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October 2017

# "No Other Choice": A Baseline Study on the Vulnerabilities of Males in the Sex Trade in Chiang Mai, Thailand

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# "No Other Choice": A Baseline Study on the Vulnerabilities of Males in the Sex Trade in Chiang Mai, Thailand

## **Abstract**

Social and cultural norms often assume men and boys to be inherently strong and/or invulnerable to sexual exploitation. As a result, sexual violence against men and boys is often ignored in programs and policy, with the efforts of organizations providing for the needs of male victims often left under-supported. Among the studies that have been conducted on males, most have primarily focused on sexual health, seeing males as agents of their own lives and careers, and largely ignored holistic needs and vulnerabilities. This study attempts to take a holistic approach to understanding the needs and vulnerabilities of young males working in the sex industry in Chiang Mai, Thailand, and provide a baseline of information in order for social service providers to better understand them and provide adequate services.

Structured interviews focused on a number of key areas including: stigma and discrimination, financial security, sexual health and history, experiences of violence, substance abuse, and emotional well-being. Key vulnerabilities to sexual violence and exploitation include ethnic minority/immigration status, family dependence on income, alcohol and drug use, early entry into the sex industry, and complicit government and law enforcement officials towards trafficking and exploitation. The research uncovered significant numbers of trans-border migrants from Myanmar, as well as the high numbers of respondents migrating from tribal areas in northern Thailand. Within the working environments of participants of this study, the research finds a high dependency on tips as the sole source of income, seemingly increasing respondents' frequency of meeting buyers of sexual services. Violence and sexual abuse was found to be common among some groups, with one in four respondents reporting instances of being forced to have sex against his wishes, and the vast majority (72%) of those working within bar based establishments reporting the same. Two clear cases of child sex trafficking were identified, with an additional one in five of total respondents reporting entrance into the sex industry at ages below 18. This indicates a high prevalence of child sex trafficking in Chiang Mai among males within the sex industry. Substance abuse was found to be a significant issue among many respondents working within bars—particularly among those working as freelancers, or individuals not directly employed by an establishment.

The findings of this study, combined with increasing evidence and global visibility, should lead to recognition from the Thai government, United Nations (UN) agencies, and donors that sexual exploitation of males does exist and needs attention. Additionally, we recommend the development of more assistance programs for young males and their families to secure alternative employment and aid in obtaining identification cards and citizenship, along with further research—particularly qualitative—on younger boys living off of the streets and engaging in survival sex.

## **Keywords**

Thailand, young males, sexual exploitation, sexual abuse, male masseurs, male sex workers, Chiang Mai, sex work, Southeast Asia, Non-Government Organizations, LGBT, human trafficking, sexual exploitation, CSEC, CSEA, boys, children

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**“NO OTHER CHOICE”:  
A BASELINE STUDY ON THE VULNERABILITIES OF MALES  
IN THE SEX TRADE IN CHIANG MAI, THAILAND**

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**ABSTRACT**

Social and cultural norms often assume men and boys to be inherently strong and/or invulnerable to sexual exploitation. As a result, sexual violence against men and boys is often ignored in programs and policy, with the efforts of organizations providing for the needs of male victims often left under-supported. Among the studies that have been conducted on males, most have primarily focused on sexual health, seeing males as agents of their own lives and careers, and largely ignored holistic needs and vulnerabilities. This study attempts to take a holistic approach to understanding the needs and vulnerabilities of young males working in the sex industry in Chiang Mai, Thailand, and provide a baseline of information in order for social service providers to better understand them and provide adequate services.

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<sup>1</sup> Authors’ choice to use either “Burma” or “Myanmar” throughout the text as the name is sometimes considered controversial due to the recent name change of the country as a result of a military coup. The authors in the current report have chosen to use “Myanmar” instead of “Burma” as the country is officially recognized by the United Nations as such.

establishments reporting the same. Two clear cases of child sex trafficking were identified, with an additional one in five of total respondents reporting entrance into the sex industry at ages below 18. This indicates a high prevalence of child sex trafficking in Chiang Mai among males within the sex industry. Substance abuse was found to be a significant issue among many respondents working within bars—particularly among those working as freelancers, or individuals not directly employed by an establishment.

The findings of this study, combined with increasing evidence and global visibility, should lead to recognition from the Thai government, United Nations (UN) agencies, and donors that sexual exploitation of males does exist and needs attention. Additionally, we recommend the development of more assistance programs for young males and their families to secure alternative employment and aid in obtaining identification cards and citizenship, along with further research—particularly qualitative—on younger boys living off of the streets and engaging in survival sex.

### **KEYWORDS**

Thailand, young males, sexual exploitation, sexual abuse, male masseurs, male sex workers, Chiang Mai, sex work, Southeast Asia, Non-Government Organizations, LGBT, human trafficking, sexual exploitation, CSEC, CSEA, boys, children

**T**HIS RESEARCH WAS CONDUCTED IN 2013 as part of a larger research project that has evolved with its progression while listening to the voices of sexually exploited children and vulnerable people in India, Cambodia, Thailand, and the Philippines. The authors felt that that this was a particularly significant project because it was conducted in cooperation with Urban Light<sup>2</sup>, a non-governmental organization (NGO) focused on serving vulnerable males at risk for trafficking and sexual abuse. Urban Light was eager to grow and expand its services, with this study providing the basis for much of the expansion that has occurred over the past four years. In addition, Urban Light’s existing networks with academia (Chiang Mai University), government (the US Department of State Trafficking in Persons Office/US Consulate in Chiang Mai/Royal Thai Government), and non-profit/NGO community have allowed this research to be shared extensively at a local level. A full version of this study was published by Love146 under the title “Boys for Baht: An Exploratory Study on the Vulnerability of Male Entertainment Workers in Chiang Mai, Thailand.” The current publication includes updated literature review, information, and discussion and is an effort to reach a wider audience and increase awareness of the often-overlooked issue of male exploitation.

For purposes of this current study, we define the “sex industry” as locations including bars, open air spaces, and massage parlors where transactional sex is available. The authors acknowledge the inherent exploitation many individuals experience earning money from commercial sex. Further, any mention of an individual under the age of 18 participating in the sex industry unequivocally is considered child sexual exploitation and trafficking. All participants in the current study were offered services from Urban Light and follow up was made. Additional services (i.e. connecting respondents to social service and government agencies etc.) was done through Urban Light. Use of the terms “sex work,” “sex worker,” and “sex industry”

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<sup>2</sup> Urban Light, <http://www.urban-light.org>

are not meant to diminish experiences of violence, abuse, and exploitation, regardless of age. Throughout the text the authors will use the term “buyers” to describe individuals purchasing sexual services.<sup>3</sup> The authors will also use “freelance” and “freelance sex worker” throughout the text to describe individuals working in the sex industry with no official employment through a venue such as a bar. Though the term “freelance” implies large levels of agency, the authors acknowledge the high levels of exploitation and coercion occurring in this sector of the industry.

### **A Gender-Exclusive Understanding of Exploitation and Violence**

Males in the sex trade are becoming more visible throughout the world and are increasingly being seen as a commodity (Ward & Aral, 2006; Minichiello, Scott, & Callander, 2015). However, much of the research that has been conducted on the global sex-trade has focused primarily on women and girls (Dennis, 2008; Jones, 2010; Cockbain, Brayley, & Ashby, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2017). This gender-exclusive approach towards reporting sexual exploitation, abuse, and sex work has overlooked the prevalence, vulnerabilities, and needs of boys and men facing these issues (Friedman, 2013; Procopio, 2017). Much of the research that studies males in the sex industry has largely focused on sexual health and the spread of HIV/AIDS, ignoring the social, psychological, and other personal ramifications that work within the sex trade entails for the young males involved (Dennis, 2008; Minichiello, Scott, & Callander, 2013).

The construction of the “traditional victim” of sex trafficking and exploitation as a woman or young girl has been perpetuated through the media and government research (Curtis, Terry, Dank, Dombrowski, & Khan, 2008; Jones, 2010; Friedman, 2013), including the United States’ annual Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP), which, until 2014 has vaguely or not at all mentioned men and boys as a population vulnerable to sexual exploitation and violence, with large focus on male exploitation in traditional labor sectors. The United States government’s decision to acknowledge men and boys alongside of women and girls as victims of sex trafficking in its four most recent (2014-2017) TIP reports provides evidence for progress in the education of public and government officials into the reality of the sex industry in Thailand. More open dialogues between government officials, NGOs, and the general public concerning male sexual exploitation is essential for overall awareness and appropriate resource allocation and funding for individuals in need. In general, the vulnerabilities of men and boys have either been ignored or overlooked, preventing this demographic from coming forward as victims and seeking essential services already provided to women and girls (Friedman, 2013).

Perceived agency and resilience in young males also makes them less likely to receive attention as potential victims of sexual abuse, (Jones, 2010; Grieger, 2012; Friedman, 2013; Brayley, Cockbain, & Gibson, 2014; Hawke & Raphael, 2016; Mitchell et al., 2017) despite trends that show the similar psychopathological effects and outcomes of sexual abuse on both boys and girls (Spataro et al., 2004; Friedman, 2013). Males in Asia are just as likely, if not more likely, to be victims of abuse, as an extensive 2007 government funded study conducted by the Ministry of Women and Child Development in India found. Over 60% of young male respondents had been victims of one or more forms of sexual abuse, while 41.12% of

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<sup>3</sup> The authors are choosing to use the term “buyer” rather than “client” because client seems to imply the sexual services are mutually agreed upon, when in reality there may be coercion, abuse or exploitation including physical, sexual and financial violence.

young female respondents had been victims of the same (Kacker, Varadan, & Kumar, 2007). Boys presented as a majority of commercial sexual abuse victims in a groundbreaking 2008 study in New York City (Curtis et al., 2008). Despite experiencing equal, and sometimes more degrees of sexual abuse and exploitation throughout the world, males are not afforded equal legal protection and access to social services as females (Lowe & Pearce, 2006; Curtis, 2008; Frederick, 2010; Friedman, 2013; Procopio, 2017).

