EMPOWERING
SEX WORKERS IN
EXPLOITATIVE
SITUATIONS

Digital technology to empower and support sex workers and
sex worker-led community-based organisations in Thailand

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As more attention is placed on exploitation and gender-based violence, it is critical that no one is left behind, regardless of their gender at birth, ethnicity, age or profession. However, research has shown that people who engage in sex work are disproportionately at risk of exploitation and violence, compared to other areas of work.

Our project takes place in Thailand, a country that attracts millions of tourists for its sex industry, in three sex work hotspots - Pattaya, Bangkok and Chaing Mai. This research project aims to understand the challenges faced by sex workers and the communities that support them. It also aims to examine the role that digital technology can play in supporting sex workers and the work of sex worker-led community-based organisations (CBOs) in Thailand.
Sex work is not only a stigmatised profession, but it suffers from a quasi-criminalised status. Much research has focused on the health and human rights of sex workers, particularly in contexts where this work is criminalised [1]. Studies have also shown a strong connection between repressive policing and sexual violence, often translating into disruption of peer support networks, limiting access to health and support services, and hindering access to justice [2].

There is a gap in research that analyses the intersection between sex work and technology. A few studies show that technology can play a role in service-delivery for stigmatised, criminalised and misrepresented communities [3]. They also highlight that technology must be centred on the needs of sex workers and their communities in order to best support them [3].

Dominant discourses on exploitation marginalise sex workers as sympathetic or undeserving victims. Those who have faced abuse as a result of coercion are deserving of help, and those who face abuse as a result of choosing to engage in sex work are not [4].

Due to the stigmatisation of sex work, repressive policing and victimisation discourses, CBOs are a key support for sex workers in exploitative situations [5]. We reflect on the potential for technology to assist them.


THE OBJECTIVES

This research project aims to understand the challenges facing sex workers and the communities that support them. It also aims to examine the role that digital technology can play in supporting sex workers and the work of sex worker-led community-based organisations in Thailand.

1 INVESTIGATE PRACTICES OF EXPLOITATION IN THE SEX WORK INDUSTRY

For this research, we aimed at exploring how practices of exploitation differ from the sex work industry compared to other industries, such as fishing and manufacturing, and whether there is a gendered dimension to sexual exploitation.

2 UNDERSTAND ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN SCREENING FOR EXPLOITATION

Secondly, we aimed at understanding what role digital technology could play to support transgender and cisgender sex work communities, particularly in screening for cases and practices of sexual exploitation.

OUR TEAM

The team involved in this project consists of Dr Hannah Thinyane, Francisca Sassetti and Monticha Puthawong (Dear).
THE METHODS

CRITICAL PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

In order to understand the lived experiences of sex workers as potential victims of sexual exploitation, we used a Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) approach, a participatory method to include narratives in the first person. CPAR critically reflects on the impacts of practices in terms of rationality, sustainability, justice and fairness. CPAR’s process consists of the following:

1. Examines existing practices and conditions in which action research is made;
2. Critically questions those practices and their impacts;
3. Engages in communicative action to reach consensus on how to overcome issues felt by participants.

We engaged with cisgender and transgender sex workers and CBOs over 18 months in three sites in Thailand - Pattaya, Chiang Mai and Bangkok.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

As part of CPAR, we conducted interviews with 14 representatives of CBOs/NGOs operating in the three hotspots identified between September and October 2018. This sample included transgender and cisgender sex worker CBOs, NGOs that support boys in sex work, and other NGOs. This brief presents the findings from these interviews after transcribed and coded using a Grounded Theory technique.
THE FINDINGS

1 EXPLOITATION IN SEX WORK DIFFERS FROM OTHER SECTORS

While the underlying indicators of exploitation are the same across industries, the impacts of labour law and inspection mechanisms that regulate work hours, minimum wage, and health and safety differ for sex work. The same mechanisms that ensure decent conditions in sectors such as fishing or manufacturing, are the ones that fail to protect sex workers and instead penalise them. The entertainment industry also differs in how victims are perceived and helped. The dominant discourse considers that sex workers that become trapped in exploitation are ‘undeserving victims’, judged by the (un)worthiness and (in)dignity of their work. This discourse fails to acknowledge their human rights, leaving them more vulnerable to exploitation than victims from other sectors.

2 CHALLENGES TO SEX WORKER COMMUNITIES

Due to the stigmatisation and criminalisation of sex work, and victim discourses, peer-based models are more usual within sex work than in other sectors. CBOs offer peer and legal support, health services and skills development. However, CBOs described facing many challenges: the hidden forms of exploitation affecting gender, age, immigration status; issues with types of work (street vs bars) and drug (ab)use; and communication, trust and lack of self-awareness issues that hinder the identification of cases of exploitation.

On gender, we found that transgender sex workers are vulnerable because social norms add another layer of social stigma. On age, we found that underage sex workers are in a fragile intersection of agency and vulnerability, often having no choice but to work in this sector. On immigration status, we found that migrant sex workers in irregular situations are vulnerable because of the constant threat of being turned in to the police. They are susceptible to further exploitation from pimps and bar owners. A participant noted:
We asked participants how technology could best support their work in identifying exploitation and in supporting their communities. They identified the potential for technology to support more privacy in interactions and self-disclosure, especially when doing outreach in bars. They highlighted the potential to improve communication across a diversity of literacy levels, languages and ethnicities. By doing so, it would allow them to foster trust when collecting information, and enhance agency and self-awareness among victims of exploitation.

Research findings identified three main purposes for technology:

1. Technology for screening sexual exploitation and trafficking
   Participants suggested that technology can be helpful in screening for cases of exploitation, to understand the severity of issues faced by sex workers, and to collect data to understand patterns and areas of risk in their communities. This would help predict patterns of exploitative behaviours, map vulnerabilities, and share targeted information and training to support community members. This information could empower sex workers and prevent further exploitation.

2. Redemptive technology
   In some interviews, participants mentioned the potential use of technology to fight back against exploitation, in how exploiters meet and lure potential victims. This would allow CBOs to use the same technology as exploiters to prevent exploitation, or to come in contact with current victims. According to a participant:

3. Alternative pathways to justice
   Due to constraints in accessing traditional justice mechanisms, technology can support sex worker CBOs by enabling social justice mechanisms. Since CBOs often act as mediators between sex workers in exploitative situations and exploiters, technology could enable them to consistently collect evidence and to fight back, using technology for justice-oriented service delivery.