. These masseuses, however, represent only a minority of women engaged in prostitution. Within the system all kinds of prostitutes are plying their trade. At the top end of the scale is the high class prostitute who rarely or never comes on to the open market, being passed exclusively among the wealthy. Her income might exceed the income of masseuses in general. Below her are a certain number of women working, some in massage parlours, some in nightclubs and teahouses. Some stay permanently on call or just come and go around hotels, some establish themselves as independent prostitutes waiting in the streets or coffeeshops. These various kinds of prostitutes cluster around Bangkok and other big towns.

The majority or at least half of the estimated total of 500,000 to 700,000



Thai woman working in the fields

prostitutes in the country, do not work in disguised whorehouses or as independent prostitutes. They work in traditional brothels where small private rooms are provided. Unlike massage parlours or nightclubs which have large neon signs proclaiming the service and the women and exist in the heart of major business and residential districts, these traditional brothels are mostly contained within an enclave, confined to a cluster of backstreets. In my opinion these traditional brothels play a more vital role in the continuation of prostitution in the country. Not only are they more ancient but also they have maintained massive popularity among Thai males of the average middle class and poorer classes. Since their existence is illegal, they are not subject to

the general census or to micro systematic investigation. According to one leading playboy magazine, in 1977 there were 83 brothels operating in Bangkok and 1.554 in provincial areas.

Information gathered from individual brothel goers and the prostitutes working there shows that the women charge from 20 to 80 baht for a pass, and they are likely to keep a third or half from each trick, the rest going to the brothel keeper. In Bangkok and some other big towns, she could probably charge a little more. Although her average income may be as low as 800 baht a month, the range of 300 to 400 baht for domestic servants, 400 to 600 baht for waitresses and small manufacturing factory workers still makes the income attractive enough for young women with little education to enter the profession or to drift from these occupations into it.

Dutiful Daughters

The strongest factor inducing women to enter prostitution seems to be economic but only a certain percentage of a number of poor women take to it. The poorest province, for example, does not send out many women into the prostitution market. A more unbiased view of "economic pressure" is needed to look into the other motives of young women in the profession. Dr Pasuk reckoned that more and more parents tend to push their daughters to work in prostitution establishments and the women feel proud of being dutiful daughters. In some cases the remittances from the daughters had helped parents buy back their agricultural land but in nearly all cases, the money was spent on day to day expenses. Some parents were found spending the money on modern amenities such as furniture, cars, television sets.

Many women said they sent additional lump sums on request to cover special expenditure like medical fees, school fees for siblings or children, and payment for hired labour during the harvest season. Eight of the girls said they had already built a house for their parents in the village, and most of the women aimed to do so before they quit.

A recent seminar estimated that about

10 percent of the prostitute population is deceived and forced into the profession. There are cases in which a woman is promised that she will get a job as a domestic servant or dishwasher in Bangkok, but on her arrival is imprisoned and forced to receive clients. Sometimes agents advance some cash to poor people and when they fail to repay the debt, make them sign a promissory note engaging to send a daughter to work in Bangkok. The practice of parents selling daughters or husbands selling wives, though illegal at present, was legal until the early nineteenth century.

Punishing The Victim

The immediate consequence of prostitution being made a punishable offence was that prostitutes had to keep off the streets, and were obliged to seek protection. Brothels and other sex oriented establishments had to accommodate the system of paying bribes to various officials, thus leading to greater exploitation of the prostitute who became vulnerable as never before to the greed of owners and keepers, pimps, and in particular the police.

The prostitute has to share her income among several parties. About a third to a half of the prostitute's earnings goes to the owner of the establishment who in turn must pay a certain amount to the authorities concerned. If while in business she is so unfortunate as to be arrested on the charge of prostitution, the owner of the establishment will advance the sum of the fine which will be later deducted from her earnings. In the worst situation, where the owner and the pimp are not warned, they just evade arrest and leave the prostitute in the hands of the police.

