

# "Because They Want Nice Things": Prostitution, Consumerism, and Culture in Thailand<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ways in which women in prostitution in Thailand have been positioned as threats to national identity through the "consumerism critique" of prostitution. The paper argues that this discourse is a product of the symbolic role played by women and the peasantry in anchoring national identity in a globalized era.

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article explore les moyens par lesquels les femmes engagées dans la prostitution en Thaïlande ont été placées comme danger à l'identité nationale par l'entremise de la << critique consumérisme >> de la prostitution. L'article indique que ce discours est le produit du rôle symbolique joué par les femmes et par la paysannerie qui ancrent l'identité nationale dans une époque de mondialisation.

The intensification of globalization and increasing integration of women's labour into the global economy has resulted not only in economic burdens for women, but also growing tensions over women's symbolic role as bearers of national culture and identity. Similarly, the growing gap between urban and rural areas is experienced not only as an economic divide but also a symbolic one, in which only the sophisticated urban areas can - and should - enjoy the benefits of modernization while the rural areas, as the seat of traditional culture, should retain their "traditional purity." The discursive link between prostitution and consumerism in modern Thailand serves to remind us of the role that the debates over tradition vs. modernity and national culture vs. globalization can play in limiting women's political agency, even as a society moves into a new era of growth and "democratization."

In late 20th century Thailand, the increasing commodification and commercialization of everyday life, particularly as it was evidenced in the rural areas, was a source of growing national anxiety. "Consumerism" summed up the religious and political critiques of the state of Thai society following the boom years of 1985 through to the early 1990s, which brought with them phenomenal amounts of foreign investment: a huge tourism industry; a decline in agricultural production and an emphasis on export-driven industry, rapid urban

expansion, and the growth of an increasingly prosperous middle class. Consumerism was regularly pointed to as the underlying cause of what were considered to be the outstanding problems of Thai society - corruption, prostitution, the drug trade, and environmental degradation. This anxiety over consumerism was particularly pertinent for Thai peasant women who joined the steady stream of migrants into the urban commercial centres to work in the sex-trade sector.<sup>2</sup> The cultural consternation of the Bangkok middle class focussed on these women as emblematic of the loss of national culture, a culture most notably embodied in the good, Buddhist peasant woman supporting "nation, king and religion" through her maintenance of the family and traditional customs. The flow of increasingly impoverished young women out of the rural areas into the urban sex-trade in order to support their families came to be viewed as a product of the degradation of traditional morals and culture leading young women to "sell their bodies" because, "they just want nice things." This "consumerism critique" came to dominate popular accounts of the booming prostitution trade in Thailand in the 1990s.

Certainly, in downtown Bangkok, surrounded by mega-malls, Western restaurants, luxury cars and high-priced fashion shops, this charge of "rampant consumerism" makes intuitive sense. When used to explain prostitution, however,

the term does not refer to the increasing number of men with disposable income who can afford to buy high priced sexual services, nor to the owners and procurers who make large fortunes on the provision of these services; indeed, their kind rarely appear in discussions about prostitution. The charge of "consumerism" is often aimed at women, even as they are targeted by advertisers as both a market and a mode of advertising. In Thailand in particular, it is a critique aimed at prostitutes themselves - who are seen to have an alarming penchant for clothing, jewelry and make-up. It is also aimed at their (usually peasant) families, who, with the remittances from their daughters, build new houses (from modern construction materials rather than the traditional teak) and buy consumer goods. While it has very recently been acknowledged that young, middle-class, university students - both male and female - are joining the ranks of sex-workers in order to increase their disposable income or to take part in the "exciting," modern and globalized world of sex and money, this has been much less the focus of attention than the overall "cultural decline" of the peasantry and peasant women in particular.