To address the question, “What is the state of research on sexually exploited boys internationally?” a group of researchers conducted a systematic review in 2017 of the body of literature related to the subject. The team found that much of the body of work describing child sexual abuse and/or exploitation (CSA/CSE) presents strong female gender bias, focuses on resilience and agency inherent in males, and lacks standardization needed to address many issues sexually abused and exploited males face (Mitchell et al., 2017).

### **Male Sexual Abuse in Asia and Thailand**

Child sex abuse (CSA) and child sexual exploitation (CSE) remains underreported throughout Thailand and Asia overall when compared to the rest of the world (Stoltenborgh et al., 2011; Trangkasombat, 2008). Additionally, male victims of CSA are far more likely to delay disclosure or not disclose the abuse at all (O’Leary & Barber, 2008; Gray, 2011; Friedman, 2013; Brayley et al., 2014; Cashmore & Shackel, 2014). Overall, CSA of both males and females in Thailand and throughout the world remains underreported for a multitude of reasons, including fear of retaliation such as threats, harassment, and violence in addition to a complicit law enforcement system (Hawke & Raphael, 2016). Occurrences of forced sex in Thailand among those identifying as men who have sex with men (MSM), including men in the sex trade, was analyzed in 2011 study which found 18.4% of men experiencing forced sex at some point in their lives, with 83.8% of these individuals having been forced by someone they knew, 67.3% forced more than once, and over half having been forced during adolescence. The study correlates experiencing forced sex with increased drug use, recruitment into the sex industry, increased male partners, and buying sex, giving some of the clearest information regarding vulnerability in the MSM community in Thailand, including males in the sex trade (Guadamuz et al., 2011). Within the MSM subpopulation, there is a higher vulnerability to sexual abuse and rape than the general population (Micheni et al., 2015).

### **Legal Protection**

The newly ratified version of the Thai Constitution<sup>4</sup> specifically states that “[m]en and women shall enjoy equal rights” (Chapter 3, Section 27, 9), a continuation of previously ratified constitutions of Thailand. Though broad measures are made in the Constitution guaranteeing gender equality and legal protections for victims of trafficking and sex offenses, the International Commission of Jurists points out that “. . . it has been left to the Courts to delineate, on a case-by-case basis, what discrimination entails and what conduct is prohibited. . .” and “. . . such decisions are not frequent” (Hector, Masupap, & Neelapaijit, 2012, p. 18). Ambiguities in interpretation of law and definitions of rape and other forms of sexual violence often prevent cases from moving forward.

A 2016 report from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health cites findings describing a “. . . disincentive for victims [of trafficking] to cooperate” with

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<sup>4</sup> 2017 Thailand Constitution: <https://goo.gl/UR7zcQ>



authorities regarding trafficking cases, citing fear of prosecution under immigration law, long and drawn out proceedings, distrust of local authorities, and corruption within government agencies (Robinson, Thame & Branchini, 2016, p. 100). Whether or not a case is taken seriously can largely depend on a victim's ethnicity, country of origin, and economic status. Widespread complicity and corruption within government agencies and police forces are accepted as countrywide problems by the Thai populace and outside observers (US Department of State, 2016; Robinson et al., 2016; Pring, 2017). Owners of establishments selling sex are known to bribe police and other authorities in exchange for lax enforcement of trafficking and sex work laws (Robinson et al., 2016; Hawke & Raphael, 2016; Empower Foundation, 2017) further complicating the efforts pursued by NGOs and ministries of the Royal Thai Government to help victims and eradicate trafficking and abuse. The Human Rights Watch (2017a) implores the Thai government officials to stop enforcement of a June 2017 law, the "Decree Concerning the Management of Foreign Workers' Employment"<sup>5</sup>, which applies ". . . disproportionate criminal penalties and fines for working without a permit, mandating up to five years in prison and fines between 2,000 to 100,000 baht (US\$60 to US\$2,935)." Brad Adams, Asia director of Human Rights Watch states that this, ". . . will make it easier for corrupt officials and unscrupulous employers to abuse and exploit [migrant workers]" (Human Rights Watch, 2017a). Implementation of this new law has led to tens of thousands of migrants fleeing Thailand out of fear, leading government officials to delay full implementation until January 2018; until this delay, reports of extortion abound. Full effects of this law are yet to be seen, as the government seeks public hearings for opinions (Martin, 2017).

### Immigration and Hill Tribe Descent

An individual's ethnicity and origin is linked to increased vulnerability to exploitation due to negative attitudes to these various groups among Thais (Toyota, 2006; Rijken, van Waas, Gramatikov, & Brennan, 2015; Nyanenkova, 2017). Chiang Mai is geographically unique to other popular tourist destinations in Thailand. It provides traffickers with access to a vulnerable population of individuals, as the city is a choice destination for migrants from Myanmar and ethnic minorities from hill tribes in Northern Thailand who seek financial stability for themselves and their families (Mon, 2010; Rijken et al., 2015; Hawke & Raphael, 2016). Discrimination among this group stems from ethnicity, lack of education, and use of informal-Thai, as Thai is often a second language to those of hill-tribe descent. Construction, service industry, or other low skill jobs are offered to these young men but pay a fraction of the minimum wage, entail long working hours, and unfair treatment, including verbal and physical abuse (McCamish, 2002; Pangsapa, 2009; Mon, 2010; Huguet, 2014). Many migrants in Thailand working these below-minimum wage jobs are sending money to support family members and do not have savings to withstand the loss of income that leaving that job would entail—even a job where their treatment is very poor (Huguet, 2014). Because of conditions at these jobs, working in the sex industry may seem more appealing option to make money and provides opportunity for more control in working hours. Matthew Grieger (2012) provides extensive analysis linking labor exploitation to sexual exploitation in his 2012 study conducted in Chiang Mai on young *Akha* (a hill tribe of northern Thailand and SE Asia) males working as freelancers in the sex industry.

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<sup>5</sup> The authors are relying on Human Rights Watch's English translation of the law. No English translation of the legislation was available at the time of publication.

All twelve respondents worked several legal jobs (construction, restaurants, parking attendants, etc.) before entering into the sex industry, and cite bullying, low wages, and other forms of discrimination while working these jobs as motivating factors for entering sex work.

With no legal protections in place for stateless people and refugees in Thailand, young men and boys within this population seek income within the sex trade because they believe they can receive stable employment and make considerably larger sums of money than working in traditional jobs (i.e. construction, restaurant work, labor) (McCamish, 2002; Grieger, 2012). Bill Frelick, Refugee Program director for Human Rights Watch, states that “Thailand presents Burmese refugees with the unfair choice of stagnating for years in remote refugee camps or living and working outside the camps without protection from arrest and deportation” and further cites police intolerance for these stateless citizens (Human Rights Watch, 2012). The current laws in Thailand consider migrants located outside government-established refugee camps to be illegal and subject to indefinite detention if caught (US Department of State, 2016). Thailand is still not a member of the UN Refugee Convention of 1951 and currently lacks laws regulating the granting of refugee status to these migrants. Workers therefore may feel unsafe to report human rights abuses for fear of deportation or arrest (Hector et al., 2012; Human Rights Watch, 2017b).

A 2010 study (Guadamuz et. al.) of males in the sex trade in Chiang Mai found that the majority of the non-Thai males (64.8%) interviewed from 14 different establishments to be of *Shan*<sup>6</sup> ethnicity (from the Shan state of Myanmar) highlighting the prevalence of this ethnic group in Thailand’s male sex industry and the potential for abuse and exploitation of this people group. Grieger’s (2012) conversations with young *Akha* freelancers in the sex trade industry also indicate the majority of the young men selling sex in Chiang Mai are known to Thai’s as *Thai-Yai* (ethnic *Shan*). The vulnerabilities of these males as stateless individuals provide bar owners with increased control, as they often hold copies of the young men’s passports, other identification (if they have any) or work permits to provide security for buyers<sup>8</sup> (McCamish, 1999; Mon, 2010). It is possible for some young men to obtain permits to work in bars such as those in Chiang Mai, even without proper identification; however, this can be a lengthy and expensive process (Forced Migration Online, 2011). For the young men working in venues where transactional sex is available or other labor sectors, possession of a work permit does not necessarily mitigate risk for exploitation, when exploitation is largely based on their ethnic minority or immigration status (Grieger, 2012). The Human Rights Watch (2010) explains that employers often retain all original paperwork regarding registration for a work permit, giving the employer full control over monitoring of their employees in addition to preventing them from moving from job to job.

There are recent reports of a resurgence in the Night Bazaar’s (a popular tourist destination in Chiang Mai) gay nightlife mentioning hilltribe, *Thai Yai* and Laotian “freelance money boys” available for sexual services (Edwards, 2017b). In Issue 80

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<sup>6</sup> Many of the immigrants in northern Thailand are from the area bordering northern Thailand, known as the “Shan state” of Myanmar.

<sup>7</sup> In Thailand, the ethnic Shan individuals are collectively known as the Thai-Yai ethnic group. Use of Shan and Thai-Yai are interchangeable in this text.

<sup>8</sup> The buyer is reassured that the owner of the establishment can exercise authority over an employee should the transaction not be satisfactory.

(2017b) of the free gay focused publication *ThaiPuan*, David Edwards tells a “typical” (p.32) story of a Shan boy who ends up in the sex industry, calling him “jungle boy,” referring to the jungles of eastern Myanmar from which many of migrants come:

By the time he reached fifteen, jungle boy had grown into a fit muscular young man, ideal fodder for his refugee camp’s traffickers to sell on the Chiang Mai’s virulent construction industry. Here he worked manual labor for several months, living on site in communal wooden shacks and working all hours for 150baht a day (\$5 US) which he often lost to Thailand’s merchants of law and order. Although tainted by amateur tattoos, the silky dark skin and bulging muscles, were his only benefits for his months of toil. Unlike the enormity of what he shows off nightly on stage, the choice to enter the sex business was easy (p. 33).

