

Article

The Role of Religion among Sex Workers in Thailand

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Abstract: This qualitative research seeks the understanding of the role of religion in the lives of sex workers in Thailand. It is based on interviews conducted among sex workers working in karaoke bars in Bangkok. Findings show that most sex workers experience different levels of life difficulty. The level of life difficulty also affects the experience of internal conflicts regarding sex and morality. Finally religion has been used as a form of ritual purification in dealing with internal sense of conflicts.

Keywords: sex workers; sex; religion; religious functions; religious coping; sexual morality

1. Introduction

Sexual practices beyond matrimonial boundaries are often considered immoral and thus, prohibitive especially within the realm of religion. The religious inclination toward detachment from sexual gratification in itself expresses a general tendency to see non-marital sexual practices as non-normative and thus, sever the possibility of perceiving any connection between religiosity and sex work. However, since religion and spirituality are believed to be an important part of who we are as human beings, the question emerges as to what role religion plays in helping sex workers negotiate between sexuality and morality. This study seeks qualitative data in an effort to understand the role of religion among sex workers working in Karaoke Bars in Bangkok, Thailand.

There are not many studies on the topic of religion and prostitution. Qualitative research by Geraldo A. Toledo on prostitutes' understanding of God conducted in Ecuador shows a close relationship between attachment theory and religion. Toledo interviewed 13 sex workers belonging to the

Asociacion Pro Defensa de la Mujer and found that attachment (or its counterpart, namely, abandonment and rejection) influences one's concept of and relationship with God. According to Toledo, people who have been abandoned or rejected by their primary caregivers, look for a secure attachment figure and in God they find the response to their needs. It is also interesting to note that sex workers see God as their protector and provider, and not a God who blames them for working in the sex industry [1].

Beatrice Okyere-Manu interviewed 12 sex workers in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa on physical and material well-being and found that, due to the level of poverty, these sex workers took the initiative to find an alternative method of earning income for their families. They had to make the choice between starvation or prostitution and decided for the latter even though it meant risking stigmatization, sexual-transmitted diseases, and physical danger; material well-being was important for their survival. Okyere-Manu concluded that while material wellbeing is important, the biblical understanding of well-being excludes the risk of physical danger, stigmatization, and sexually transmitted diseases and hence Christians addressing this issue need to take into consideration the overall wellbeing of sex workers [2].

Somporn Kantharadussadee Triamchaisri and Rujikorn Hwanpurd's [3] (2004) research among prostitutes in Bangkok offers a comprehensive view of the context of sex work in Thailand. The data collected is based on a survey distributed among 398 sex workers in four provinces in central Thailand. The aim of the study was to identify factors related to holistic well-being among sex workers. The study shows that 86.8% take physical hygiene seriously, 60.9% practice some form of daily centering prior to work, 50.3% avoid causing harm to others, and 41.1% are married, relatively financially stable and feel supported by their husbands. Factors that help to predict well-being are: age of the first sexual encounter, years of work as sex workers, number of locations of work, general life satisfaction, and level of understanding of human sexuality. The study shows that working in many locations increases their income level. In addition, the longer their experience within the field, the more equipped they become in coping with multiple problems. Age is a significant determining factor for the level of maturity, the decision making process, and the ability to manage life in general. The ability to support themselves helps to increase their level of competencies in life.

2. Types of Sex Workers in Thailand

While the phrase "the oldest profession" in referring to prostitution is certainly true for Thailand, Thailand was not known for prostitution until the period between the mid-19th and the 20th century. During this period there was an abolition of slaves and a surge of immigration into Thailand by male workers. Additionally, the law of the land divided wives into three categories: women married with their family's consent, women responsible for up-keeping and running the household, and finally women bought by their husbands for sexual gratification. This third group normally came from poor families. When Rama V abolished slavery in 1905, many female slaves found themselves homeless and jobless, and therefore, sold their bodies as means for survival. Around the same time period millions of Chinese men came to engage in construction work (roads, railways, and palaces) thus creating a great demand for sex. In 1908 the king initiated legalization of prostitutes in order to protect sex workers and provide them with medical care. During World War II there were many brothels set

up to serve 300,000 Japanese soldiers and at the end of the war, these brothels continued to serve the British and Indian soldiers who remained in Thailand to provide security. The expansion of prostitution in Thailand continued rapidly with GIs during the Vietnam War [4].