It seems ironic, to say the least, that the fingers being pointed at prostitute women are invariably well-manicured, belonging to well-off members of the middle and upper classes. I argue, therefore, that there is a displacement of the consumerism critique onto women, particularly peasant women engaged in prostitution, because of the symbolic role of peasant women in embodying national culture. This process has opened up political space for some women but shut it down for others. Elite women have been able to negotiate for themselves a political role as arbiters of tradition and modernity and instructors of the rural (female) population in the maintenance of national culture. At the same time, this particular construction of the prostitution issue has sublimated the problems of growing poverty in rural areas, the exploitation of female labour in the "new economy" and the potential abuse of young women in the global sex-trade. As well, prostitute women's agency in seeking out a better life for themselves and their families has been read as "greedy consumerism." As a result, this discourse silences the claims of new women's groups and sex-workers who argue that prostitution should be decriminalized and the working conditions of prostitution addressed.<sup>3</sup> Thus,

even in the new middle class-led democracy of the 1990s, and despite their being the subject of a great deal of public debate and concern, prostitute women, both because of their gender and class, are marginalized political actors. This article will trace the development of the "consumerism critique" and its implications for women in prostitution.

## WOMEN AND THE NATION

The anxiety about the loss of culture is particularly acute with regard to women because of their association with the maintenance of culture. National identity and culture are often considered to be embodied in women, as mothers of the race or as primary socializers of young citizens (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989, 7). Women are also used as symbols of the (feminine) nation that the (manly) state must protect through, for instance, war (Sharpe 1996, 100). Women's presumed embodiment of the nation has resulted in restrictive measures on their movement and sexuality, in order to avoid "dilution" of national identity. The investment of female bodies with such heavy national symbolism makes women's sexual and social agency highly problematic because their actions are quickly read as a challenge to the national order. Women who work in prostitution, therefore, are often the subject of intense concern for their unruly sexual behaviour. Women who use their bodies for other than the designated national purpose are a threat to national identity.

The symbolic role of the rural, peasant woman in Thailand can be traced through Thailand's political development in the latter half of the 1900s, from military authoritarianism (interrupted only briefly by democracy in the mid-1970s) to established democracy in the mid-1990s. In the 1960s both radical and conservative nationalists used peasant women as metaphors for "real Thai culture" and the changes wrought in rural society, particularly among the women, as metaphors for the damage to Thai tradition being brought about by Westernization, capitalist penetration and American military presence. In one example of this symbolic discourse - a short-story by well-known cultural nationalist Suchit Wongthes entitled "Second Nature" - women, both from Bangkok and the rural village, are symbolic of Thai culture and its corruption. In this

story, as Benedict Anderson explains: "A countryman at heart (or at least so he thinks), [the hero] dreams of 'showing up' the corrupted (Americanized, by implication) women of Bangkok by marrying the simple village girl he had left behind back home" (Anderson 1985, 45). He returns to his village to visit his sweetheart and finds his village, and his sweetheart, completely changed. The rural girlfriend, however, appears pitifully ignorant in her attempts to mimic urban culture, reinforcing the notion that the peasantry were too unsophisticated to deal with modern culture. Suchit writes:

He wanted to tell to her [sic] that stretchpants were repulsive; but he held back, reflecting that he still had a few days left to explain to her that Bangkok boys with education and good taste regarded all girls who wore stretchpants as low-grade whores; for any girl who clothed her body with such provocative tightness must be basically hard and far too forward. The young men were all agreed that a real Siamese beauty would never be brazen enough to display her bag of sexual tricks like that before the public.

(Wongthes 1985, 98-99)

In this passage Suchit links women's consumption of Western goods, particularly clothing, to an impure sexuality and lack of Thai-ness (no "real Siamese beauty" would wear those clothes).

The link between sexual impurity and cultural impurity was further reinforced by the particularities of the American presence in Thailand during this time. This linkage was articulated most clearly by the pro-democracy forces that grew up in the same period. Students demonstrating against the presence of American military troops in Thailand during the 1960s pointed to the sexual relations between American military men and local women as proof of the degrading effect of the American presence on Thai culture. With the arrival of thousands of American servicemen in the 1960s the practice of prostitution expanded rapidly and took on a more blatant form than seen previously. The Americans, the students argued, were the cause of "the rotten Thai society in which we are now living, one with 'hired wives,' prostitutes and half-breed

children of all colours" (Morell and Samudavimjia 1981, 165). By implication, women who worked as hired wives and prostitutes were endangering the body politic and the reproduction of the Thai race. Women in prostitution had become emblematic of cultural decline.

