

Policy Challenges and Pathways: Thai Sex Workers' Migration Experiences Abroad



Niphon Darawuttimaprakorn
Dusita Phuengsamran
Sureporn Punpuing
Nucharee Srivirojana

Institute for Population and Social Research
Mahidol University



Executive Summary

The transnational migration of Thai sex workers represents a significant phenomenon driven by structural inequalities, offering both economic opportunities and profound vulnerabilities. Analysis of migration pathways indicates that the majority of Thais migrating for sex work abroad are voluntary or desired migrants (approximately 90%), seeking higher income to support their families through remittances. Only a minority are classified as trafficked victims involving deception and coercion.

Consequently, public policy must shift its analytical focus away from treating all migrants as trafficking victims. The core vulnerability faced by Thai migrant sex workers is not inherent to the work itself, but is a direct consequence of the criminalisation of sex work in Thailand.

Effective migration governance therefore requires an urgent paradigm shift from punitive enforcement to comprehensive labour protection. This necessitates the decriminalisation of sex work in Thailand, coupled with rights-based consular services and effective reintegration programmes. The Thai government must prioritise legislative reform to recognise sex work as legitimate labour and implement proactive protection measures at both origin and destination to ensure the safety and dignity of migrant sex workers.

Introduction

Migration of Thai sex workers abroad reflects both opportunity and vulnerability. This study finds that most Thai migrant sex workers are voluntary migrants; only one in ten experience trafficking through force, fraud, or coercion. Therefore, migration policy must move beyond conflating all sex worker migrants with trafficking victims.

This study explores how migration pathways shape Thai sex workers' experiences abroad and identifies implications for safer, rights-based migration governance.

Methods

This study applied a qualitative approach. In-depth interviews were conducted with 14 female and 5 LGBTQ sex workers, alongside one focus group discussion with 5 female sex workers. Additionally, 10 stakeholders involved in sex worker migration were interviewed. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to identify key informants.

Types of Thai Sex Worker Migrants

Two main categories of Thai migrant sex workers emerged:

1. Voluntary or desired migrants

These individuals choose to migrate independently or with encouragement from family, friends, or community members. They commonly travel through informal networks, including relatives, peers, or brokers. Migration is often seen as a rational economic strategy.

2. Deceptive or trafficked migrants

These migrants are recruited through false job offers, often advertised as legitimate massage or service work. Brokers arrange travel documents and visas but upon arrival, migrants are forced into sex work. Passports and money may be confiscated, leading to debt bondage and confinement.

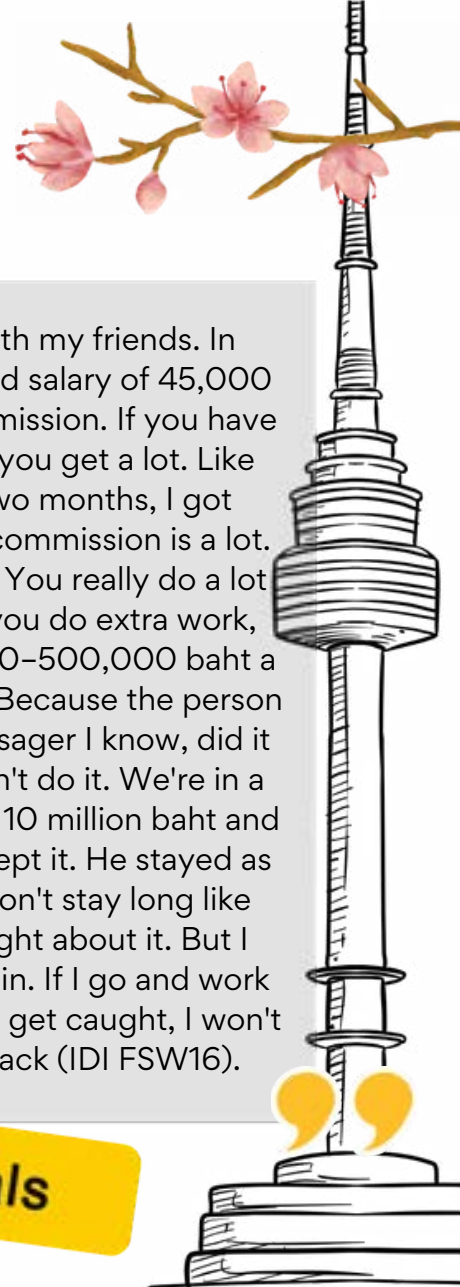


Migration Destinations



Primary destinations are in Asia, including Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Japan, China (including Hong Kong), Korea, and Taiwan. Other destinations include Australia, New Zealand, Europe (such as Finland and Russia), and parts of the Middle East, including Bahrain and Dubai.