Independent prostitutes have been worst affected, since they have become most vulnerable to police crackdowns. A high ranking police officer, in his thesis, which remains one of the most valid documents on the subject of curbing prostitution, admitted the corruption among the police. "Some of them even become pimps themselves", said the major colonel.

The actions of the police are supposed



Conversing in a cafeteria

to be against forced prostitution, but the police usually make independent prostitutes the first target group. They know they are hitting the wrong place. Most arrested prostitutes are voluntarily in the profession and would pay anything to obtain their freedom again. They generally pay a sum of 600 baht as unofficial bail money to the police and another sum of 300 baht to the court. Not so long ago, police general Narong Mahanond admitted that the problem of prostitution was a sensitive one since it was connected with certain influential groups. "Often the police can't do anything because they know that the men behind the operation of some brothels are those whose pictures are frequently seen in the newspapers, attending big parties with top ranking policemen or government officials."

This situation leads to a dilemma for the prostitute who has to decide whether or not to run away from the establishment. The advantages of submitting herself to an establishment are evident. She has a place to practise and is generally protected from certain abuses. Yet she has to pay for this protection. Unless the rewards are exceptionally high, she will choose to avoid the brothel and keep her freedom. Every independent prostitute I know takes very good care of herself. She can hold a

health card and visit the clinic as often as she wishes whereas those in an establishment must wait till the scheduled time. Some girls as young as 11 to 14 who have been deceived and are in virtual sexual slavery, are given a VD check too infrequently. The VD check system is primitive and incomplete, and abortion as a form of contraception is widely practised.

A group of 38 women arrested in 1982 from a small traditional brothel in Bangkok said that the most common contraceptive method used there was the controversial Depo Provera injection. If a woman did not stop bleeding after the injection, she would be given some pills to stop the bleeding and would continue receiving clients. This was the only treatment for complications arising from the contraceptive injection. One of the women was so badly infected that she was unable to walk properly but she did not even complain of it till we noticed and asked about it.

Since abortion is still illegal in Thailand, most of the time it is performed in backstreet clinics with all the dangers and complications that sort of operation entails. Some women would go back home and have traditional induced abortions. It goes without saying that only those who survived could tell the fatal tale.

In Dr Thepanom's sample of 1,000 masseuses, 41 percent had VD and 19

percent had had abortions. His study also discovered that a quarter of them were regular users of drugs, most common of which were barbiturates, especially heroin. Alcoholism seems to be a rising trend among those who work in nightclubs and bars.

Generating Fear

Like other measures to curb prostitution, reformatories focus on the prostitute as the first and only, party to be condemned. The so called reform process generally takes a year. Three reform houses, termed institutions of socially handicapped women by the ministry of the interior, operate in the country. Altogether they can accommodate about 1,800 women. Thus they have only token impact on the estimated population of half a million prostitutes. Limited budgets and poor cooperation between the police and the department of public welfare have spared most prostitutes from the institutional reform process.

Though the reform institutions are called vocational schools for adults, the rules regarding contact with outsiders and freedom of movement for the inmates are hardly different from those operative in prisons. The women are strictly forbidden to go outside the reformatory grounds, even to walk on the jetty where a couple of armed guards maintain a 24 hour watch. Cigarette smoking earns ten beatings. Not folding clothes properly rates three. Inmates must kneel and approach on their knees in deference to their teachers and visitors. Letters in and out are censored and some may be thrown away.

Speaking to the women privately is nearly impossible. One has to have a letter from the department of public welfare and even then a teacher or warden is present most of the time. No sewer pumps are permitted to the women and they have to scoop out the toilets with buckets. Only ten baht per day is budgeted for food for each person.

The so called occupational training generally offers weaving footrugs, sewing and weaving, laundry work, bookbinding, beautycare and cooking. Most of the emphasis is placed on housewifery and

housework. Thus after decades the reformatories still equip inmates for nothing better than employment as domestic servants.

Thai labour laws do not consider domestic servants as employees and do not give them even minimal protection. The salaries paid are extremely low. Those women who are still young and have economic problems are invariably attracted to the greater rewards and relative freedom of prostitution. There is little incentive to accept the "decent" but Exploitative occupation for which they are trained.