The importance of the peasantry in national identity was extended and entrenched by the military. The military government that returned to power after a brief period of open democracy was forcefully ended in 1976 had learned that co-optation, rather than coercion, of the rural citizenry was perhaps the best path to maintaining stability and ending the threat of peasant rebellion. In particular, factions within the military had realized that the previous era had failed to bring the peasantry into the national agenda, hence their willingness to join the so-called "communist insurgency" of the 1960s and 1970s. The military began programs to pacify the countryside by integrating the peasant community into Thai national identity. With the support of the bureaucracy, the military carried out intensive campaigns such as the Village Scouts program that worked to indoctrinate peasants into the ideology of "nation, religion and King" (Bowie 1997). The returning military-led government built its legitimacy on its connection to the peasantry as the "real Thai people." It stitched the psyche of the nation back together from the violence and rapid change of the 1970s through its creation of a united Thai identity, based in the countryside. It declared 1980 the "Year of the Farmer" and established a National Identity Board, which - even as the army continued to battle rural uprisings and rural migrants poured into the cities to escape rural poverty - boasted:

The village is a peaceful place, its slow pace reflecting the serene, unassuming nature of the villagers themselves... most farmers are content to earn enough to support their families ...wealth is not something most villagers actually crave .... The natural affection Thai villagers feel for their land minimizes population migrations. Moreover, villagers have *little ambition* to change their lifestyles.

(Pasuk and Baker 1995, 319.  
Emphasis added)

A peaceful and contented country as represented by the rural people was re-established through the military's "beneficent" guiding hand. So was their "natural" adherence to and affection for their country and their way of life. As Craig Reynolds has pointed out, "the current official formulations of what is quintessentially Thai never fail to include the peasant and the village" (1991, 15).

This national redefinition had particular implications for the thousands of rural women who were streaming to the cities to find work in the sex-trade industry in the face of rising rural impoverishment. They were quickly emblazoned on the national imagination as both victims of a foreign invader and betrayers of cultural purity deserving of both protection and punishment. Either way, they needed to be educated back into being "good Thai women" in order to protect Thai culture.

#### PROSTITUTION AND ELITE-LED WOMEN'S PROGRAMS

Like the students, government and elites treated prostitutes as symptomatic of cultural decline. Elite women, who designed and carried out the programs to stem the flow of rural women into prostitution, defined themselves in terms of their contribution to national culture and as staunch defenders of national identity, and they built their authority in terms of their ability to "re-enculturate" rural Thai women. Clearly drawing the distinction between elite protection of culture and peasant susceptibility to foreign influence, one female professor argued in 1977 "the bad [foreign] influence causes a section of Thai women, especially the poor and the ignorant, to sink down to the lowest level. The Thai Government and the more fortunate Thai women realize the seriousness of the situation and are looking for a solution to the problem" (Poolthupya 1977, 22).

Programs to divert women from prostitution, such as the one initiated by the Committee for the Promotion of the Welfare of Women (CPWW), were designed to inculcate what elites considered to be "traditional Thai values." The courses included not only skills training (in housewifery as well as manners and morals) but "Thai history and culture, comparative religions, the Thai language, and the concept of 'Land of Dharma

and Prosperity'" (CPWW 1989, 4). According to Philip Hirsch, the Land of Dharma and Prosperity program was itself part of the government's program to bring the rural areas into the national ideological sphere and under the centre's political control. The program was "based on ideological training sessions that emphasise unity, individual virtue through abstinence from *abayamuk*, the Buddhist vices of drink, gambling, and adultery" (Hirsch 1991, 330). Adherence to these Buddhist values would, according to the government, usher in a new era of peace and prosperity. Thus the anti-prostitution programs were shaped by the military's and the elite's agenda to bring the countryside into Thai national identity as defined by urban elites.

Elite women, closely linked to the governing circle, positioned themselves as the gatekeepers between the modern and the traditional. According to elite women, peasant women needed the elites to guide them through the landmines of modernity without losing their "traditional identity." Peasant women were identified as lacking in moral fibre and motivation. From a three year study of prostitution one elite-run organization concluded that the lack of education beyond *Prathom* (Level) 6 left village girls unequipped with either skills or a "sense of direction with which to face the future" - a lack which left them open to becoming victims of circumstance and led into "undesirable" situations, particularly upon migration to the cities (CPWW 1989, 1). The instigation of change is clearly envisioned as coming from the elite Thai women who convert "passive and unresponsive" village girls into "self-confident" women who at the same time have "good deportment" and "dress appropriately" - i.e., hold true to "Thai customs" (CPWW 1989, 9). Thus, elite Thai women and through them, peasant women, have successfully negotiated the opposition between (Western) modernization and (Thai) tradition.