This “typical” story of a young Burmese migrant/refugee boy navigating networks of exploitation and trafficking (specifically child trafficking and potentially child sex trafficking) as the “easy” choice for employment. The fetishization of these young men who are victims of circumstance and exploitation is typical in advertising and promotion of establishments catering to tourists and the gay community throughout Thailand. In addition, this account further elucidates the challenges male ethnic minorities and migrants face when entering the workforce in traditional jobs, and is even more compelling when compared to similar findings from prior research showing these patterns of entry into the sex industry.

Tourists are guided to purchase sex at go-go (show) bars and karaoke bars as they are seen as “safer” venues than buying from freelancers. “Dangers” from buying sex from a freelancer stems from many of them not having proper ID. In addition, *The Gay in Chiang Mai* (2016) tourist guide provides further insight to structures in the sex industry of the city and protections for buyers within karaoke and go-go bars with this warning on their website:

Freelancers AT YOUR OWN RISK – Picking up freelancers or street boys (e.g. around Thapae Gate, the Night Bazaar Area or by the river) might be cheaper than going to a go-go [show] bar or Karaoke but you have no recourse if things go wrong. These guys are mainly from hill tribes, or Burma and often have no ID. Although there are no guarantees, at least in the Go-Go and Karaoke bars the owners should know who works for them, have registered them with the police and have copies of their IDs and work permits.

### **Entering Sex Work**

Generally, urbanization of rural populations puts young males at risk for sexual exploitation throughout South and Southeast Asia (McCamish, 2002; Rijken et al., 2015; Hawke & Raphael, 2016). A 2006 ECPAT study of young males in the sex trade in Bangladesh found that increased pressure on children to provide for their families in rural villages and provinces surrounding urban centers drove many to involvement in the sex industry (Ali & Sakar, 2006). Similar findings can be found in studies on males involved in the sex industry in Thailand (McCamish, 2002; Grieger, 2012), Cambodia (Blanch & Miles, 2012; Davis & Miles, 2012), and the Philippines (Davis & Miles, 2013). Respondents in these studies cite a range of vulnerability factors, including a lack of education or vocational training, a single or no parent family, family debts, ethnic minority status, and insufficient language skills, which appear to be linked with their entrance into the sex industry.

Grieger's (2012) study examined the male freelance sex industry in one of Chiang Mai's most popular tourist destinations. All respondents were of *Akha* hill tribe descent, and many of them were even from the same village. The phenomenon of boys and young men from similar hill tribe/ethnic origins building communities throughout the various venues of sex work seems to be a common theme throughout the male sex industry in Chiang Mai. Not only do young males working in the sex industry form communities on their own within the bars, they are frequently recruited by these establishments based on their body size or ethnicity. Malcolm McCamish (1999) points out these recruitment tactics of sex trade venues in Pattaya, a city in southern Thailand:

Though larger bars cater to a wide spectrum of client tastes, smaller bars sometimes exercise specific recruitment policies, targeting. . . the workers' geographical origins or body size. This means a worker should be able to find compatible workmates by carefully selecting the bar, and quickly discovering whether or not he fits into the environment (p. 164).

Finding "compatible" workmates often entails finding a bar where young males of similar ethnic descent are working. Northern Thailand is home to over ten hill tribe populations, all of which have different culture, languages, and customs (Schliesinger, 2000). Often, hill tribe rivalry, biases, or language barriers prevent these different groups from working well together. Compatibility of workers is important, as it is to any business, but these groups are often advertised as a selling point for the particular sex venues. McCamish's observations of male sex worker communities in Pattaya seem to mirror the communities in Chiang Mai's various male entertainment and sex trade establishments. The *Gay in Chiang Mai* website, a popular online destination for tourists seeking sexual services from males, includes this description of "The Mountain Boys of Chiang Mai" in its 2017 perspective on the gay scene in Chiang Mai:

Where Chiang Mai differs from other parts of Thailand is it is surrounded by jungle and mountains which is still home to many hill tribe people who are excluded from the benefits of Thai citizenship. Then across the border in Burma is the Shan State where poverty and lawlessness abound. The result is an influx of refugees and migrant people into Chiang Mai, many of these real mountain boys (Dek Bon Doi) still find the sex trade to be a better option than lowly paid, exploitative hard labour. That's not to say that exploitation isn't alive and well in the bar business too. Please remember many of these people are here as victims of human trafficking in one form or another. It is these guys, along with a few from Laos and Cambodia who now dwell in the gay bars of Chiang Mai hoping to meet affluent foreigners. And, it is the mountain boys who for many gay visitors are still Chiang Mai's greatest attraction.

Even with the acknowledgment that exploitation is going on in bars, the author glamorizes the plight of many individuals as an attraction for Chiang Mai. The author also confirms the exploitative nature of more traditional venues of employment leading many to enter into the sex industry. *Gay in Chiang Mai's* 2012 "Chiang Mai Gay Scene Overview" further acknowledges how ethnicity of men in the sex trade differentiates the city:

Something which differentiates Chiang Mai's commercial [sex] scene, from other cities like Bangkok and Pattaya, is that many of the male sex workers here are not Thai but come either from Burma or the various hill

tribe ethnicities of Northern Thailand. In fact, most of the guys working in Chiang Mai's go-go bars are Tai Yai refugees from the Shan State in Burma. With their own ethnic identity, different culture, and perhaps more masculine features [which] are different from boys in, for example, Pattaya, and who are more likely from Isaan, Cambodia or Laos.

### Social Hierarchy and Sexuality

It is important to preface a discussion on sexuality in Thailand and SE Asia with the understanding that concepts of sexual identity in the West cannot be applied to these cultures. Performing sex acts with someone of the same gender does not necessarily imply that an individual self-identifies as homosexual (De Lind van Wijngaarden, 1999; Jackson & Sullivan, 1999; Minichiello, Scott, & Callander, 2013; Friedman, 2013), and studies on men who have sex with men (MSM) indicate this as a theme throughout Thailand (Kunawararak et al., 1995; De Lind van Wijngaarden, 1999; Guadamuz et al., 2010), India (Davis, Thakur, & Miles, 2013), Cambodia (Blanch & Miles, 2012; Davis & Miles, 2012), and the Philippines (Davis & Miles, 2013). Because of the complexities in describing sexuality, especially in Thailand, it is common for men in the sex trade to also be referred to as “men who have sex with men” (MSM). Most of the NGO community working with this population describe individuals in this way, as this label does not denote sexuality and allows this group to be discussed collectively. When NGOs working with MSM groups in Thailand are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) focused, men who do not identify as a member of the LGBT community may be alienated and not seek needed services. Additionally, perceptions of hostility in public healthcare towards same sex relations may prevent these groups from seeking health care at all, as Lane et al. (2008) explains: “. . . [I]t may be the case that [non-gay-identified] MSM's strategy of avoiding homophobia in health care settings inadvertently causes these MSM to continue to compromise their own sexual health as well as the health of their male and female partners.”

In Thailand, contrary to strict western definitions regarding masculinity and sexuality, the partner who is penetrating in the sexual encounter “is relatively un-stigmatized and generally maintains his masculinity [even] in homosexual encounters” (Storer, 1999, p. 146). A complex social hierarchy based upon merit exists in Thailand and expectations from an individual in a higher social standing (i.e. the buyer) are assumed; these expectations may include sexual acts that a sex worker would not normally consider (De Lind van Wijngaarden, 1999). Though maintaining self-perceived and socially-accepted concepts of masculinity in the context of male sex work is important, the need for money and the sex worker's already vulnerable position may promote sexual behavior that the individual would not normally engage in (Minichiello et al, 2013).

Thailand's complicated pronoun system provides additional insight into the importance of social standing and hierarchy in Thai society. Unlike the English language, where the pronoun system must consider gender, number of individuals, and person, the Thai system of pronouns is much more complex and considers “. . . social identities and social status (e.g., age, sex, education, occupation, etc.), social and interpersonal relationships, and the social setting of the interaction and its level of formality” (Baron, 1998, p. 62). This may increase the vulnerability to exploitation of men who sell sex, especially with Thai buyers who maintain a position of power (De Lind van Wijngaarden, 1999; Minichiello et al, 2013). In a 1999 study in Pattaya, Thailand, McCamish highlights a preference for *farang* (foreign) buyers over Thai buyers because of foreigners' ignorance of these hierarchies in the

Thai social system. He further explains that “[w]orkers would be less likely to complain to a Thai client and would find it much harder to challenge a refusal to use condoms by a Thai, who would assume a socially superior position as a client”<sup>9</sup> (p. 173). A compromise in maintaining the “masculine” role in sex may be considered acceptable because it is a result of his lower status in Thai social hierarchy.

## **Conclusion**

Males in the sex trade in Thailand appear to be vulnerable to exploitation due to a variety of issues including ethnicity, immigration status, poverty, and lack of education. When compounded with Thai social structures, systemic complicity in government, lack of visibility, and lack of recognition as victims of trafficking, research indicates males face serious challenges in the sex industry.

## **METHODS**

Purposive and snowball sampling methodologies were used in gathering respondents for this study; researchers were limited to venues that allowed access to respondents. In approaching venue management, researchers would state that they were working alongside an organization that provides health services and educational opportunities for young males working in the sex industry. Additionally, management was informed that the survey’s purpose was to gain a better understanding of the needs of males in the sex industry so as to provide them with better care and resources in the future.

The study’s design employed a mixture of quantitative and qualitative research methodologies.<sup>10</sup> Structured interviews were conducted with 51 males involved in the sex industry from three geographical<sup>11</sup> areas within Chiang Mai, with the sampling included two groups of males in the sex industry: male masseurs (51% of sampling) and bar-based respondents (49% of sampling). Respondents within the bar-based category are broken into three subgroups: those working in karaoke television (KTV) bars, those working within show bars, and those working as freelancers within bars.

Three respondents in the study reported ages below the 18. The authors recognize Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) definition of a child as “...any human being below the age of eighteen years...” (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989), and further recognize UNCRC optional protocol defining child prostitution as “the use of a child in sexual activities for remuneration or any other form of consideration” which is unequivocally considered exploitation (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2000). Any participation in the sex industry by individuals under the age of 18 is considered child sex trafficking by default, as per Article 3 under the General Provisions of the United Nations “Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime” (United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, 2004). Special effort to disaggregate data involving children was made throughout this analysis.