What then is the hidden agenda of the reform institution? I strongly feel that its ultimate goal is to make the prostitute feel guilty and repentant for the "crime" of being promiscuous. The "moral training conducted by monks and qualified personnel" mentioned in departmental documents seems to be serving this purpose. With heavy emphasis placed on housework and domestic virtues, the reform process only figures as a continuity of social emphasis on feminine virtues and on the primacy of the family. In my opinion these reformatories only serve to control women's sexuality and to perpetuate women's sex roles. They denounce that which is opposed to the essential virtue of a "good" woman—non chastity. The reformatories are clearly controlled by the status quo double standards as regards men's and women's roles. In much the same way as the prison does little to reduce crime at its roots, the impact of the reform institutions on the prevention and solution of the problem of prostitution is nearly nil. The immense success of both prison and reformatory is only in the direction of generating fear. The police know best how to manipulate this fear because a prostitute will do anything to avoid being sent to a reformatory.

Since its establishment in 1960, stories of inmates making a bid for freedom by swimming across the 200 metre wide canal have become legendary amongst the inmates. While some have succeeded, those who are caught face severe punishment. They are beaten and isolated. On November 11, 1981, two inmates escaped with the help of two armed men.

The women "felt suffocated" by the reform process and had written to relatives appealing for help. On November 27, more than 100 inmates went on strike. The uprising was meant to be a massive escape but was quelled by 50 policemen. During the confrontation 10 inmates were injured and required hospital treatment. Press reporters were not allowed to see the women at the hospital. The rebellion received no attention and no concern at all, even from women's groups.

Independent Women

I have little faith in interviewing prostitutes who are under arrest or detention. A man can go to a bar and pay there while a woman cannot do this. When I went to bars and nightclubs alone I was made to feel an intruder, an unwanted guest. Trying to appear like one of the prostitutes was even worse—dishonesty breeds only dishonesty. The deafening noise, the artificial surroundings and forced conversations soon obliged me to abandon the idea of frequenting these places to talk to the women. Access to sex oriented establishments is also very limited for women with or without male company. I could meet with prostitutes who worked in brothels that catered almost exclusively to locals, only when they were arrested. I could see vast differences between the women whom I met when they were under arrest and were forced by circumstances to speak to me, and those that I got to know under other circumstances.

In trying to recount my personal experience of communication with some independent prostitutes, I hope to question the view of the department of public welfare authorities that prostitutes are "mentally subnormal" or "borderline" cases.

I met Noi and Wipa at a police station during one of the worst crackdowns on prostitutes in July 1981. They had not been arrested but had gone to the police station to see two friends who were in jail, and to give them some money. In our brief talk, Noi revealed many details about police corruption. Her independence in her work had made her more vulnerable to police

crack-downs. A few days later, Tew, another independent prostitute working in the same coffeeshop as the other two, phoned me. We arranged to meet and I met a highly sophisticated 26 year old woman. We met a number of times before she left to live with a man in Europe. We still correspond and meet when she comes back on vocations. Tew was married twice, once to a Thai who she found was already married, and then to an American who she found overprotective. She knows only too well from her own experience through marriage and later in prostitution, what place a woman has in Thai society and how she is mistrusted both as a wife and as a prostitute. Out of necessity or deliberate choice, she is now a monogamous wife who has extra-marital relationships for both money and pleasure. Her experiences could easily make her a sex therapist, a source of information about sexual misery and delight in Thai and foreign communities. She brought about a radical step in my thinking and awareness of prostitution.

Noi is also separated from her husband who had another wife under the same roof. She came to Bangkok in 1979 and worked in a garment factory for over a year. Her salary of 900 to 1200 baht a month left her too little remittance for her mother who brought Jip Noi's baby. Twice Noi tried to, commit suicide and finally she left the factory because she could no longer stand the exploitative conditions. Through a friend she got introduced to a new career in a massage parlour where she met Wipa, also a divorcee with four sons and sick parents to look after. They decided to work independently after a few months in the massage parlour.