In 1996, the Thai government initiated the new Suppression Act in order to combat children in prostitution. This Suppression Act includes severe punishment on procurers, clients, and parents selling their children [5]. As a result the number of brothels in Thailand dropped drastically, but in its place there are many forms of sex industries such as bars, massage parlors, karaoke, café, *etc.* [5]. Generally there are two types of bars offering sexual services. Open-front and go-go bars are among the most commonly frequented by foreign tourists. The girls are mostly recruited from poor rural villages in the north or north eastern parts of Thailand. In this type of bar, the girls are free to choose their clients. They are not obligated to serve if they do not wish to do so. They do not receive a monthly salary. They earn approximately 30% of the price of the drinks their clients buy for them and another 30% (200 to 300 hundred bahts) generated from an “off-fee” (when clients pay the bar to take them out for the night). The major income comes from sexual services provided for their clients (1000–2000 bahts). The go-go bars, on the other hand, do not have an open-front to the street and inside the bars are metallic poles where dances are performed which are, on an average, about three songs. Each woman wears a number for the purpose of identification. They get paid between 7000–10,000 bahts per month, 30% for every drink the clients buy for them and another 30% to cover the off-fee or bar fine. Once the off-fee is paid, the sex workers can leave the bar and accompany the clients. Those working for go-go bars get paid an average of 1500–2500 baht for sexual service per client. Part of the agreement is for each sex worker to earn 10 to 12 off-fees to meet the monthly quota; otherwise she will have to pay a fine of up to 600 baht per month ([4], pp. 36–43).

Massage parlors are not to be confused with places offering a traditional Thai massage. Visitors stepping into massage parlors will find a big glass window with sex workers wearing long dresses or bathing costumes. Similarly a number is assigned to every woman for the purpose of identification. Upon making a selection, the customer is ushered into a room containing a bathtub and a bed. After a bath, sexual service will be performed according to that customer’s preference (oral sex or intercourse). Sex workers in massage parlors are required to perform sexual services for clients. They earn approximately 30% to 50% of the amount paid to the establishment (1000–2000 baht) and normally receive generous tips from their clients. Due to the absence of a salary, their income depends on the number of clients served, which can range between two to seven per night ([4], pp. 43–44; [6], pp. 173–78).

Café/Karaoke bars belong to another category in the sex industry commonly frequented by locals. The daily routine of a sex worker consists of singing and dancing on stage, sitting with their preferred clients, entertaining and conversing with them in order to gain their favor. While singing, customers often buy wreaths made of money and offer them to the singers. Singers who know how to entertain clients normally get more wreaths. In addition to the money garland, they earn an income of 20% to 30% from drinks that customers buy for them. If the customers wish to take them out, they are not obligated to reciprocate. If they agree to go with the customers, an off-fee is paid to the establishment. Going out with customers does not necessarily imply sexual activity. It could simply mean having dinner, listening to music, and at times it is just for company and conversation. If sexual services are

involved, the payment is to be negotiated between the client and the sex worker—normally at 2000 baht or more if it involves the entire night ([6], pp. 127–35).

3. Methodology

The plan to interview sex workers in Thailand was met with difficulties. Many sex workers were unwilling to be interviewed regarding their involvement in prostitution and their personal lives. The first stop in the process of identifying participants for this study was Chiang Mai city in Northern Thailand. The contact was a taxi driver who took the interviewer to a karaoke bar that only offers sexual services. Upon entering this facility, a solicitor asked sex workers to sit in the main lobby. The interviewer informed the solicitor about the intention to have a conversation with some of these ladies and would contact her later. The following day, during the phone conversation, the interviewer negotiated remuneration for the time spent during the interview. She informed the researcher that she would pass this information along and get back regarding the specific venue. An hour or so later she called to inform that none of them volunteered for the interview. Realizing the difficulty in accessing this population, the interviewer contacted an acquaintance in Bangkok who knew a karaoke bar owner. The arrangement was made and the interviewer was able to interview 12 sex workers from two bars regarding the role of religion in their everyday living.

