



Ping-Pong Hell

Thailand's sex-show industry is all about pain

TIEW, A 47-YEAR-OLD MIGRANT WITH BLEACHED HAIR AND MAHOGANY SKIN, remembers the night when razor blades lacerated her vaginal walls. After amusing a largely Western audience with bizarre tricks—using her vagina to extinguish a candle and her pelvic muscles to shoot out ping-pong balls—Tiew prepared for her grand finale. Offstage, she implanted a wire tightly coiled with steel razor blades into her vaginal cavity. Tiew planned to extricate the wire as she gyrated around a pole in front of her inebriated audience.

But suddenly, the Royal Thai Police flooded the stage with light. Alarmed women groped for their clothes, customers proclaimed their innocence, and the brothel's manager escaped through a rear exit. Completely naked, Tiew raced down three flights of stairs into Bangkok's notorious Patpong District. The blades sliced her open like a gutted fish. "I didn't know a person could feel so much pain," she remembers.

Vast economic disparities between tourists and Thai locals have long enabled foreigners in Thailand to request massages with "happy endings" or to "rent a girl-

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◀ A Thai exotic dancer waits for customers in Bangkok's red-light district.

friend/boyfriend” for a holiday. Now, the global economic crisis is spawning dangerous new ways to dehumanize women. During “exotic” dances, sex entertainers insert and extract everything from live animals to razor blades from their vaginas. Razor-blade tricks are “understood to be a job requirement in the bar-show setting where [johns] are sexually excited by the possibility of the genital mutilation of Thai women,” Melissa Farley, executive director of the San Francisco-based nonprofit Prostitution Research & Education, wrote in the journal *Violence Against Women* in 2004.

Ping-pong shows are a disturbing but logical extension of a deeply misogynistic sex industry, according to Catharine MacKinnon, the noted feminist law scholar, who is the Elizabeth A. Long Professor of Law at the University of Michigan Law School. “Pornography of Asian women sold in the West has been almost entirely a pornography of torture,” she writes in an email. “This is presenting that in the flesh.”

In Thailand, a tourist with money has unchecked power. “All forms of [sexual exploitation] are about comparatively rich men buying poor women,” writes MacKinnon. “Anything that accentuates that inequality increases the abuse that can be demanded,” and “anything that makes women relatively more powerless, including living in the global South, makes the abuse both sexier and easier to get away with.”

The World Bank estimated in 2008 that the average annual purchasing power of Thais is \$7,703 per person, compared to \$46,716 in the U.S. As a result of the current economic downturn, hundreds of factories have

closed across Thailand, leaving thousands jobless. Unemployment is rising at a rate of about 100,000 workers a month and may climb to 1.5 million this year. Thai women who have lost their jobs in villages often travel to such sex-tourism hotspots as Bangkok, Phuket and Pattaya for work.

When Tiew was widowed in her early 20s, she migrated with her young daughter from northeastern Thailand to Bangkok to work at a plastic factory, where she earned 15 Thai baht a day (roughly 46 cents in the U.S.). When the factory closed, a friend advised Tiew to pursue work in the infamous Patpong District.

There, Tiew was inducted into the sex-show world. She learned such tricks as how to place a lit cigarette in

salary is the highest Tiew has ever garnered.

Even if a migrant laborer secures an increasingly elusive unskilled factory job, the salary is 10 to 20 times lower than that paid to the lowest-level employee at “beer bars,” according to the nonprofit organization Ashoka. Human-rights advocates note that a prerequisite for protecting and empowering vulnerable people is ensuring their socioeconomic welfare. “One of the ways to ensure that women and girls are not sold in commercial sex establishments is for governments to provide alternatives, including free education and viable economic opportunities, that don’t trigger human-rights violations,” says Taina Bien-Aimé, executive di-

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her vagina, intake the fumes and emit the smoke, and how to insert an egg in her vagina and smack her body against the wooden floor multiple times before removing the unbroken egg. Tiew watched even more extreme acts: In one, a woman stuffed an agitated frog inside her body and remained motionless as the audience counted out loud in unison, enthusiastically encouraging her to suffer.

The club where Tiew performs charges 200 to 300 Thai baht (\$6 to \$9) per guest. She stamps a time card when she arrives and is penalized 5 Thai baht (15 cents) for every minute she is late. Each month, she receives two nights’ vacation and, if she doesn’t miss additional nights, earns 6,000 Thai baht (\$185). That

director of New York-based nonprofit Equality Now.

Tiew says her body feels destroyed. Since police raided the club, she only has sex with customers when desperate for cash: “It hurts too much.” She acknowledges that ping-pong shows usually front for brothels.

There are currently no legal prescriptions against sexual voyeurism in Thailand, and in general, sex tourists enjoy relative impunity. But Bangkok-based NGOs try to dissuade tourists from thinking that everything in Thailand—including a human body—is for sale.

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—DEENA GUZDER