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<sup>9</sup> Use of “client” and “buyer” vary throughout the literature. Etymology in other authors’ work are not meant to imply agreement in usage and connotations.

<sup>10</sup> IBM SPSS v. 20 and Google Sheets were used for qualitative and quantitative analysis respectively.

<sup>11</sup> Santitham, Night Bazaar, and Chiang Mai Land

The survey (see Supplemental Content) was made up of a combination of multiple choice and open-ended questions covering areas including: demographics, relationships, personal and family finances, issues of prejudice, stigma and discrimination, migration, sexual identity and personal sexual history, sexual health, substance abuse, sexual violence and abuse, income generation, and well-being. All interviewers were from the partner NGO, Urban Light, and were provided with careful research and ethical training using the United Nations Inter-Agency Project (UNIAP) on Human Trafficking<sup>12</sup> (2008) ethical guidelines to ensure that respondents were provided with respect and that culturally appropriate language was used before, during, and after each interview. As a precaution, all interviews were held in public venues within close range of other members of the research team to ensure safety and accountability. All respondents were offered services from Urban Light and follow up was made. Additional rapport building by Urban Light was conducted in subsequent weeks and months following surveying.

All interviews were conducted in the Thai language by three native Thai speakers and one Thai-fluent expatriate. Interviewers sought to establish rapport with respondents prior to the survey and provided each respondent with information concerning the following: the research and its purpose; assurance of anonymity and confidentiality; information regarding the personal and sensitive nature of the interview questions; and the individual's right to choose not to answer any question, stop the survey, and/or withdraw from the study at any time. Respondents were compensated for their time with 150-baht phone card worth of phone minutes (roughly ~\$5) or a meal if they chose.

## RESULTS

### Demographics

Of the 51 respondents, ages ranged from 15 to 35 years of age, with a mean age of 22.2 (Table 1a). Three respondents in the study disclosed ages under 18, one 15 years of age, and two 17 years of age, with more than 80% of all respondents falling within the United Nations (UN) definition of “youth”, which is 15 to 24 years. These ages are “. . . best understood as a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood's independence” (United Nations, 1981). Within each sector of the sex industry, age distribution of the surveyed group varied (Table 1b). Nearly all respondents were found to be members of various ethnic minority groups from Thailand and nearby Myanmar. The majority of respondents (61%, 22 people) indicate that they were born in Thailand— many from Isan or other ethnic minority areas of northwest Thailand and 39% (14 people) were born in Myanmar.

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<sup>12</sup> UNIAP Guide to Ethics and Human Rights in Counter Trafficking: Ethical Standards for Counter-Trafficking Research and Programming: <http://un-act.org/publication/view/guide-ethics-human-rights-counter-trafficking/>

**Table 1.** Demographic information including (a) age distribution of all respondents and (b) age distribution across all sectors of the sex industry surveyed. Highlighted in red are individuals that are unequivocally considered victims of child sex abuse, trafficking, and exploitation per UN definitions.

a. Ages of respondents			b. Ages by sector of work							
Age	Overall		Male Massage		Showbar		Freelancers in Bars		KTV Bars	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	% of sector	Freq.	% of sector	Freq.	% of sector	Freq.	% of sector
15 - 17	3	5.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	37.5	0	0.0
18 - 21	20	39.2	9	34.6	5	71.4	1	12.5	5	50.0
22 - 25	21	41.2	11	42.3	2	28.6	3	37.5	5	50.0
26 +	7	13.73	6	23.1	0	0.0	1	12.5	0	0.0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>100</b>

Among the 36 people who disclosed their birthplace, nearly all (33 or 92%) report migration to the Chiang Mai area, with a significant portion (39%, 14 people) indicating migration from neighboring Myanmar. Information regarding immigration status stems from asking respondents their place of birth. Close to one-third of total study respondents (15 people) did not disclose immigration or migration information to researchers. Along with the large proportion of trans-border migrants, qualitative data indicates that many respondents had migrated from tribal/ethnic minority areas in Thailand, with informal conversations before and after interviews and interviewer familiarity with *Thai Yai* and *Akha* dialects as main indicators, besides place of birth. Ethnic minority status was not explicitly asked, though only one respondent specifically indicated to be Thai, with no minority status.

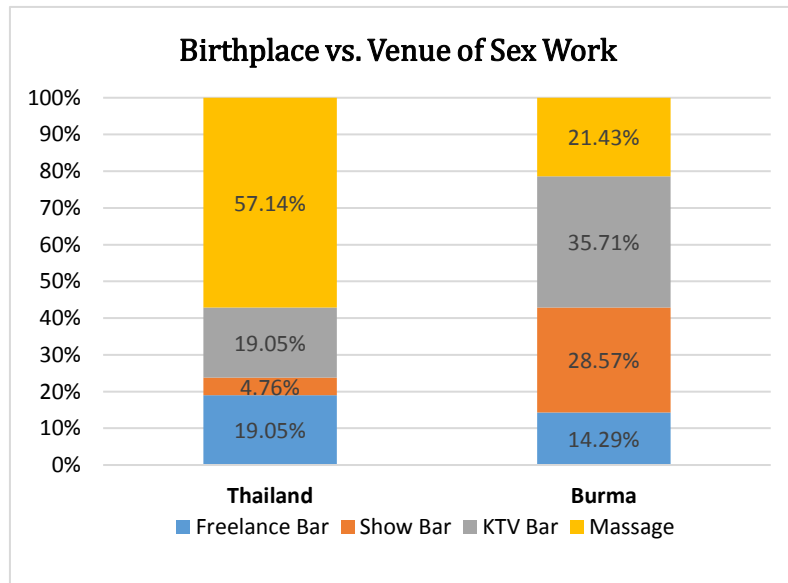
Comparing total respondents, one-in-five (10 people) cite having no formal education and 4 in 5 (38 people) cite ending their education before the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, to a lesser extent, one in 10 (5 people) indicate having some post-secondary education and one indicate completing college (*Table 2a*). Levels of education seem to be directly linked to birthplace, as there are notable educational differences exist between trans-border migrants from Myanmar and those migrating from ethnic minority areas in Thailand (*Table 2b*). In particular, educational attainment is significantly lower among Burmese migrants.



**Table 2.** Comparing the levels of education from all respondents (a) and between Burmese migrant and Thailand born non-migrant respondents (b). Individuals born in Burma have lower levels of education than those born in Thailand. Some individuals who disclosed education did not disclose their birthplace, thus the data of 35 people is presented in the comparison of education and country of origin.

a. Overall Education			b. Education by Country of Origin			
Highest Completed Grade in School	Overall		Born in Thailand		Born in Myanmar	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
No Schooling	10	20.41	2	9.52	7	50.00
Up to Fourth Grade	1	2.04	0	0.00	0	0.00
4th to 6th Grade	8	16.33	2	9.52	3	21.43
7th to 9th Grade	20	40.82	12	57.14	2	14.29
10th to 12th Grade	5	10.20	1	4.76	2	14.29
Vocational College	1	2.04	1	4.76	0	0.00
Diploma	1	2.04	0	0.00	0	0.00
University	3	6.12	3	14.29	0	0.00
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>100</b>

Burmese immigrants and northern Thai migrants tended to populate different areas of the male sex industry in Chiang Mai (*Figure 1*). The majority of Thais, or 57% (12 people), were found to be working within male massage establishments, while a strong majority of Burmese migrant worker—nearly 80% (11 people)—were found to be working within bar based establishments.



**Figure 1.** Thai (22 people) and Burmese (14 people) respondents’ employment in various sectors of the sex industry. Country of origin was determined by respondents’ reported place of birth.

Among the 48<sup>13</sup> respondents who had migrated to Chiang Mai, two-thirds (66%) cite doing so in search of work. Seventy-one percent of Burmese migrants (10 people) indicate actively sending their earnings from selling sex home in support of family members, with some supporting sick or elderly parents living in provincial areas and others supporting the education and/or financial needs of younger siblings. The following are direct quotes from five respondents regarding what income is used for:

“I send 5,000THB/month to family. Our financial situation is not good because my Dad is sick and I have to take care of him.”- KTV Bar employee, age 22

“[I’m] taking care of parents, younger brother and younger sister.” - Male masseur, age 18

“My biggest obstacle is the need of money for my family.” - Freelancer, age 23

“My room has to be paid and my girlfriend is pregnant and I’m not ready.”  
- Freelancer, age 17

Twenty-one respondents (41% of total respondents) suggest they entered into the sex trade due to their economic circumstances. The vast majority of this group (81%) cite that they are responsible for sending their earnings home in support of family members. In addition to those entering their current work for financial reasons, six respondents (12%) cite entrance into the work because they had “no other options”.

### **Personal Sexual History**

Respondents were asked a series of questions regarding their first sexual experiences. These experiences denote sexual intercourse (consensual or coerced) and may exclude some forms of unwanted sexual touching which may have happened prior to respondents’ subjective label as their “first sexual experience.” The ages at which these first sexual experiences took place ranged by 13 years, the youngest at age 9 and the oldest 22. Respondents cite their first sexual partners, on average, to be more than 2.5 years older than them; the youngest partner is cited to have been nine years of age (the same age as the respondent at the time), and the oldest partner is cited to have been 41 years of age (the respondent being 17 at the time). Twenty-one percent of first sexual experiences qualify under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as adult-to-child sexual abuse (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989). Two experiences were described as being forced. In both cases, the perpetrators were adult females (31 and 19 years of age), with respondents reporting ages of 16 and 15 years, respectively, at the time of occurrence. Among all respondents, slightly more than one in four, or 26%, indicate that their first partner was a male and 72% indicate that their first partner was female.

The majority of respondents (69%, 35 people) identified as a male preferring sex with females, and 20% (10 people) as a male preferring sex with other males.