This study aimed at understanding the role of religion in the lives of these sex workers specifically focused on the way they cope with life and interpret their own life's meaning. The criteria for selection included women who were 18 years and older, identified as sex workers, residing and working in Bangkok, Thailand. The aim in the selection of the sample was to interview individuals from different age groups and individuals with various lengths of time working in this profession for the purpose of comparison. Because of the difficulty in finding access to this population without the help of individuals whom sex workers trusted, snowball sampling was utilized by requesting the bar owner to recommend participants keeping in mind the criteria and the possible variation in terms of age and length of time spent in this profession. Once participants were identified and permission granted, appointments were scheduled taking into consideration privacy and conveniences for participants. On the day of the interview, an explanation was given in relation to the nature and objectives of the study. Each participant was given a consent form to sign. All interviewees remained anonymous, and the interviews confidential. The interviews were conducted by Siroj Sorajjakool, PhD, Professor of Religion, Loma Linda University. Interviews lasted approximately 45–60 min. The open-ended questions were designed to identify the daily struggle among sex workers both in their private and public life in order to better understand what role religion might play. The open-ended questions were the following:

1. What are some of the issues you deal with in your daily living?
2. How do you imagine being perceived by the public?
3. What are some common misunderstandings you experience?
4. What role does religion play in your life?
5. Does religion play any role in helping you understand the meaning of your life?

These questions were an initial attempt to grasp at the basic issues in the life of sex workers which would assist in deciding how to formulate better questions in the process of determining categories and exploring a possible theory. After reviewing the first four interviews and noticing a certain pattern, two questions were added to determine their level of difficulties in life and gain a better understanding of their internal conflict. With these additional questions, each participant was asked to rank the level of life's difficulties on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being "very difficult." Asking participants to rank added further clarity about the relationship between life's difficulties and religiosity. The first four participants were tracked in order to get input on these two additional questions.

The interviews were tape recorded, transcribed, and coded according to methods suggested by Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin [7]. The first level of analysis started with open coding—a line by line labeling of "what is going on here." The next level of analysis involved creating categories based on descriptions of what was happening. This research used a "constant comparison method" to examine how a new response was "like" or "not like" a previous category [8]. The final level of analysis linked the emergent categories together in a way that explained the data. This explanation was the "grounded theory" which accounted for variation in responses.

For validity, emerging themes were compared with all interviews to see if the analysis explained each case. All interviews were read and re-read in view of this emerging theory and at the same time the openness to make appropriate revisions accordingly. For saturation, the researchers noticed a consistent pattern showing the connection between moral conflict, life's difficulties and religiosity with the exception of case # 9 where religiosity was not driven by these two factors. Subsequent interviews after case # 9 showed similar pattern with an exception of one participant whose religiosity was not driven by life's difficulties (for further explanation, see results).

4. The Context

The work context of this study is based on two karaoke bars in Bangkok and Thonburi, Thailand. The first karaoke bar, where interviews with three sex workers were conducted, is located on Wisutkasat Road, Bangkhunprom, Bangkok. The second location is Pinklao, Thonburi. Nine sex workers were interviewed on two separate days. Of the 12 participants, 11 migrated from northeast and one from the south. The mean age was 29 and the ages range from 19 to 41. Educational level ranged from grade 3 to bachelor's degree (one completed 3rd grade, one completed 4th grade, two completed 8th grade, three received high school diploma, five are currently in college, and one has a bachelor's degree). The five students, that are currently pursuing their bachelor's degree, were hired as dancers in the karaoke bar. They received 6000 baht monthly for their three nightly performances. All dancers earned extra income by sitting with customers and singing karaoke. These five students have all been out with their customers. Three of the participants indicated that, while they engaged in drinking alcohol, singing karaoke, and accompanying customers (which often involve touching and fondling), they did not engage in sexual activities (however, the bar owner believed otherwise).

In terms of the religious context, participants' religious worldview, as a functional reality, is based on Theravada Buddhism that reached Thailand in the 13th century through the missionary work of Sri Lankan monks ([9], p. 7). However religion in Thailand is a complex interwoven of beliefs of both Buddhism and indigenous religions. Speaking of the complexity of Thai Buddhism, Kirsch (1977)