Girls who resisted instruction were interpreted as lazy rather than resistant to a process that substituted "cultural training" for economic and social empowerment. For instance, when village girls resisted the CPWW program for domestic service training, the CPWW reported that "village girls are not interested in the course, considering it degrading to serve in the homes" and "many of the girls do not wish to work. They are accustomed to

poverty and inertia" (CPWW 1989, 27 - 28). As Mary Beth Mills points out, however, "domestic service is the lowest paid form of urban employment and carries little aura of modernity (excluding new domestic technology) which is one reason why village women seek urban employment in the first place" (n.d., 8). Women who needed to support their families and who were seeking some of the promise of the modern era for themselves would understandably find domestic service "degrading." That they did so shows some of their refusal of the strengthening grip of the elite on the peasantry. However, their efforts were read by the elite as "misguided" at best. The women in development programs of the 1980s continued to echo the belief that peasant women required the careful guidance of their betters in order to ensure their maintenance of traditional culture while benefiting from the changes wrought by modernization.

#### THE THOROUGHLY MODERN MIDDLE CLASS

The 1990s marked the passage of Thai political organization from semi-authoritarian/semi-democratic into a wider middle class-based democracy. While members of the old elite class remained the key power-brokers, the new middle class of urban professionals and white collar workers became a new and formidable political force. Despite this shift in political power at the centre, the relationship between the urban and rural communities remained weighted toward the centre. Indeed, the middle class was able to consolidate its power over the rural areas, in part, through its interpretation of social "problems" such as prostitution as a product of rural backwardness and consumer greed. Thus, other democratic groups such as peasant organizations, which included large numbers of women, that demanded economic and political rights for the rural areas, and women's groups who sympathized with sex-workers' demands for better working conditions and decriminalization, were silenced through this particular interpretation of the nature of rural communities.

The growth of a "modern middle class" has occurred quickly in Thailand. In Bangkok, this class numbered nearly two million by 1986, up from two

hundred thousand in 1960 (Paribatra 1993, 884). In the boom period beginning in 1986 their numbers increased rapidly. Pasuk estimates that the "middle class" accounted for over five million people by the end of the 1980s (1993, 30). In 1993 Sukhumbhand Paribatra described this new Thai middle class as,

mostly young (ages 25-35); well educated (bachelor degrees or equivalent); exposed to "modern," Western-influenced culture; and employed in the professions in executive, managerial, administrative, or technical positions. A typical member of this class has a small family, a working spouse, and a two-bedroom house in a housing estate paid for with a long-term loan. He or she is predisposed to shop for food in modern supermarkets, travel, read newspapers and magazines, listen to radio and television, and if not already owning one, planning to own a car and credit card. (1993, 884)

The growth of the new middle class has been accompanied by increasing consumption, particularly the consumption of foreign goods. This consumption of foreign goods produced a great deal of middle-class angst over national culture and identity. Articles on the loss of Thai culture and the increase in cosmopolitan consumerism appeared regularly in middle-class newspapers. As Kasian Tejapira explains it, unlike in the student era where nationalism was linked to national commodity consumption, Thai-ness has now been "liberated" from any "specific national or ethnic commodity-referents" making it a "free-floating signifier" rather than a grounded identity (2001, 153). The anxiety over this development can only be assuaged for the middle class if there is a population that remains tangibly linked to national culture. The peasantry, therefore, becomes increasingly important in grounding what has become a "free-floating" identity for the middle class.