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<sup>13</sup> These respondents gave a reason for “migrating” to Chiang Mai. Twelve respondents who did not disclose “place of birth” did give reasons for “migrating” to Chiang Mai, hence the discrepancy between 36 immigrants/migrants mentioned above and those 48 mentioned here.

Lastly, 12% (6 people) identified as a male having equal preference for sex with both males and females alike<sup>14</sup>.

### Transactional Sexual Experiences and Payment

Respondents entered into the sex trade at mean age of 20 years. The ages of entrance into the sex industry ranged 14 years, the youngest beginning at 13 and the oldest at 27 (*Table 3a*). Eleven people (21.5%) report entering into the sex trade before the age of 18. Slightly less than half (45%) report entering the sex trade before the age of 20. All but five respondents (90%) indicate beginning at ages within, or before, the UN definition of “youth” (United Nations, 1981). Though all sectors of the sex industry analyzed had at least one respondent report entering the sex industry below the age of 18, 75% (six people) of the freelance sector respondents started selling sex before turning 18 years old.

**Table 3a & 3b.** Entry into the sex industry. a) Respondents’ reported ages of entry into the sex industry. b) Respondents’ perceived ages of when males enter into the sex industry.

a. Ages Respondents Entered Sex Trade																
	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	
Male Massage	1	0	1	0	2	0	5	3	2	4	3	1	2	1	1	
Show Bar	0	0	0	0	0	2	3	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	
Freelance-Bar	0	2	1	1	2	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
KTV Bar	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	3	1	2	0	1	1	0	0	
<b>Total:</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	

b. Respondents’ Perceived Ages of Males Entering the Sex Industry																
	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	
Male Massage	0	0	1	0	4	5	1	1	9	1	0	0	0	0	0	
Show Bar	0	0	0	0	2	4	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Freelance-Bar	0	2	2	1	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
KTV Bar	0	0	0	1	1	3	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	
<b>Total:</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	

Official employment in sex-trade establishments (massage parlors, KTV bars, show bars) requires an age of at least 18 years old, which is why there is perhaps

<sup>14</sup> In our group’s survey, descriptions of sexual orientation categories were used in place of international/western or colloquial terms denoting sexual orientation. This was done to avoid divergent interpretations of LGBT categorizations.

such a discrepancy between opinions/observations of freelance workers and those within establishments.<sup>15</sup> Thirty-four percent of respondents (15 people) believe males enter the sex industry before the age of 18 (Table 3b). Respondents report seeing males under the age of 18 actively involved in the sex industry as reasoning behind these reported ages. In addition to selling sexual services, 29% (13 people) of respondents report having been filmed or photographed for pornography. This was most common among those from show bars, where 5 of the 7 respondents indicate being filmed and one declined to respond.

Overall, 51.69% of buyers were perceived to be foreign. This varied significantly between different areas of the city. Respondents working within the Santitham area perceive 28% of their buyers to be foreign and respondents in Chiang Mai Land area perceive 19% to be foreign. This was significantly lower than those working within the Night Bazaar area, who perceive 82% of their buyers to be foreign, on average. These divergent rates are likely due to the fact that the Night Bazaar area is one that is more commonly visited by foreign tourists and backpackers, while other areas in Chiang Mai are more commonly visited by locals and some long-term expats. Females and transgender individuals were buyers of sex “in the past week” only at massage parlors and KTV bars. At the KTV bar, 60% of respondents (6 people) reported sex with a female client in the past week. A majority of these female buyers at the KTV bar were reported to be between the ages of 20-30 years old, by far the youngest buyers based on respondents’ estimated ages. Buyers of sex in other sectors were overwhelmingly reported to be over the age of 30 and up to 70 as the oldest. Total buyers across all sectors “in past week” are shown in Table 4a.

Respondents’ income from sex work is shown in Table 4b. Respondents from the freelance sector earn less than half of what respondents across other sectors earn and is the only sector where respondents earn less than the government mandated minimum wage (~6,000-7,500 THB/month). Data indicates a positive correlation between the frequency with which respondents meet buyers for sex and their reliance upon tips as their sole means of income (Table 4c). A notable proportion of respondents, or 43% (22 people) indicate that tips are their sole means of income, and they receive no form of regular wages. Less than one-third (15 people) indicate receiving a mixture of both wages and tips – the majority of this group came from respondents working in KTV bars. Though, at the time of data collection, these respondents reported receiving a salary, outreach efforts by Urban Light has found, following data collection, that employees of the bar were not being paid a salary, and employees relied on tips as the sole source of income. Respondents’ number of buyers within the past week ranged from zero to eight.

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<sup>15</sup> Established bars and entertainment venues legally cannot hire individuals under the age of 18 per the Public Entertainment Place Act of 1966.

**Table 4a, 4b, & 4c.** Payment and buyer information. (a) Buyer demographics across all sectors. Men, women, and trans people are buyers of sex with males. (b) Reported weekly income and calculated monthly income. Calculated USD is based on 31 THB per 1 USD (2013) (c) Income sources among respondents across different sectors. There seems to be a positive correlation between respondents reliance on tips as their sole source of income and their frequency of meeting buyers of sex.

#### Transactional Sexual Experiences:

##### a. Buyer Demographics

	Buyers Last Week	Male Buyers	Female Buyers	Trans Buyers	Sex Last Week	Sex Last Day
<b>Sum</b>	165	139.5	22.5	17	76	33
<b>Responses</b>	40	37	32	29	39	40
<b>Average</b>	4.13	3.77	0.70	0.59	1.95	0.83

##### b. Income By Sector

Earnings			
	One Week Sex Work (THB)	Monthly Calculated (THB)	Monthly Calculated (USD)
<b>Male Massage (n=22)</b>	฿3,481.82	฿13,927.28	\$449.27
<b>KTV Bar (n=5)</b>	฿3,720	฿14,880	\$480.00
<b>Showbar (n=6)</b>	฿3,383.33	฿13,533.32	\$436.56
<b>Freelance Bar (n=3)</b>	฿ 1,450.00	฿5,800	\$187.10

##### c. Reliance Upon Tips Versus Frequency of Sex With Buyers

	Tips as sole income		Salary & Tips		Average # of buyers met for sex in the past week
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Past week average:
<b>Male Massage</b>	14	54%	4	15%	2.7
<b>Showbar</b>	5	71%	2	29%	2.8
<b>Freelance-Bar</b>	3	38%	0	0%	1
<b>KTV Bar</b>	0	0%	9	90%	0.7
	22	43%	15	29%	1.8

##### Male Massage

Modes of payment among male masseurs vary from establishment to establishment. In some establishments, masseurs are known to receive a small portion of the base fee that is paid to the establishment for the massage services; however, the majority of male masseurs (54%, 14 people) report that tips are their only form

of income and that they receive no salary. Several of the massage establishments offer both erotic and traditional massages and required minimum tips to masseurs depending on the massage given.

### **Show Bars**

While the number of respondents coming from show bars is small (7 people), it is notable that respondents working within show bars indicate the greatest reliance on tips among all other outlets of the male sex trade. A strong majority of this group (71% or 5 people) indicate that their income is solely dependent upon the tips received from buyers with no other form of regular salary. Only one out of the five establishments approached were willing to grant field researchers access to respondents. Because of this, the scope of understanding on the systems of pay within these establishments is limited.

### **Freelancers Working in Bars**

Findings from field interviews, coupled with qualitative field data indicate that the majority of freelancers are not directly connected to the bars in which they work. Prices for sex work are typically negotiated on a client-by-client basis. Two respondents surveyed in the freelance bar were officially employed by the bars and sold sex outside of work time. They also provided sexual services within the establishment to supplement their income. In addition to providing sexual services, young men working in the freelance bars will give massages for tips and will be given a small fee from the bar if a client buys him a drink. The current study's youngest respondent (age 15) reported giving massages at the bar for tips as his primary source of income.

### **KTV Bars**

Respondents from KTV Bars reported that they were able to make a maximum guaranteed salary of 100 THB a day (~3.25 USD<sup>16</sup>), which would be equivalent to 3000 THB a month (~100 USD) if they are able to work every day. All other income is from tips.

### **Violence and Sexual Abuse**

Sexual violence and abuse among respondents was reported, with the rates of forced or coercive sex markedly higher among respondents from bar-based establishments (*Figure 2*). Six people (12%) indicate forced sex happens "always," one person states that this happens "very often," and four people indicate that this happens "sometimes." Three out of five, or 60% of respondents report instances of unwanted sexual touching with the past 12 months. One third of this group state that this happens "always," 11% state this happens "often," and another third state that this has happened "a few times." All but two indicate this harassment is from their buyers.

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<sup>16</sup> Baht to dollar conversions are based on 2013 values of approximately 31 THB/1 USD: <https://tradingeconomics.com/thailand/currency>



**Figure 2.** Violence and sexual abuse experienced among respondents.

### Emotional Well Being

Twenty-two respondents (43%) indicate experiencing stigma or discrimination due to their presence in the sex industry. Of this group, 45% (10 people) indicate this stigma or discrimination comes from friends, 18% (4 people) indicate family, 18% (4 people) indicate strangers, and 14% (3 people) note various other sources of stigma and discrimination. The majority said that they do not regularly experience stigma or discrimination due to their work.

Respondents were asked to recount negative feelings associated with their work over the past 12 months. Most prevalent were feelings of shame, reported by 20 individuals, 49% of total respondents (41 people), followed by low self-esteem reported by 15, or 37% of respondents. Guilt was reported by nearly one-third of respondents (13 people). Other negative emotions associated with their work were self-blame reported by 15% (six people) and feelings that they should be punished reported by 10% (four people). A majority of respondents (65%, 35 people) indicate that their family members were unaware of their work in the sex industry and one in four indicate that they had not disclosed their work to their partners (spouses, girlfriends/boyfriends). Respondents migrating from Myanmar were found to be significantly less likely to have disclosed their work to their families compared to those who report having been born in Thailand. More than half of respondents born in Thailand report that their families were unaware of their income source in Chiang Mai, while 79% (11 people) of those born in Myanmar report their families were unaware of the source of their income. Both migrant and non-migrant respondents report fears and/or apprehensions about disclosing their income source to family members. Some respondents indicate that lying or telling half-truths to parents would hurt or worry them if they knew the truth.