writes “Thai religious complexity is of the sort commonly characterized as syncretic, in which elements derived from several historically discrete traditions have combined to form a single distinctive tradition” ([10], p. 241). With this syncretic religious expression karma remains at the root of Thais approach to everyday living. Explaining this interrelation Mulder (1979) states “for the contemporary Thai the comfortable prospect of an ancestor heaven has been replaced by a long cycle of rebirths and the knowledge that to do good will improve one’s karmatic position and that to do evil worsens it” ([11], p. 44). Within this context, merit-making is primary for the purpose of the accumulation of good karma that will be translated into better future life. Professor Prasert Yamklinfung writes “the idea of renunciation of worldliness and the implied negative attitude towards the accumulation of wealth are never taken seriously by most Thai Buddhists as these beliefs run against their values of enjoyment of living in harmony with oneself, others, and nature” ([12], p. 7). Mulder (1979) confirms this view when speaking of the compatibility between Thai Buddhism and ancestor worship. “To the contemporary Thai this belief (ancestor worship) is perfectly compatible with the Buddhist expectation of a next life where one hopes that things will be better” ([11], p. 47). This basic assumption is what guides moral practices and motivates the people to engage in the process of merit-making.

In terms of merits, generosity is one of the most common forms being practiced by Thai Buddhists and it often consists of offering food to monks, supporting the Sangha with material needs, contributing to construction of projects by Sangha and every other form of charitable activities. Prior to engaging in merit-making process it is customary to evoke the five precepts. While Buddhists will take pain to practice these precepts, the practice is not a conscious attempt hence, the practice itself may not fully take place while engaging in the process of merit-making [13]. This has significant implications for sex workers whose profession may go directly against the 3rd precept. The above stated concepts of morality and merit-making inform the internal beliefs and values of interviewees and their lived-religion.

5. Results

Early in the interview process, two distinct factors emerged that guided subsequent questions. These two factors were the level of life’s difficulty and the internal sense of conflict among sex workers. These two factors seemed to determine the level of engagement with religion and religious practices.

5.1. Life’s Difficulties

When considering factors leading these participants to labor as sex workers, all of them indicated finance as the primary factor. While finance may be the leading cause, there were levels of financial difficulties among the 12 participants. There were those who engaged in sex work because of their desperate situations, those who joined the industry due to a moderate level of financial difficulty, and those with non-pressing financial difficulty.

Those in desperate situations represent participants whose survival was dependent on their income as sex workers. The moderate group represents those who were having a hard time making ends meet, but their survival was not threatened. The final group represents those who were not in a critical

financial situation but would like to earn extra income for their personal expenses and to help lessen the burden on their families' financial situation.

The first group represents young girls who left home at a young age and migrated to Bangkok for jobs or to pursue an education. These girls started out in factories, earning minimum wage or selling food by the road side while taking residence in a local Buddhist temple. A few became involved with married men who deserted them after they were pregnant. One of the participants, a 40 year-old factory worker, had an affair with a married man and became pregnant. The man soon deserted her. Because she was not able to work, she survived by selling and pawning her belongings until she gave birth to her daughter. After giving birth, the hospital would not discharge her because she owed them 6000 baht. Finally one of her acquaintances bailed her out. Realizing the need to support her young daughter, she decided to work in a karaoke bar. When she first started working she was making 100 baht a night and it was not sufficient to provide for her and her daughter. Initially she asked her niece from another province to come live with her in order to help take care of her daughter but not long after the niece had to return to her village. Without any one to take care of her daughter, she hired her neighbor while she was at work. Her income did not cover the expenses for food, rent, child-care and eventually she was evicted from her house. While suicide was not an option for her because of her daughter, it was an attractive escape that she pondered. In desperation she decided that sleeping with clients was the only option for her and her daughter's survival.

A 19-year-old first year college student told the story of loss which changed her life. When her mother was still alive, everything was going well for her because her mother would make sure all her needs were provided for. After her mother passed away, her dad only offered a fraction of what she used to receive. She tried coping with this major loss by supporting herself through college. Her expenses included room and board as well as tuition. She was not able to make ends meet and so she decided to become a dancer in a karaoke bar and sleep with clients. In tears she said, "I used to hate sex workers. I used to look down on them. I thought of them as loose and immoral. Now I'm just like them. But if I don't do this type of work, I will not be able to survive."

The moderate group is represented by those who had been working in a factory earning 200 baht a day (minimum wage), a hair salon, or owned a small business but discovered that their income level was not sufficient to cover their expenses. They soon learned that by working in a karaoke bar they could earn double or more than what they used to earn. One of the participants was introduced to karaoke bar by her friend. During her first night, she earned 700 baht. Subsequently she earned between 400–500 per night but this amount was still much more than working in a factory; if she entertained clients sexually, she could gain an additional 2000–3000 baht per night.