For two years now, both have given support to form a group of prostitutes. Once they joined in a panel discussion on registration of prostitutes at Thammasat university and the audience were bewildered at their articulate speech and witty answers to different kinds of questions. Some even suspected that they were trained to stage a performance.

Nok was probably a contrast to Noi,

Wipa and Tew. She worked as a breast masseuse and never wanted to work independently, saying that it was a lower grade of prostitution as the woman had to approach the man first. No doubt she had no wish to face the police in the street. Like all young successful prostitutes Nok was not prepared to abandon the massage parlour before it asked her to do so. She often talked about opening a grocery shop or a beauty salon in her hometown in the north but it was only a vague idea. She said she was flirtatious and enjoyed being so. Her exceptional grace and beauty caused many disputes among the men with whom she associated. She does not plan to leave Thailand, and refused marriage proposals from foreigners. However she kept up a correspondence and held out hopes to those who sent her money. Compared to Noi, Wipa and Tew, Nok seemed to be more submissive and much less rebellious in her perception and way of life.

Now we come to Oy whose late father had left too little for her and her brother to continue their higher education. Working as a hostess in a bar in the most well known red light district of Bangkok she managed to support her brother as well. She got pregnant and when she alarmed me it was too late to abort. However she wholeheartedly accepted the child though she had to earn extra money by becoming a go-go dancer, which she had refused to do before.

There have been many crises in her young life —starting with her mother's death, followed by a rape, the unexpected death of her father, the change of profession and lately the arrival of the child, but Oy has never lost courage and hope.

Spirit Of A Fighter

Personally, I very much value the spirit of struggle and the relatively independent and defiant attitudes of the prostitutes I know. These attitudes I have rarely found in women not of their kind. Prostitutes are women who have the spirit of a fighter in sexual and in other relations. While their middle class sisters are repressed by conservative values and by sexual double standards, prostitutes seem to have more autonomy in their personal and sexual lives. Their frank

familiarity with the crudest facts of life and of male natures is much more enlightening to themselves and others than the pretentious atmosphere of artificial and conservative thoughts which confines most "good" women. This transformation may take months or years but it almost always happens, and it is interesting to watch an obedient young girl turn into a sophisticated and rebellious woman in this male dominated society where "good" women are subservient and unquestioningly respectful to male superiority. Having marked themselves as whores, these women have developed the spirit of a fighter for their own survival and for a better life.

In view of the social consequences, in particular the spread of venereal diseases, many concerned groups have urged the government to do something about prostitution. Since 1960 there have been two important moves on registration of both the establishment and the prostitute. Both attempts were met with strong criticism and opposition, mostly on moral grounds. The most forceful argument seemed to be that the woman would be stigmatised for life. Despite the growing number of prostitutes, the profession is still cruelly despised. The stigma would also hinder possibilities of a change of profession. Besides nobody was sure of how far the authorities would keep their promise to guard the secrecy of the registration.

Police As Pimps

The advantages of legalisation were evident from officialdom's point of view. It would be easier to supervise, inspect, tax and close down at will; it would be possible to ensure that those employed enjoy reasonable working conditions and are not operating under coercion or fear, also that health conditions are observed. However police major colonel Kitti Seributr pointed out that the registration would not work as it was meant to, since most prostitutes preferred not to be registered. All of them were known to pay money to corrupt police, corrupt health officials, corrupt politicians, who were in fact themselves responsible for the

legalisation.

Several cases of deception and coercion have only revealed how many parties, including the police, are embroiled. The hotel 58 case in March 1981 and the hotel 28 case in February 1982 highlighted the scandalous involvement of the police. The hotel 58 case involved two 15 year old girls who were promised jobs at a restaurant, but were imprisoned in the hotel at Bangkok and were forced to receive customers who came for "virginity breaking" specials. They managed to escape with the help of a person in a massage parlour nearby, who later was harassed until he had to leave his work. A report was prepared by 150 representatives from 19 groups, and was submitted to the police, department director, demanding legal action against all, involved in the crime. However no legal action was taken nor was the hotel closed down. The victims dared not and did not appear in court.