## **Access to Sexual Health Education and Services**

Among the 30 respondents who met at least one buyer for sex within the past week, four (13%) indicate that they did not use a condom and two respondents indicate that they have never used a condom ever. Condom use and sexual health education was found to be lowest among freelance sex workers. Among the eight freelance sex workers, six met buyers for sex within the past week, but only one indicates using a condom, a notable difference from other sectors of the sex trade where the majority indicate consistent condom use.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Key Vulnerabilities to Exploitation and Violence: Overall Themes and By Sector**

Overall, the current study finds that respondents' immigrant and ethnic minority statuses present the largest vulnerability to the male sex worker population in Chiang Mai, something that has been well documented as a high-risk factor (Pangsapa, 2009; Hoctor et al., 2012; Grieger, 2012; Huguet, 2014; Rijken et al, 2015; Gay Chiangmai, 2017). Fourteen respondents (39%) reported birth in Myanmar, while 29% of total respondents (15 people) did not disclose place of birth to the research team.<sup>17</sup> With the current study population, this lack of information presents a gap in our understanding of migration and origins of male sex workers. Though only 14 (27% of total people in the study) individuals disclosed that they were from Myanmar, that number could indeed be much higher. Non-disclosure is no surprise, given the penalties illegal migrants face if they are caught working in Chiang Mai. Urbanization and migration of these groups to city centers such as Chiang Mai are largely motivated by financial needs, as 62% of total respondents (31 people) state that they came to Chiang Mai for work or money. Sex work is highly incentivized, with pay usually exceeding double the minimum wage in Thailand (300 THB/ day or ~6,000-7,500 THB/month)<sup>18</sup>. Freelance sex workers are the only group who report weekly earnings from sex to be less than the equivalent of Thailand's legal minimum wage. Because such a large portion of respondents (69%, 33 people) are supporting their family members, socioeconomic status of family needs to be considered a key vulnerability among males in the sex trade in Chiang Mai.

Based on previous studies and information gathered from gay tourist guides online, many males enter the sex industry in Chiang Mai due to wage withholding and discrimination in traditional job sectors (e.g. construction service industries, parking attendant etc.) stemming from their ethnic minority or immigrant statuses (Mon, 2010; Grieger, 2012; Huguet, 2014; Edwards, 2017a; Gay Chiang Mai, 2017; US Department of State, 2017). Information describing discrimination in various job sectors outside the sex industry is backed by reports received by Urban Light during weekly outreach efforts following data collection. Several respondents seeking alternative work from the KTV sector reported inability to find minimum wage jobs because of their ethnicity and, in a few cases, lack of government issued ID. Though respondents of all establishments included in the current study seem to have ability to come and go freely, the lack of access to viable (both psychological

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<sup>17</sup> Forty-eight individuals cited reasons for migration to Chiang Mai, with the remaining three reporting their origins in Chiang Mai. Only 36 individuals disclosed place of birth.

<sup>18</sup> Minimum wage based on 2013 rate.



and financial) alternative employment limits their exit from the sex trade. Respondents who reported entering the sex industry because it presented “easy work/schedule” (25%, or 13 people) mirrors findings from other studies analyzing the male sex industry (McCamish, 1999; Grieger, 2012). It should be no surprise that many respondents in the current study report entering the sex industry because the work is “easy” and the schedule flexible when compared to the long hours worked in previous jobs where discrimination, bullying, and lack of pay abound.

Nearly 50% of respondents reported that they “would” or “maybe would” (17 people, 33.3% and 7 people, 13.7%) take a job offering 6000 THB/month as an alternative to their current income generation. Prior negative work experience in non-sex work income generation potentially motivated the remaining 28 respondents (55%) to flatly say they would not take a minimum wage job. Weitzer and Ditmore (2010) explain that many “. . . [sex] workers . . . whether trafficked or not, want to leave the sex industry, yet other employment options offering livable wages are woefully lacking” (p. 344). Additionally, Thai culture places high levels of pressure on older males to provide for their family, including younger sibling’s education costs and for emergency expenditures. McCamish (2002) further explains that parents receiving money from their sons earning income through sex likely would not accept lower remittances if their sons were to leave the industry and potentially make lower wages. He points out that this may be one of the greatest motivating factors for young males to continue sex work. In the current study, 69% (35 people) of respondents report sending money home to support their families, with many paying for expenses such as medical costs for parents and education for younger siblings. Respondents not sending money home to their families (primarily respondents from the freelance sector) may be engaging in “survival sex” just to meet their basic needs, especially troubling in the case of minors:

“[Earning money from sex] is against what I want to do, but I have no choice. It is necessary.” — Freelancer, 17 years old

Ultimately, individuals must negotiate between levels of exploitation, individual agency, discrimination, and need for money in their decision whether to pursue traditional jobs or sex work. As Grieger (2012) mentions in his study related to *Akha* freelance sex workers, all respondents worked in traditional job sectors upon arrival to Chiang Mai. Discrimination, bullying, and lack of minimum wage pay, attributed to minority status, made these jobs unviable, demoralizing, and exploitative. Work in the sex trade, though exploitative by nature, can provide a work environment where minority or immigrant status may not be detrimental to earnings or self-esteem (Weitzer, 2009; Shulich, 2005 as cited in Grieger, 2012; Grieger, 2012). Despite 49% (20 people) and 37% (15 people) of respondents reporting “feelings of shame” and “low self-esteem” respectively, positive attitudes towards sex work compared to previous work experiences should be taken into account in future studies. Was previous work so unviable that sex work became the only option? Grieger’s findings support this, though the intersections of labor exploitation and sexual exploitation need to be further investigated.

There are myriad modes of entry into the sex industry, and prevention cannot be pinpointed by a single factor. Grieger cites current literature and NGO claims that obtaining proper identification is the primary way of preventing trafficking, yet these claims are only substantiated in theoretical terms (*i.e.* all laws and rights regarding citizenship will be enforced and granted to individuals). If ethnic minorities are denied legal protection by police and other officials (US Department of

State, 2016; Robinson et al., 2016; Pring, 2017) and continue to be victims of social sanctions because of various factors, including low levels of education, minority status, and informal Thai language skills (Toyota, 2006; Rijken et al., 2015; Nyanenkova, 2017), a government ID does not solve potential risks for exploitation. Of the 12 respondents in Grieger's 2012 study, 100% possessed a Thai ID card, with an additional 15 out of 16 other male freelance sex workers not formally interviewed for the study all possessing proper government-issued ID. Though ID was sometimes obtained through illegal or unofficial means, it may be concluded that proper identification is not an end-all solution to male sexual exploitation or male sex work in Thailand. This *caveat* needs to be made and other factors examined.

The largest study conducted to assess citizenship among ethnic minorities in Thailand (Thai ID cards holders) was the 2006 United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Highland People's Survey which found that out of the 63,724 people surveyed in 192 Thai-Burmese border hill tribes, 37% did not have Thai citizenship or proper identification (Clement, 2011). Migrants and ethnic minorities can expect higher wages from having identification/paperwork, though it does not prevent exploitative employment practices. The United Nations Thematic Working Group on Migration in Thailand cites in its 2014 Thailand report that 35% of migrants possessing proper paperwork earn less than minimum wage (Huguet, 2014). Having proper identification or paperwork does, however, have a direct effect on education rates among ethnic minorities in Thailand. UNESCO (2011) surveyed over 71,012 people in "highland<sup>19</sup> [Thailand-Burma] border villages" and found that those lacking citizenship (*i.e.* Thai ID or government paperwork) were 73%, 94%, and 98% less likely than ethnic Thais to enter primary school, secondary school, and higher education respectively. Respondents in the current study similarly had low levels of education attainment: 20.4% (10 people) had no schooling at all; 18.3% (9 people) had primary education or below; 40.8% (20 people) reached grade 9 with an additional 10% (5 people) finishing high school. Only 10% (5 people) of respondents had some post-secondary schooling. Disparities in education among Burmese immigrants and Thai natives further elucidates incentives for many individuals to enter into the sex industry. Low education rates limit job opportunities and drastically increase individual's' vulnerability to exploitation in any job sector.

A significant number of males may be entering and actively involved in the sex industry as children, as 21.5% (11 people) of respondents report their entry into the sex industry under the age of 18. Although only three respondents reported ages less than 18, our field team felt that a number of individuals at the KTV bar looked younger than their reported age, though no official confirmation was made of this (*i.e.* by looking at ID cards). Additional evidence is provided by respondents; fifteen (34%) reported that they perceived the age when males enter the sex industry is below 18. Clearly, minors are trafficked and exploited across all sectors of Chiang Mai's sex industry, further evidenced by at least two respondents in each sector reporting that they believe males enter under the industry under the age of 18. Additional evidence of child exploitation and sex trafficking comes from a 2016 study surveying "street-involved children" (*i.e.* children living and exploited for work on streets) in Chiang Mai. It found that ethnic minorities make up the majority (61%) of those surveyed, with 38% of all respondents starting street work (*i.e.* selling flowers etc.) to support their families. An additional 16% describe exchanging sex

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<sup>19</sup> Ethnic minorities in Thailand are often known as "highlanders." This survey included ethnic-Thais (those with citizenship).

for material items or money. This population of children is clearly at high risk for entering the sex industry and the results from this study provide some of the clearest and most recent evidence of child exploitation and sex trafficking in Chiang Mai (Davis & Fiss, 2016).

Despite Thailand's reputation as a sex-tourism destination and perception that the sex industry is driven by, and largely caters to, western tourists (Mutchler, 2005; Kontogeorgopoulos, 2016), a slight majority of respondents reported buyers (51%) were perceived to be Thai, a trend also previously reported by Hawke & Raphael (2016). Amounts of foreign versus Thai buyers varied in each sector, though estimates seem to be dependent on neighborhood location in Chiang Mai. Thai social structures place these young men earning income in the sex industry at high risk for exploitation, especially when the buyer is Thai. As McCamish highlights, challenging a Thai client to use safe sex practices or to not perform certain sex acts becomes difficult, especially as ethnic minorities and immigrants lay at the bottom rungs of Thai social hierarchies. Women and trans individuals are also identified as buyers of sexual services in Chiang Mai's male sex industry, challenging assumptions that only men are buyers of sex (Dennis, 2008; Jones, 2010).