The last group represents young college students who received partial financial help from their parents but decided to work in order to earn extra income for themselves and to help reduce the financial burden on their families. Some of these participants indicated that they did not engage in sexual activities with clients although every single one of them had gone out with clients outside of their job routine.

5.2. The Sense of Conflict

Eight of the 12 participants believed in the immoral nature of sex work. They felt conflicted while working in karaoke bars but the intensity in their level of conflict differed. To some, the conflict was related to stigmatization. To be viewed as sex workers is to feel marginalized, to be looked down upon as loose and immoral; as someone who chose an easy way of earning income instead of engaging in hard to break the cycle of poverty. The sexual nature of their work was not expressed in connection with morality. The guilt was often associated with a sense of deception because they pleased men in exchange for monetary gain. They felt as though they put on a show of affection for personal gain and not because they really care or like their clients. They show affection despite the fact that they find some clients repulsive. Other aspects of guilt have to do with betrayal, especially when entertaining married men. There is a fear of being the cause of marital conflicts and creating emotional pain to spouses of these men. The rationalization they often use is, "These clients made their own decisions. We never ask them to." When asked what they often think about while working, most participants indicated that they were preoccupied thinking about how much they are going to make and ways they can earn extra income. The other preoccupation is worrying about their financial situation while entertaining clients.

Four of the participants did not express any type of moral conflict pertaining to their work. One of the participants stated that "while people perceived sex workers with negative immoral connotations, at least I know my limit." A participant with a bachelor's degree in political science explained:

"Morality is a matter of the soul. When customers give, they do not give in order to get in bed with us. They give because they like our singing. There may be those who give in order to gain sexual favor. But even then it is up to us. We have a choice. We can choose to go with the client or decline their offer. Morality is a matter of the soul. Conscience is an internal guide. Narrow-minded people are those who lack morality. We have not done anything wrong."

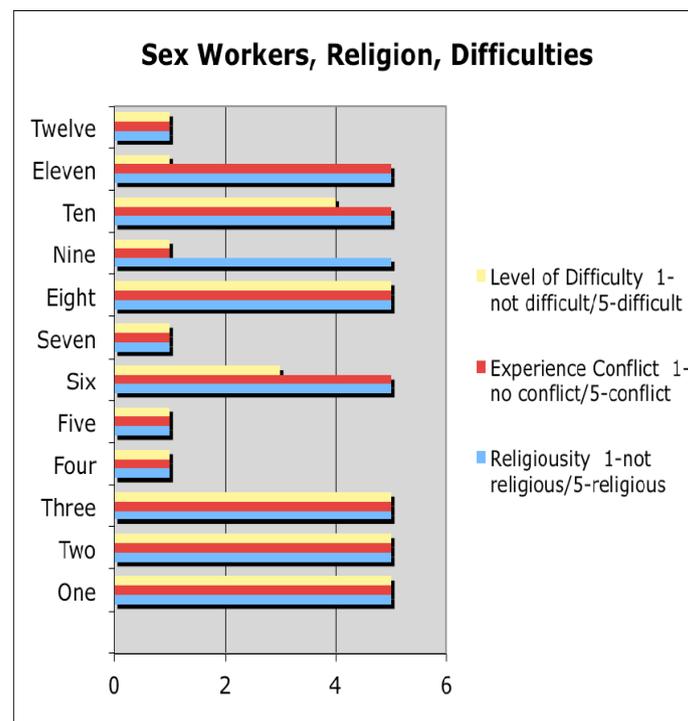
All four participants who did not experience any type of moral conflict indicated that they enjoyed their work. They took pleasure in singing, dancing, and entertaining clients. They were not obsessed with financial worries but concentrated their efforts on entertaining clients and performing to the best of their ability.

Most participants expressed a change of perspective regarding sex workers. Prior to their involvement in sex work, many had negative judgements perceiving sex workers as immoral and loose, lacking in personal values. At the time of the interview, they expressed sympathy and recognized that, for most, it was life circumstances that forced a person to choose this path. "Nobody wants to sit around and be fondled by strange men whom they know nothing about." If an option existed, this would not have been their chosen path. See Table 1 and Figure 1.