In the other case 62 young women were rescued from hotel 28, by the police of the crime suppression department who received a letter from one of the women. As soon as the case was transferred to the police of the district where the hotel was located, all the rescued women including those who pressed their wish to go back home, were deliberately sent back to the hotel. The Women Lawyers' Association of Thailand then took charge of the case. One immediate result was the transfer of several high ranking police officers of the district.

What we need, according to lawyers, is not a new legislation but enforcement of the measures which already exist in the penal code, under the legalisation system, deception and coercion could easily be used to obtain forced or fake signatures of the victims, to make them registered prostitutes for life.

Nevertheless a substantial number of people still hold that prostitution is the ultimate sexual exploitation of women and that any attempt to regulate it implies recognition and therefore some measure of acceptance. The only policy those who take this view can agree upon some of total

suppression, which would result in more abuse and exploitation than ever before.

In making the choice between prohibition and legalisation, the committees set up have been blinded by the traditional double standards of sex. They regard prostitutes as immoral women with attributes mental defectives and lepers. They require the prostitute to be out of public sight. Some genuinely "believe that the hardship and exploitative conditions are meant to deter women from drifting into prostitution. The legalisation law shaped by their views still maintains repressive measures on the woman in prostitution, for example she must not be protected by labour laws, she must not be permitted to go out of a restricted area. Those who violate these regulations have to face more severe penalties. The reform

victim of custom and law. There must be no interference with those who can afford to be independent. Those in the brothel must be granted freedom of movement, fair treatment in matters of business action, right to relaxation and free time, together with a reasonable limit on their working hours and on the number of clients per day. Medical services must be provided.

The reform institution must be revolutionised. All prison conditions, especially the surveillance and punishments, must be abandoned. The institutions should be open only to those who voluntarily opt to go there, and should function like a vocational training school with a wider range of training available. The institution should stop emitting 'its moral discourses on women's sexuality and women's roles. The



Thai rural women

institution must of course continue to exist and generate fear.

Need To Decriminalise

I believe that the illegality of prostitution as denned in the Prostitution Prohibition Act has only increased the exploitation of prostitutes. The abolition of the Act is a precondition for any possible improvement. Prostitutes must be decriminalised. If prostitution needs regulation, protection must come first, not repression. Only if the legalisation law respects the prostitute's human dignity and protects her rights, instead of only protecting the brothel keeper and the client or the "decent" public, can it benefit the prostitute who hitherto has been the only

prostitute must be respected as a normal human being and not treated as a mental defective or a leper segregated in a twilight world.

Not Foreign Men Alone

Much has been attributed to "foreign influence" as far as the growth of prostitution in Thailand is concerned. Nobody would deny that the massive arrival of the Chinese in the middle of the nineteenth century, the presence of the Americans in Asia in the Pacific war, the Korean war, and finally and most significantly in the Vietnam war in the sixties, have helped spread prostitution. The rest and recreation programme of the American GI alone began with 33,000

visitors in 1966 and rose quickly to an average of 70,000 a year in 1968-69. The visitors were accommodated chiefly in Bangkok and claimed to have laid most of the foundations of Bangkok's reputation as a city of many doubtful delights.

However, we must recognise the historical fact that prostitution existed and was institutionalised before the arrival of the Chinese in the nineteenth century, the American soldiers, and lately the tourists. What has happened, is not, in my opinion, the corruption of innocent native maidens into sinful prostitutes by the vicious foreign men. All the foreign men did was to introduce an additional demand into the existing institution, whereupon the internal economic pressures and the laws of supply and demand took over. Hit by the increasing disparity between rural and urban incomes, the rural women did just what earlier generations of poor women had done, the only difference being the sophistication of the business and the varied nationalities of the customers.