At the same time, the middle class looks down upon the *chaobaan* (villagers) as uneducated and untrustworthy. The gap, both ideological and economic, between the urban middle class and the rural peasants widened over the 1980s. The middle-class urbanites sought increased political

participation and an end to corruption in government while rural peasants were becoming increasingly reliant on the largesse of elite and government corruption. This division put the peasantry and the modernizing middle class on opposite sides of political struggles over governmental change. During the 1980s the bonds created through the Village Scout movement - as well as other programs linking military and conservative elites to the rural peasantry - became part of a system of maintaining rural support for particular politicians. Local "godfathers" involved in illegal businesses, and protected by members of the military and government officials, arranged vote-buying schemes for politicians requiring rural support. The provincial areas accounted for over eighty percent of the seats in the National Assembly. In this period the newspapers increasingly referred to "dark influences" to suggest the involvement of the godfathers in government and business affairs (Pasuk and Baker 1995, 336-37).

This rural-military "dark influence" connection is the subject of a great deal of resentment by the urban middle class, which has often seen its political aspirations founder on the basis of rural voting power. It blames peasants who sell their votes for the continuation of "old style" politics and the resulting failure to develop a modern, efficient public sector. For the peasant class, the godfather system provides the benefits unavailable from the state itself as the godfathers provide loans and gifts for social needs such as weddings, local charities and public works (Pasuk and Baker 1995, 334-35). As James Ockey has pointed out, with the widening gap between rich and poor "no matter which parties are in government, the focus on the ability of individual candidates to deliver specific benefits prior to the election - cash, donations to temples, road or bridge building - makes perfect sense....What the middle classes perceive as 'corruption' can be seen as one small benefit that parliamentary rule has brought to the poor" (2001, 319-20).

Middle class Bangkokians, however, have grown tired of the continuing traffic jams, the seemingly irresolvable pollution problem and the problems of shakedowns, corruption and bribery by police and officials (Basham 1993, 15-17). Increasingly, the middle class views itself as the

modernizing force of Thailand, which should have political power in order to guide the country into a rational, efficient and prosperous future. The peasantry, on the other hand, are not viewed as capable of understanding the needs of running a modern nation, hence it is best left in the hands of the "technocratic" elites and modern managers.

This distrust of the peasantry is played out in the struggle to maintain national identity. Thus, although peasants have become icons of "true Thai-ness" they are also viewed as the ones "most at risk of losing their culture and need to be policed to ensure that they not become Westernized" (Montgomery, 1996). This contradictory position escalates the sense of anxiety over the maintenance of cultural identity and ensures that the new middle class remains in control of that identity even if it is "embodied" in the peasantry. Peasant women, despite their political activism in peasant organizations and their willingness to voice demands as urban workers, become the object of political concern and control to protect cultural identity rather than political subjects.

### PROSTITUTION, CONSUMERISM AND NATIONAL CULTURE

The "consumerism" critique of prostitute women, therefore, reflects these same concerns to police the maintenance of national culture. Prostitute women are, most visibly, rural women who have come into the urban areas to escape the poverty of the countryside and often to provide for their families. Both as peasants and as women, they are emblematic of national culture. Prostitution, therefore, is regularly read as symptomatic of the loss of culture through Westernization, as one *Bangkok Post* editorial read: "Art, tradition and culture are the root of society. Once the root is severed, people lose their knowledge of their own roots and rapidly accept a new culture, usually from the West, aggravating social problems such as prostitution" (Montgomery 1996).

Indeed, media coverage of the prostitution issue since the early 1980s has focussed on the "foreign" aspects of the trade - tourists coming to Thailand, Thai women going to Japan or Europe - emphasizing the interaction between Thai women and foreign men and cultures. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, non-governmental organizations

working on the prostitution issue raised public awareness over the exploitation of women in prostitution, but - following their intellectual roots in the student movement - they also focussed on the issue of foreign involvement through tourism and international "trafficking in women."<sup>4</sup> In reality, tourism and international trafficking/migration accounted for a small, though important, proportion of the prostitution industry. However, the focus on tourism and trafficking served to reinforce the association of women with national culture and the degradation of both through contact with Westernization. In drawing attention to the exploitation of women in prostitution, rural women drawn into the sex-trade were often characterized simply as victims of "evil foreigners" with no agency of their own.