Push and Pull Factors for Migrating Abroad

Push factors that drive these migrants to travel abroad mainly come from economic constraints. They would like to get higher income to send remittances back to improve the economic condition and wellbeing of their family. Some of them migrate abroad to escape stigma, societal limitations, or to have personal empowerment, adventure, and experiences.

Pull factors that drive sex workers to migrate to Korea include the opportunity to earn a high income. Some of them stay there illegally as “ghost workers” and become at risk of being arrested for working illegally as undocumented sex worker migrants.

I went to Korea with my friends. In Korea, you get a fixed salary of 45,000 baht and a 12% commission. If you have a lot of customers, you get a lot. Like me, in less than two months, I got 170,000 baht. The commission is a lot. But I can't handle it. You really do a lot of massage. But if you do extra work, you can get 400,000–500,000 baht a month. It's different. Because the person I went with, the massager I know, did it like this. But we didn't do it. We're in a different line. He got 10 million baht and he told me that he kept it. He stayed as a ghost worker. I won't stay long like him. At first, I thought about it. But I want to go back again. If I go and work as a ghost worker, if I get caught, I won't be able to come back (IDI FSW16).

Problems Faced at Destination by Voluntary Migrants



Even though many sex workers earn high incomes abroad, voluntary migrants still face serious challenges, including overexploitation and threats from brokers, mama-sans, pimps, and clients. Those working illegally are often cheated of wages, physically and mentally abused, and have limited access to legal protection due to lacking permits, overstaying, or being blacklisted. They remain vulnerable to bribery, raids, arrest, and detention, and cannot access health or social services. Some experience unplanned pregnancies, and their children may lack nationality and access to education.

Some people who go there have to accept the situation, even if their employer doesn't pay, physically abuses them, or forces them to do so. They have to accept the situation. They can't ask for help from anyone because it was wrong for them to choose to go there. It's even worse because they see it as a sin. They don't accept this profession. As for those who can stay, they can't escape the issue of bribes, and they have to pay. They took our younger siblings and locked them up for 15–30 days. Then they pushed them back to their country at the checkpoint. We had to go and get them back. (IDI SH1)



Problems Faced at Destination by Deceptive Migrants

Deceived or trafficked migrants face physical confinement and isolation. They are locked up in apartments and are not allowed to go anywhere or contact anyone. They become coerced labourers or victims of sexual violence by pimps and clients. In one case, a migrant was “tested” by being forced to have sex with 5–6 gangsters or pimps. They are also forced into debt bondage by increasing facilitation fees if they do not agree to do sex work.

She said that my appearance wouldn't pass. I said: Huh, then why did you bring me here? Why didn't you tell me in Thailand? She said that it's fine, just do it. This is a job. No one will know. If you don't do it, you have to get 160,000 baht per person from home. I asked her how much each person would be. He said it was the ticket postponement fee, the COVID quarantine fee, etc., more than 100,000 baht. There was also the tag fee. At first, the uniform fee was 170 dirhams, and the house fee was 300 dirhams. I will buy you condoms. I said: What is this? I didn't come to do it. Sister, take me to a real massage shop. (IDI FSW16)