Field researchers in the current study had the opportunity to speak with some male Chinese tourists patronizing a show bar. The tourists described their trip to Chiang Mai as a "freeing experience," relating that in their hometowns in China, non-heteronormative sexual practices or relations had a stigma attached that prevented them from living openly. As a tourist in Chiang Mai, these tourists felt unjudged to be in a male show bar and be open about their sexuality. Whether or not these Chinese men purchased sex is unknown, but upon entry to the bar, all patrons are told by a host that all young men are available to "go home" with customers. Stigma and discrimination of LGBTQ groups in home countries of tourists may indeed be a driving force for many to seek and purchase sex in at male entertainment and sex trade venues in Thailand.

### **Bar-Based Respondents**

This group (25 people) includes respondents from KTV bars, show bars, and respondents working as freelancers not directly employed by bars. On average, respondents earning income in these venues were found to be 2.5 years younger than those working in massage establishments. Bar-based respondents reported higher rates of alcohol consumption and were found to be significantly more likely to be under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol during sexual encounters with buyers, relative to respondents from massage establishments. Additionally, bar-based sex trade establishments were the only outlet where individuals under the age of 18 disclosed participation in transactional sex with adults. This meets UNCRC definitions of child abuse and exploitation, along with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights' definition of child sex trafficking. Bar-based establishments were also found to be a common place of income generation for trans-border migrants into Chiang Mai, with a strong majority of respondents having migrated from Myanmar (80%, 11 people) found to be working within these venues.

### **Freelancers Working in Bars**

Respondents from this group (eight people) were among the youngest of all respondents interviewed, with an average reported age of 20.75 years. Additionally, all respondents in this study reporting ages below 18 were receiving income as freelancers within bars. The two 17-year-old individuals reported meeting buyers for sex, while the 15-year-old reported never meeting buyers for sex, instead

earning tips from massages and drinks purchased for him. Respondents in Grieger's 2012 study also indicated receiving tips at the bar in exchange for touching buyers and having drinks bought for them at the bar. The 17-year-olds, and likely the 15-year-old, are unequivocally victims of child sex trafficking per UN definitions. Furthermore, 75% of all respondents reported entering into the freelance sector below the age of 18, and, by definition, are all considered victims of child sex trafficking and exploitation. This sector stands out as the highest risk area for child sex trafficking of all sectors surveyed. Entering the sex industry in this sector likely starts at a young age, with massages and tips from drinks as initial sources of income. The longer time individuals spend in this environment, the more likely individuals will be sexually exploited or trafficked.

Seemingly high frequencies of survival sex, or instances in which sexual services might be exchanged for basic needs, were observed among freelancers working in bars. Though anecdotal, survival sex is assumed if individuals aren't using their money to support family members or others; six freelance respondents (75%) report not sending money home. The *Gay in Chiang Mai* (2016) online tourist guide warns tourists that "[m]any [freelancers] are doing what they do because they have few choices and options in life and they are often just homeless street kids. Please understand their situation, show them respect and don't try to force them to do anything against their will." This provides further evidence of both child sex trafficking and high levels of "survival-sex" occurring in the freelance sector. The warning also tells buyers that many freelancers lack proper ID and no recourse can be made if a transaction goes unfavorably. The only individual in the current study who explicitly reported not having an ID card came from the freelance sector. Additionally, this is the only sector where respondents report earning less than Thailand's minimum wage.

Education rates are significantly lower among this group. While all respondents report having at least some form of primary education, it is significant that no one working within this group reports having an education beyond the eighth grade. In addition, members of this group indicated a very low awareness of sexual health issues and were found to be least likely to use condoms during sexual encounters with buyers. Substance abuse was also found to be a significantly higher for members of this group. More than half of respondents working as freelancers within bars, or 57% (4 people), indicate that they are "always" under the influence of alcohol while meeting buyers for sex (the 15-year-old is not included in this analysis). All respondents in this group report alcohol use.

### **Show Bars**

The majority of respondents at show bars reported ages between 18-21 years (20.6 years average) old and indicated the lowest levels of education among all groups interviewed, with 50% of the group having had no education at all. Individuals from this group indicated some of the highest frequencies of meeting buyers for sex and reported the second highest frequencies of being under the influence of alcohol during sexual encounters with buyers (second only to those working as freelancers in bars). Several data points coupled with field data and anecdotal information from former employees of show bars indicate high levels of vulnerability and structural exploitation. Not only were respondents from show bars found to be more likely to meet buyers for sex with a high-frequency, but they were also found to be the most reliant upon tips as their sole source of income.

While this initial data does raise some significant concern for the young males working within these establishments, it should be noted that this quantitative data

comes from a limited sampling. The denial of researchers' access to four out of five show bars infers highly problematic business practices likely to be occurring within these establishments. Management within the accessed show bar indicated that other show bars in the area are run very differently and that researchers would not likely be granted access—an assertion which proved to be true. This management also indicated that male show bars within the Chiang Mai area are understood to be homogeneously staffed with groups coming from tribal or ethnic minority areas—different show bars were usually comprised of different tribal groups, and it is cited that it is uncommon for these groups to mix, something also reported in online gay tourist guides and in previous literature. The majority of males working in this sector are from Myanmar, which other studies and the online *Gay in Chiang Mai* tourist guide points out (Guadamuz et. al., 2010; Grieger, 2012; Gay Chiangmai, 2017). Researchers did receive additional information regarding the inner workings of show bar environments by a KTV respondent formerly employed at a bar where access was denied to researchers (Showbar Case 1). The *Gay in Chiang Mai* tourist guide states that this particular unaccessed show bar is “. . . still the place to go. . . if you want to find more masculine, muscular Shan guys. . .” (Gay Chiangmai, 2017). This same tourist guide points out that most show bars are Thai-oriented, while the accessed bar is foreign run and caters more to tourists. For this reason, a full spectrum understanding of vulnerabilities of show bar males is incomplete.

Vulnerabilities factors include increased reliance on meeting buyers for sex, use of performance enhancing drugs, Thai-oriented clientele at bars, and a stressful work environment. In future studies, a broader sampling from a larger number of respondents working within show bars would be useful in order to verify these trends.

**Show-Bar Case Study 1.** Description of working conditions at unsurveyed show-bar. This description details high dependence on tips for income, short working hours, use of performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs), and high pressure to perform sex-work.

*Showbar Case Study: Because the research team was denied access to four out of the five showbars that they approached, overall information regarding the inner workings of the establishments is limited. Our team was, however, able to gather information from a former employee of a particular showbar (who is included as a KTV bar respondent within the current study) that had vehemently denied our team access during data collection. The respondent reported a much more stressful work environment in the showbar than at his current employment at the KTV bar. Though his hours at the KTV bar are much longer (9PM-6AM) than at the showbar (9PM-1AM), he reported that there was far less pressure in the KTV Bar to engage in sex work because there, he is a guaranteed base pay of 100Baht per night that he works and there is more opportunity to earn tips from serving drinks. The respondents indicated that he received no salary at the showbar where he was previously employed and his pay was entirely service-based, relying on tips from serving drinks and sex work. He also reported that some nights he would have sex with multiple customers (sometimes up to three) and needed to use performance enhancing drugs (PEDs) often. In addition, the respondent indicated that he was under greater pressure to engage in sex work at the show bar in that the establishment was only open 4 hours a night and there was no guaranteed salary, thus earning a living depended upon his ability to go home with customers. At the KTV bar, the respondent reported that he did not rely on PEDs as he did not leave the bar with multiple customers in one evening. Shorter working hours highly incentivized sex work at the showbar.*

*It is important to point out that this particular respondent was able to leave employment at this particular establishment and decided to begin working at a KTV bar located nearby. He reported higher satisfaction with the work at the KTV bar based on less pressure to do sex work outside of the bar.*

### **KTV Bars**

Respondents working within KTV establishments (10 people) were found to have a mean age of 21.5 years and were somewhat older than those working within other outlets of bar-based sex work. Half of respondents working within KTV establishments (five people) migrated from Burma and only one person had received higher than an eighth-grade education. While respondents working in KTV establishments indicated lower frequencies of meeting buyers for sex, they reported high frequencies of being forced to have sex against their wishes, with half of the group (5 people) indicating that sex with buyers is 'always' against their wishes. This is similar to what is reported by respondents from other outlets of bar-based sex work.

Respondents report earning 100 baht per day for a full evening working at the bar. This is well below Thailand's minimum wage salary of 300 THB a day (~10 USD), equivalent to 6,000-7,500 THB (~190-240 USD) a month for full-time work. This pay is only possible for a 30-day work month. Along with lengthy hours (9PM-6AM), working every day is exhaustive to near impossible. Though well below the Thai minimum wage of 300 THB a day, this base pay encouraged regular work attendance. Additionally, employees are fined 5 THB for every minute after 9PM that they show up (the 5 baht is subtracted from the base 100 THB pay). This fine system ensures that individuals show up on time; however, there is no requirement for them to show up every day. Because individuals working in this sector receive base pay, there seems to be less reliance on sex work for income. Five respondents (50%) report not sending money home to relatives, which may be an indication of survival sex among respondents in this sector.

Since completing data collection, follow-up with respondents working within in KTV bars have reported having not been paid the base salary of 100 baht for the past two months (at the time the follow up was done). Because of the lack of pay, several young men have quit working at the bar and bar ownership has been actively recruiting young men to fill these newly vacated positions, promising the base pay of 100 THB a day. Reportedly, the bar continues to forgo paying anyone. Tips are stated to have been the only source of income, though many respondents continue working at this KTV, as quitting would leave them jobless. Respondents who have quit have reported difficulty in finding alternative employment that would pay comparably (even without the base salary). Reasons cited include lack of education and their ethnic minority statuses. All data gathered regarding this group is based in the context of respondents receiving their base salary. Based on observations of other sectors, this discrepancy of pay encourages reliance on tips and increases vulnerability to engage in sex work in order to meet financial needs.