It soon became clear to the organized women's groups working on the trafficking issue that Thai women were not simply victims of evil traffickers and foreigners but that there was a certain amount of agency involved in becoming and/or remaining a prostitute - despite the obviously limiting circumstance of poverty. One Bangkok-based women's group, the Foundation for Women, found that when some women were deported back to Thailand they would seek ways to return to Europe or Japan or wherever they had been because it was the only way they could see to make good money. Researchers for the Foundation were taken aback by the attitudes of villagers who defined victimization in the sex-trade as "working for nothing," and argued that if women continue to send good money home they are clearly "successful" not "trafficked" nor victimized (FFW 1996, 58). Indeed, a 1996 study on prostitution conducted by the Foundation discovered that the increased earning power of women in prostitution may, in fact, be changing women's status within some village communities. The researchers pointed out that "women's increasingly obvious contribution to the improvement in the family's economic status through labour migration has changed [the decision-making power of senior males] somewhat. In some families, women are now considered the head of the household and women have a greater share of the decision-making power. Even parents have come to respect their daughters" (FFW 1996, 58). And, while women's groups recognized that successful involvement in the sex-trade was not

creating a sea-change in attitudes towards, or the overall status of, rural women, they increasingly came to recognize the need to respect women's agency in the sex-trade and the need to listen to the women's own demands for better working conditions. In a 1996 meeting to discuss proposed changes to the law governing prostitution in Thailand, participating sex-workers argued against criminalizing prostitution, stating that what they wanted, far from being "rescued," was protection under the labour law: legitimate work contracts specifying work hours and ensuring access to welfare; benefits and medical check-ups; reduction of working hours; minimum wage guarantees and access to education (Sakboon 1996, A5).

Groups such as the Foundation came to define the issue of prostitution not as one of sexual exploitation per se, but as an issue of labour rights. Similarly, EMPOWER, the organization for sex-workers in Thailand, has continued to campaign for safe working conditions for women in prostitution rather than rescuing or reforming them. The Thai-based, internationally-focussed, Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women has also recognized prostitution as a form of labour in a world of constrained choices for poor women in the developing world, which must be distinguished from "forced" prostitution and "trafficking in women" which results from deceit and the use of force. All of these organizations, while not necessarily entirely in agreement with each other or the broader international sex-workers' rights movement, have rejected approaches to understanding women in prostitution in Thailand that characterize them as either "victims" or "criminals" and have begun to focus on the need to address working conditions in the sex-trade and to give prostitute women voice.

Indeed the relative independence of many women working in prostitution, particularly those involved in the tourist-oriented trade, may be precisely what is being targeted by the "consumerism" critique. This "brazenness" contradicts the dictates of middle-class and elite society, that peasant women should be guided by their betters. Prostitute women have refused to stay within their "proper" roles, consorting with both the modern and the foreign outside the control of the elites that seek to guide them. "Symbols" are never supposed to have agency. Indeed, the very

importance of a "symbol" is in its silence, in its availability to others to invoke as they see fit. Any agency on the part of those who are invoked as symbols, therefore, must be interpreted in such a way that it disciplines its practitioners back into their "proper" (and silent) roles. By interpreting the agency of prostitute women merely as consumerism or greed, the consumerism critique effectively silences the complex realities of prostitutes' lives and their political demands.

At one level, the consumerism explanation of prostitution silences the structural issue of poverty by turning those who try to survive from prostitution into the "undeserving poor," suggesting that their suffering stems from their greed and improper attitudes rather than the poor economic conditions in the countryside which are the result of government policies emphasizing production for export. That women would engage in prostitution simply for "consumer goods" erases the fact that even though prostitution can provide a better income than factory or domestic work, the greatest percentage of the money generated from each transaction does not end up in the pocket of the sex-worker. It goes to owners and middle-men, as well as the officials that have to be paid off, given the formal illegality of prostitution itself. Prostitute women from the Northern part of the country in particular often send the largest portion of their incomes back to their villages to support their families - fulfilling their roles as "dutiful daughters." At the same time, the consumerism critique repeats a stereotype of women from the North (who predominate in the prostitution industry) as *jai oon* (softhearted/headed) and in love with beautiful things. This characterization of Northern Thai women erases the underlying sense of duty that Northern women feel to provide for their families. This stereotype is precisely what lies behind the demand for Northern women by Thai customers.