Policy challenges at Origin

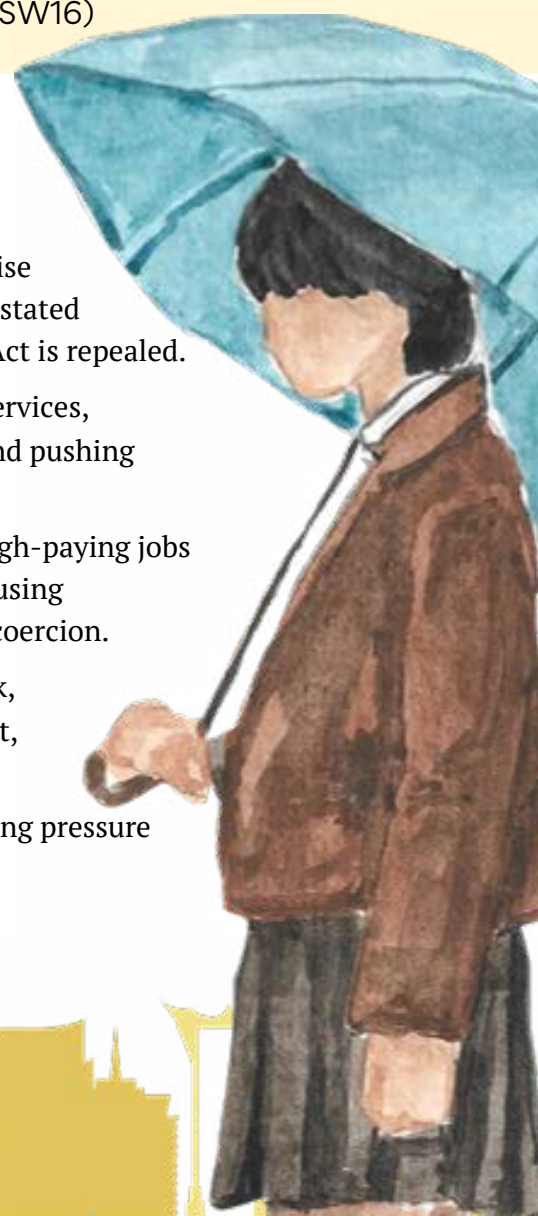
The Prevention and Suppression of Prostitution Act 1996 and the Prevention and Suppression of Trafficking in Persons Act 2008 criminalise sex work, reinforcing stigma and violations. The Ministry of Labour has stated that sex work cannot be recognised as legitimate labour until the 1996 Act is repealed.

This exclusion from the social security system denies access to health services, unemployment benefits, and pensions, weakening labour protections and pushing workers into exploitative and undocumented work abroad (IDI SH8).

Unsafe recruitment further increases vulnerability. Agencies promise high-paying jobs but charge excessive fees, forcing workers into debt bondage. Migrants using unregulated channels face higher risks of trafficking, exploitation, and coercion.

Repatriated migrants, especially those deported for undocumented work, remain highly vulnerable. Thailand lacks adequate reintegration support, leaving them stigmatised, in debt, and without viable alternatives.

This combination of criminalisation and weak reintegration creates strong pressure for re-migration.





Policy Challenges at Destination: Access and Protection Deficits

• **Physical and digital isolation:** Trafficked migrants face difficulties accessing consular support due to physical and digital isolation. They are often confined or isolated by their handlers and denied access to communication methods such as the internet, making it impossible to contact consulates.



• **Fear of reporting:** Voluntary migrants avoid seeking help from Thai consulates or legal entities at the destination because they fear punitive responses (arrest, deportation, blacklisting) rather than protection.

• **Indiscriminate law enforcement against voluntary migrants:** Police raids and arrests often do not distinguish between voluntary migrants and trafficked victims.

• **Financial burden of return:** For arrested voluntary migrants, the Thai government typically does not provide repatriation funds. They must use their own savings to purchase return tickets.

• **Disruption of peer networks:** Criminalisation disrupts essential peer networks and informal support systems.

• **Exclusion from formal bargaining:** Criminalisation limits the ability of migrant workers to join unions or collective bargaining mechanisms.



Policy Pathways for Safer, Rights-Based Migration Governance

- Repeal the 1996 Prostitution Act and decriminalise voluntary adult sex work to reduce stigma and legal vulnerability.
- Amend labour and social security laws to include sex work and ensure access to health insurance, unemployment benefits, and pensions.
- Provide standardised pre-departure training on debt risks, legal awareness, contract negotiation, and financial literacy.
- Legally recognise and support sex worker networks and unions as key sources of information and protection.
- Ensure Thai consulates provide non-judgmental, rights-based support, including shelter, legal aid, and communication access.
- Establish clear frameworks with destination countries to distinguish consensual sex work from trafficking and prevent indiscriminate enforcement.
- Fund repatriation and provide reintegration support, including counselling, health services, financial literacy, and alternative livelihoods.



CREDITING: The layout production and open-source distribution was made possible with the support of the Mahidol University International Relations Grant for the Mahidol Migration Center - Joint Research Unit, MMC-JRU.