With the withdrawal of the American army from Vietnam, many expected that the service industries which had grown up around it would immediately collapse, but this expectation turned out to be naive. The GI ways of recreation were overwhelmingly adopted by the Thai males with their already permissive code of conduct. There had grown up a local clientele which remains important even today. Most customers of massage parlours, for example, are local.

In the past decade the country has depended on tourism as the second biggest income earning sector. The year 1980 was declared the year of tourism. At a meeting of governors from all of Thailand in October 1980, Mr Rajanasathien, the then deputy prime minister, offered an economic solution: "Within the next ten years, we have a need of money. Therefore I ask all governors to consider the natural scenery in your provinces, together with some forms of entertainment that some of you might consider disgusting and shameful because they are forms of sexual entertainment that attract tourists. Such forms of

entertainment should not be prohibited only because you are morally fastidious. Yet explicit obscenities that may lead to damaging moral consequences should be avoided. We must do this within reasonable limits because we have to consider the jobs that will be created for the people." This declaration led to a series of protests, first against the pragmatism of the deputy prime minister, and then against the sex tourism.

Cursed or blessed, tourists will flood in, not only to Bangkok but also to Pattaya, Phuket, Hadyai on the southern coast and to Sugnai Kolok near the Malaysian-Thai border. The easing of visa regulations between ASEAN countries has made it easier for nationals of these countries to travel in the region. In 1980 the number of Malaysian and Singaporean tourists even exceeded the number of Japanese tourists. There has also been a greater influx of Thai prostitutes into the two countries.

In December 1982, 154 Thai prostitutes were sent home by Singapore authorities. A few weeks before, the labour department said that about 5,000 Thai women had been lured to Hong Kong and another 5,000 to the Portuguese enclave by promises of easy money. The age of doing the business abroad has arrived. Just as a large number of Thai men and women have to head for employment in the middle east, so also Germany, Switzerland, and Japan were the countries most sought after by the prostitutes. More and more was heard from Thai males who could not stand seeing "their" women being sexually exploited abroad. To save its face the country would of course have to make it more difficult for women to obtain passports. This was explained as a means to prevent Thai women being deceived and forced into prostitution in foreign countries. Such restrictions would only result in the passports being sold at a higher price in the black market.

With the world economic recession and the even greater disparity between rural and urban incomes since the rice price has come down as never before, Thai rural women will persist in using sex as a source of income.

Resist Authority

The law can take away the legal right of parents to sell their children but it cannot do away with the moral authority that the parental institution has held for Gentries and which is being strengthened by the educational apparatus. To leave unquestioned the parental authority over the daughter is to let continue the parental control of the daughter's sexuality which is one important aspect of the power relations between parents and daughters in this country. If prostitution is to be perceived as one aspect of the power relations, the parents-daughter relationship in these particular circumstances and in general should be concurrently questioned and challenged. There is no reason why parental power cannot be misused.

Disobedience and resistance from daughters should not be immediately branded as ingratitude, which is seen as almost a familial crime in most Asian countries. A daughter who decides to prostitute herself is different from one who does so under parental pressure. The former has more autonomy in deciding how much money she will give the parents. More and more prostitutes who have made large contributions to their families have started to question the status of being "dutiful daughters."

The fact that the arrival of female babies has become more of a welcome event in some areas only helps to reveal what a role the expectation of economic returns plays in the parents' attitudes towards child rearing. In praising the dutiful daughter, one must not acquiesce in the status quo of parental power being exercised over the daughter's sexuality, whether to direct her towards prostitution or towards marriage.

The fact remains that the evidence of widespread involuntary or forced prostitution in this country and abroad is slim. More and more prostitutes, even those who are forced by their parents, have shown their strong determination to stay in the profession. Sex is harnessed to an economic end. Men are seen as targets, a source of money. It has taken a long time

to recognise that the causes of flourishing prostitution are to be found in the economic structure and by no means in the perversion of the rural woman who refuses to live as the working peasant should. Although a number of concerned people have shown their anxiety at forced and child prostitution, they have not been able to help also showing feelings of repugnance towards the perverted woman who allows more than one man to gain access to her body. For them, as well as for more repressive moralists, the desire to protect innocent women is largely overshadowed by the impulsive wish to impose a certain moral code of conduct.