### **Massage Establishments**

Respondents from massage establishments (26 people) reported an average age of 23.5 years, 1.3 years older than the mean age of all respondents. While male masseurs were found to have slightly higher rates of education than those working in bar based establishments, 75% of respondents within this group reported that they had not received beyond a 9<sup>th</sup>-grade education and more than one in five (21%) having no education at all. Although all respondents from male massage establishments were expected to provide sexual services to buyers and also reported some of the highest frequencies of meeting buyers for sex within the past week, levels of vulnerability and agency in their sex work seemed to vary greatly between massage establishments. Some establishments functioned as a traditional job, where masseurs would arrive, work for a few hours, and leave. However, numerous

respondents indicated living at the massage establishment itself. Nearly half of respondents from one particular establishment reported living at the massage parlor and field data indicates this to be a common trend among other massage parlors.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### General Recommendations

While continued advocacy on sexual health issues is important, it is also important that government bodies and social service organizations are aware of the holistic needs that are present among males in the sex industry that go beyond solely providing sexual health education, condoms and STI checks. Education services should specifically focus on the development of young males as whole persons, providing them with emotional health, life skills, vocational skills development, and legal help alongside of necessary sexual health services. In addition, there is a need for both government and NGOs to take on and train young males coming from challenging social backgrounds, providing opportunities for finishing basic education and offering vocational training to young males who desire an alternative to involvement in the sex industry.

There is a need for the development of expanded outreach efforts to hill tribe areas that attempt to address some of the systemic “push factors” that drive young males into sexually exploitative careers, teaching the dangers of being involved in the sex trade and advocating for vocations that uphold the dignity of the individuals involved. It is important for NGOs to advocate the benefits of education and the development of practical vocational skills. In addition, there is a need for expanded aid to obtain appropriate government identification and citizenship which aids individuals’ ability to receive social services including healthcare, education, and a wider range of employment options. Additionally, the development of scholarship programs to keep students in school, especially high school, to help alleviate pressures of extra costs associated with attending high school (transportation, school meals, books, uniform, etc.) would be greatly beneficial for at-risk youth.

Social service organizations should work to educate law-enforcement officials in northern Thailand to understand the systemic needs and vulnerabilities of tribal and other migrant groups and provide training for officials on how to treat such groups with dignity and respect. A stronger collaborative stance and partnership between civil society stakeholders such as both regional police and military police and sectors of the government including social welfare department and the various ministries. The gap in shared information and transparency leaves the NGO sector and the public sector at a disconnect. Efforts have been made by Urban Light to bridge these gaps, however, the hierarchy of leaders and public opinion of NGO’s makes this a challenge.

The anecdotal evidence gathered in this research indicates that there is a high prevalence of child sex trafficking in Chiang Mai. Complicity in government officials charged with enforcing trafficking and exploitation laws needs to end. The government should seek to enforce current laws, specifically pursuing establishments that employ individuals under the age of 18, a violation of Thailand’s Public Entertainment Place Act of 1966 (Kingdom of Thailand, Amendment 47, Section 16.1 and 16.2). This would be a concerted effort to eliminate child sex trafficking and exploitation in the country. The building of trust between these government groups and locals/victims will greatly improve accountability and positive results

for those seeking justice and/or protection. Meanwhile, social service organizations should work with NGOs to lobby for the development of socially responsible businesses to provide such youth with viable employment alternatives to sex work. With the number of mobile ride-share apps launching in Chiang Mai including Uber and Grab Taxi, there is a new secrecy surrounding commercial sex venues. This has caused a diminished ability to track perpetrators through the support of the traditional *tuk-tuk* (taxi) drivers who were once willing to share information about new locations, brothel shut-downs and city-wide happenings in terms of trafficking and exploitation. It has been problematic for NGO outreach teams trying to reach these populations and provide services.

Lastly, it is important for child rights advocates work to dispel the common belief that boys and young men are independent agents and do not have significant vulnerabilities as females do. It is important that young males are incorporated into the language of vulnerability so as to normalize the understanding that exploitation of violence is a human issue—not merely an issue that affects females.

### Outcomes

The research team presented the results at several meetings, including two with the United States Consulate in Chiang Mai and major presentation at Chiang Mai University. Academics, NGO staff, Government social workers and the press were invited. Even the *Rangoon Times* and *Samui Times*<sup>20</sup> published articles expressing concern of the number of Burmese young men involved in the sex trade. There was a great deal of interest generated even among sex buyers who wrote to express an alternative perspective. In addition, the results of this research have been presented to the US Department of State Trafficking in Persons office and in the presence of diplomats in Thailand and around the world.

As a result of the research, the very real vulnerabilities of the young men were evident to the staff of our partner organization, Urban Light. Urban Light used the findings and assessments from this research to build upon existing programs including outreach expansion, from three areas to now 18, including street locations and high-risk areas of Chiang Mai where exploitation and trafficking are likely. They also gained credibility from donors and other NGOs for taking the initiative to fill the research and understanding gaps, on top of the ability to provide better services to beneficiaries.

### Recommendations for Future Research

The present study offers only an initial look at the visible surface of male sex industry in Chiang Mai. Additional baseline research is necessary to understand the wider spectrum of sexually-exploited males, including those groups that are not readily accessible and across multiple venues. Anecdotal information suggests that networks of young males are available through underground brothels and online services in the Chiang Mai area. With the increasing use and availability of mobile devices and high-speed internet, research in this area is needed. Future studies should work to partner with the social service sector to understand the needs and experiences of male survivors (particularly young boys) to inform anti-trafficking in persons and anti-sexual exploitation efforts towards these groups, as well as an analysis of the demand for males among both foreign and Thai clients.

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<sup>20</sup> See “Nyein” and “Male” in references for articles.



Our study suggests a high prevalence of child sex trafficking among boys in Chiang Mai and efforts need to be made to reach this group.

There is little understanding to what extent lacking proper identification puts men and boys at risk for exploitation. The 2017 TIP report indicates that Thailand has problematic procedures for handling non-ID holding foreign children whose families have been complicit in their trafficking. Additionally, the report states that boys in this situation are far more likely to be sent to juvenile detention centers rather than receive specialized services. It further acknowledges males as victims of both labor and sexual exploitation and explains flaws in the government's victim identification procedures allows for many victims to be re-victimized and treated as immigration violators. With the current body of literature, including Grieger's 2012 study, more research needs to be done to understand the effects of lacking identification and entry into the male sex industry. The current study did not explicitly ask respondents to provide identification or immigrant status, but there is evidence that a majority of individuals involved in sex work in Chiang Mai are ethnic minorities or Burmese migrants lacking proper government issued ID (Edwards, 2017a; Gay Chiangmai, 2017).

Deeper, qualitative research is needed to build on this initial baseline in order to bring a better understanding of the needs and vulnerabilities of sexually exploited males in Chiang Mai. In particular, qualitative work investigating family backgrounds and the various "push factors" that lead such groups into sexually exploitive fields of work would be greatly useful. In depth analysis of the intersections of labor exploitation and sexual exploitation may help in this area, investigating effects of citizenship/government documentation along with previous work experiences of respondents' modes of entry into those jobs. Patterns of migration and more pinpointed information on individual's origins may help create a better understanding of trafficking prevention methods. It would also be beneficial to conduct research that aims to develop a deeper understanding of "positive deviance", looking at young males who do not enter into the sex industry—even when their peers do—and the various factors that may prevent them from beginning such work.

## CONCLUSION

This study attempts to provide insight to the often overlooked needs and vulnerabilities of males working in sexually exploitive careers in Chiang Mai and create an impetus for expanded social work and advocacy for such groups.

This study revealed that a significant majority of males in the sex industry have come from various hill tribes in northern Thailand. Data collected from this study, coupled with the current, limited body of literature on male exploitation in Thailand underscores the reality that more attention needs to be paid to this population of people. Alarmingly, 1 in 5 respondents report entering into the sex industry before the age of 18, clear indications that child sex trafficking is occurring at a high rate in Chiang Mai. Only three of the current study's respondents reported ages below 18; however, there are anecdotally far more individuals involved in the sex industry in Chiang Mai. Two respondents are clear victims of child sex trafficking and exploitation. Additionally, individuals above the age of 18 describe abuse and exploitation indicated by high prevalence of unwanted touching and forced sex. Current Thai social structures, including its highly patriarchal foundations and marginalization of ethnic minorities perpetuate these vulnerabilities. With further

understanding of the issues that young males involved in the sex industry experience, government agencies, along with local NGOs, can potentially have great success in breaking the cycle of poverty and exploitation, which often includes males in the sex industry and other exploitive careers.

In the current donor climate, there is a great difficulty to find funding for services involving young men and research looking at the needs of these individuals. These funding shortfalls can largely be attributed to the lack of awareness that males *are* vulnerable to exploitation and are not innately strong and agents of their own destinies as many social and cultural beliefs may assume. It is vital that churches, NGOs, and government groups adopt a holistic and balanced understanding of human vulnerability. Rather than approaching issues of human trafficking and sexual exploitation from a gender-based perspective, it may be more helpful to approach such subjects as a *human issue*, encompassing males, females, and even the variety of identities in between. It is important that we understand males and females as human beings with hopes, desires, vulnerabilities and needs that require a thorough understanding in order to serve them appropriately, meeting their actual needs, rather than only the needs that we perceive them to have. Such an understanding comes only through careful research and increased advocacy.

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**Glenn Miles**, Ph.D., has worked for over 25 years focusing on children and young people in difficult circumstances in southeast Asia. He pioneered INGOs Servants to Asia's Urban Poor, Tearfund UK and Love146 in Cambodia and teaches on child rights, holistic child development and safeguarding in Wales and southeast Asia. He initiated a series of research projects on sexual exploitation; listening to boys, young men, women, and transgender survivors and perpetrators.

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

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