Jordan Rollins

Singh, J.P. and Shilpa A. Hart. 2007. “Sex workers and Cultural Policy: Mapping the Issues and Actors in Thailand.” *Review of Policy Research* 24 (2): 155-173.

The authors of this article address the relationship between globalization, sex work, and national as well as international cultural policies that affect tourism. Thailand is specifically examined as a case study. Here, globalization is concisely defined as “the interconnectedness of people, ideas, and products” (Singh and Hart, 2007:155). It is a process with broad implications as it encompasses virtually all aspects of life in the modern world and shapes culture. “This article deals with a deeply controversial side of cultural policies and tourism in mapping the position of the sex industry” (Singh and Hart, 2007:155). Mapping the sex industry is especially important in the case of Thailand as officials do not want to name, identify, or curb it. Singh and Hart (2007:159) clarify that “treating the commercial sex industry as a cultural industry requires not just an explicit cultural policy perspective but also, and more importantly, a human rights perspective.”

The authors argue that sex tourism can be placed in two contexts that aid in understanding how the industry fits within a modern cultural policy framework. “One expands the notion of cultural policies and the other notes their origins and effects” (Singh and Hart, 2007:155). Bangkok has developed into one of the world’s leading destinations for commercial sex, attracting both natives and tourists in droves. The fact that an individual could pay for sex in their home town, city, or country but choose to travel to Bangkok exemplifies the industry’s economic and cultural significance. In order to dissect the sex industry’s position in Thailand, Singh and Hart (2007) follow Throsby’s (2001) cultural mapping guidelines: “A first stage may be a straight forward contextual analysis of the object of study, involving physical, geographical, social, anthropological, and any other types of mapping to establish an overall framework which will inform the assessment of each of the elements cultural value” (Singh and Hart, 2007:155).

Heading Throsby’s (2001) advice, the authors begin by examining the political economy of the sex industry. Poverty largely accounts for the supply while the demand side of the equation must account for “transnational fantasies, corruption, and international encounters” (Singh and Hart, 2007:159). The exact figures regarding the number of individuals working in the sex industry are considerate but obscure. This is because the industry is multifaceted and includes women who work in different capacities in brothels as well as karaoke bars, massage parlors, and dance clubs (Singh and Hart, 2007). Additionally, employees of such service industry establishments including hotels and the families of those working in the sex industry depend on it for income. Those who work in brothels see clientele mostly comprised of Thai men while the “non-traditional” venues primarily target tourists. “As such, cultural policies concerning tourism and entertainment establishments are directly related to the bars that attract foreign visitors, whether they be businessmen, military personnel, expatriates, or tourists” (Singh and Hart, 2007:160). The effect the industry has on the Thai economy is staggering.
The authors cite Lin’s (1998) work which estimated the underground economy in Thailand “amounts to between $33 to 44 billion per year, of which sex work accounts for two-thirds. The underground economy itself amounts to 15-18 percent of the Gross Domestic Product; in other words, sex work accounts for 10-12 percent of Thai GDP” (Singh and Hart, 2007:160). The industry has and still continues to grow. Singh and Hart (2007:159) quote Bishop and Robinson (1998) who summed up the industries general presence by stating, “Sex isn’t sold everywhere in Bangkok, buts it’s available in enough places and enough kinds of places at a low enough price to confirm the First World view that the whole city is an erotic theme park.”

Reverting back to supply and demand, what has been termed, “dual development” has played a major role in perpetuating a steady supply source. Dual development refers to the process in which rural areas in developing nations such as Thailand suffer as a result of the expedient manner in which commodification grips the country and cities and metropolis areas begin to develop and sprawl. Singh and Hart (2007:161) describe it as a “lopsided” growth experiment “in which labor from rural areas was absorbed into the urban milieus of the developing world.” Rural communities become desolate as many individuals leave to pursue economic opportunity. This includes many women who turn to the sex industry through a sense of duty to send money back to their families.

The authors also dedicate time to discussing governmental and institutional components of sex work. Prior to 1960, prostitution in Thailand was legally regulated and prostitutes had to register with the government and were required to pay fees. In 1966 the government passed the Entertainment Places Act, which effectively “legalized the existence of places that promoted commercial sex” such as bars and massage parlors without addressing prostitution itself (Singh and Hart, 2007:162). This Act set the stage for the first major boom in Thailand’s sex industry which was brought about by the presence of U.S. military personnel who came to the country for “rest and relaxation” during the Vietnam War (Singh and Hart, 2007). “By 1970, U.S. military personnel spending in Thailand exceeded 20 million dollars” (Singh and Hart, 2007:162). In the time since, the industry has continued to grow yet it is still not officially recognized as the primary source of tourism by the Thai government.

The remainder of the article outlines the authors’ clear stance that sex work is work and should be treated as such. There are religious and cultural contexts specific to Thailand that must be considered when developing and implementing policies. The worldview of many organizations who try to “help” prostitutes or advocate against prostitution, or conflate it with trafficking “does not necessarily align with those of local NGOs and sex workers themselves” (Singh and Hart, 2007:167). Sex work should be named a cultural industry and attention should be given to policies that curb the collateral damage coinciding with it. The government supports an illegal act which to an extent, disables their ability and hinders justification for helping individuals involved in the nation’s largest tourist attraction.