Redefine Virtue

By portraying an innocent young girl being "corrupted" and "destroyed" by males, local and foreign, the conservative reformer as well as feminist succeed in arousing people's rage against male vice. Women are by implication urged to more virtuous, obedient, non assertive, especially in sexual relations. The anti vice campaign has always come to mean repression of the vicious woman, imposition of a guilty conscience both on the prostitute and her client, and finally becomes nothing but a power instrument of certain agencies under different labels.

Like any other sales transaction,

prostitution requires a minimum number of two people. We may start with the fact that if there was no demand, the women would have to seek other employment. Why there is a demand from men remains a subject of pure speculation. Why is it that the role of supplier is reserved for women only? No man is systematically or by force coerced into the sales transaction the many women are.

No man is as much harassed, espised and cruelly humiliated by social morality and by the state as is the prostitute. No man, in having more than one sexual relationship, is accused of degrading all men the way the prostitute is accused of degrading womankind. The solution is not to condemn those who have been spared or simply to spare the condemned and leave the whole institution unquestioned. The unequal moral standard between men and women in sexual relations must be radically challenged.

The fatalism of *karma* which has been the main ingredient in Thai Buddhist thought throughout history has been pacifying the despised and cursed for a long time. Though Thailand has no caste system, what has happened to the prostitute's mind is similar to what has happened to the mind of the lower caste people in India. Every Thai considers

himself or herself as having been born into a certain status and role according to previous deeds in past lives. The prostitute could also attribute her situation to the law of *karma*. Several young prostitutes were, found to accept repeated induced, abortions Is fate, as the most natural way in the given scheme of things.

Despite their growing efforts and the success they have gained in several economic and social spheres during the last two centuries, Thai women still feel very much inferior creatures to men. In the name of "women's liberation" and "women's development", they are taught to teach themselves more self promotion rather than to understand or to attempt to change the moral and sexual standards which discriminate between men and women. Even if their impressive labour force participation were to be recognised and rewarded in terms of legitimate power or authority, almost everything regarding their moral, sexual position would remain to be redefined.

Low status jobs do not confer high status even if they bring a higher income. The solution, I believe, is not the promotion of the status of the prostitute but a radical examination and change in sexual relations between women and men both inside and outside the institution of prostitution. □

'ON August 6, women's organisations in Lahore held an emergency meeting to protest against the court award of 15 lashes to a blind girl Safia who had been raped by her employers.

Safia, a young blind girl, worked as a domestic servant for a week. Then she returned home and told her mother she had been raped by Maqsood, her employer's son. Some days later when Sana's mother was not at home, Maqsood's mother came and again took her to the house where she was raped by Maqsood's father. As a result of the rape, Safia became pregnant but she hid the matter from her father, who came to know of it only a few months later. He then solicited the help of village officials and police to register a case of rape (*zina bil jabr*) but these people refused to help him.

Blind Girl Punished For Being Raped -Report From Pakistan

Only after the child was born and died, did Safia's father manage to register a case of rape

The court acquitted the accused men for "lack of evidence" because the current law in Pakistan requires four adult male eyewitnesses to prove rape. However, since Safia, an unmarried girl, had borne a child, this was treated as evidence of her

having committed adultery by consent (*zina bil raza*). She did not get the benefit of doubt which the men had got, because the fact of her having borne a child was used against her. Thus the court converted the case of rape to a case of adultery by consent, found Safia guilty of *zina* and sentenced her to 15 lashes in public.

Concern was expressed by a number of women's organisations, including the Women's Action Forum, Punjab Women Lawyers' Association, Tehriki Khwateen, Pakistan Muslim League Women's Wing, All Pakistan Trade Union Federation Women's Wing, Tehriki Istiqlai Women's Wing, and also by many individual women.

(from Karachi Daily News)