Further, characterizing the prostitute woman as consumerism-driven undermines recent attempts to recognize the agency of young women in entering the prostitution industry by translating that agency as misguided and selfish - a betrayal of her cultural heritage and her role in preserving it. Young women in prostitution continue to be read as in need of guidance and/or punishment rather than as self-interpreting agents who deserve a political

voice and increased control over their own lives. A 1996 law designed to address the prostitution problem reflects this approach. It punishes both prostitutes and parents who sell their children into prostitution - rather than focussing on the broader causes of prostitution and listening to the demands of prostitutes themselves for the decriminalization of prostitution and better working conditions. To interpret sex-workers as selfish consumers denies them a place as political agents who have problems and solutions that they want addressed by the larger community.

## CONCLUSION

The condemnation of prostitute women as driven by consumerism is a reflection of the anxiety over the apparent loss of "traditional culture" and national identity in the current era of rapid globalization. Women often have a symbolic role as bearers of national culture that can result in the close circumscription of their activities. Prostitution is particularly threatening because it signals women's failure to stay within their prescribed roles thereby endangering the "reproduction of the nation" both physically and socially. While women are traditionally considered bearers of national culture, peasants have taken on an increasing importance in the Thai national imaginary with the globalization of the middle-class. As the middle class enjoys the "cosmopolitan" and the "modern" it seeks to anchor Thai identity in the rural peasantry.

As peasant women, therefore, prostitute women are doubly marked as bearers of national culture. Their clear refusal to play their "proper roles" and to follow the direction of the middle and elite classes provokes anger and anxiety among these same classes, who feel the women should be disciplined into their "proper roles." The accusation of "consumerism" legitimizes such discipline by silencing the complex realities of prostitutes' lives and their demands for control over their own lives. The gendered process of globalization, therefore, has ironic consequences for women. While globalization has led to women's increased economic exploitation, the very critique of globalization through such discourses as "consumerism" would deny women political and social agency. While a nationalist response to

globalization has opened up a political role for some - particularly elite - women, it has suppressed more radical politics by marginalized actors such as women in the sex-trade.

## ENDNOTES

1. This article is a shortened and re-worked version of a chapter in: Leslie Jeffrey, *Sex and Borders: Gender, National Identity and Prostitution Policy in Thailand*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2002.
2. In the interests of space and time I have not gone into the details of the development of prostitution in Thailand here. Such an analysis has been provided in several sources including Thahn-dam Truong's *Sex, Money and Morality*, London: Zed, 1990. For more recent analyses of prostitution that move beyond political economy, see, for example, Lenore Manderson, "Public Sex Performances in Patpong and Exploration of the Edges of Imagination," *Journal of Sex Research* 29.4 (1992): 451-75; and Penny van Esterik *Materializing Thailand*. New York: Berg, 2000.
3. Prostitution was criminalized in Thailand in 1960 with the passage of the Prostitution Prohibition Act, although in 1966 the government passed the Entertainment Places Act which allowed for the use of "special service girls" (a widely understood euphemism for sex-workers) in places of entertainment as a bow to the entertainment industry built around the American military. Sex-workers remained vulnerable to arrest and fines or detention according to the whims (and political/financial interests) of officials. In 1996 the government further extended criminal law on prostitution by including clients of under-age girls and parents who sold their children into prostitution in the Criminal Code, while continuing to penalize sex-workers.
4. I have used the term "trafficking" (as well as "prostitution" rather than "sex-work") here as that is how it was constructed in Thailand at the time. However, it was soon recognized that the reality of the international movement of women in the sex-trade, including Thai women, was much more complicated and often involved a certain amount of "choice" rather than simple "force." Certainly, the international debate over trafficking has involved many sex-workers and pro-sex work feminists who have provided excellent critiques of the term and the politics surrounding its usage. See, for example, the collection of articles in Kamala Kempadoo and Jo Doezma, eds. *Global Sex Workers: Rights Resistance and Redefinition*. New York: Routledge, 1998. On Thai migrant sex-workers specifically see Satoko Watanabe, "From Thailand to Japan: Migrant Sex Workers as Autonomous Subjects" in the above collection and Siriporn Skrobaneck, et al., *The Traffic in Women: Human Realities of the International Sex Trade*. New York: Zed Books, 1997.

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