Table 1. Religiosity, experience of conflict, and level of difficulties.

Case	Religiosity (Yes/No)	Experience Conflict (Yes/No)	Level of Difficulty 1-not difficult 10-very difficult
One	Yes	Yes	10
Two	Yes	Yes	10
Three	Yes	Yes	10
Four	No	No	5
Five	No	No	5
Six	Yes	Yes	7
Seven	No	No	5
Eight	Yes	Yes	10
Nine	Yes	No	5
Ten	Yes	Yes	9
Eleven	Yes	Yes	5
Twelve	No	No	4

Figure 1. Comparison of the level of religiosity, conflict, and difficulties as reported by participants.



5.3. The Role of Religion

Of the 12 participants, four did not engage in religious practices and rituals on a regular basis even though they acknowledged the importance of religion. One of the four participants indicated that she found comfort in religious practices while another occasionally contemplated the teachings of the Buddha when she faced difficulties in life. They had not been going to temples, giving alms to monks, or engaging in other forms of religious practices or merit-making activities.

For 8 of the 12 participants, religion played a very significant role in their lives. Some visited temples frequently while others gave alms to monks and engaged in various forms of merit-making activities. Seven of these eight sex workers indicated a sense of conflict between their work in the karaoke bar and their religious beliefs. They equated sex work with immorality and deception. Many of these participants have a deep-rooted belief in karma-formation, the teaching that one reaps what one sows, and what one sows will always come back. Bad deeds will be repaid by bad karma in one's life.

A 19-year-old participant believed that her mother passed away because she was misbehaving and constantly disobeying and now she was left to manage life on her own. This hard life, to her, was meant to be a lesson resulting from her bad behavior. What made the belief in karma significant in the understanding of the role of religion was expressed in the life of a 24-year-old sex worker who had not been religious nor making merits until the last three months. When probed regarding the time she came to this profession, she said that it was four months ago. Most of the eight participants who experienced conflict between sex work and religion turn to religious practices in one form or another.

The most common form of religious practice is merit-making such as giving alms to monks or offering donations to the temple. They admitted a strong sense of guilt (deceiving men for their money or causing tension between husbands and wives) and in order to deal with this guilt they engaged in merit-making activities. The process of merit-making is said to bring a sense of comfort and peace to them knowing that the accumulation of these religious acts may repay for the sins they have committed, and assure them of a better future in this life or the next. One of the participants did not believe that merit-making could serve as a form of penance. She said:

“Working in this place and visiting the temple is like living in two separate worlds. At the temple I feel at peace with myself. When I give alms to monks it helps to give me a sense of peace and comfort. It can never repay for the sin that I committed. I still have to live with the consequence of my past sinful acts. Nothing can erase that. I choose to do this because it is the only way I can survive and I have to bear the consequences of my actions.”

Reflecting on the role of internal conflict, Jane S. T. Woo, Negar Morshedian, Lori A. Brotto, and Boris B. Gorzalka [14] (2012) found a connection between religiosity and sex guilt among their subjects ($n = 178$ Euro-Canadian; $n = 361$ East Asian). While the level of sex-guilt is higher among East Asian women, high level of religiosity remains an important contributing factor in the level of sex-guilt. Another related study by Yoel Inbar, David A Pizzarror, Thomas Gilovich, and Dan Ariely adds clarity to the experience of these sex workers in relation to guilt. Based on 41 undergraduate students in an experimental research, the study finds that “feeling guilty about one's own moral transgressions can lead people to engage in physical self-punishment, and that such self-punishment, in turn, serves to reduce feelings of guilt” ([15], p. 16).

There is another important variable relating to the role of religion. This is the level of difficulties that participants experience. Chart 1 and 2 show the comparison between the level of difficulty and religiosity. Six out of the 12 participants indicated a high level of difficulty in their lives. All six participants expressed high level of engagement in spiritual practices such as visiting temples, meditating or making merits. While the other six who experienced a moderate level of difficulty believed that religion is beneficial, they rarely engaged in any form of religious practices. Hence the next important variable that determines the role of religion for these participants is the level of

difficulty they face in their lives. A 26-year-old participant grew up in a farm. When her father passed away, she was forced to marry. Unable to get along with her husband, she left her village and migrated to Bangkok. She started working in a nursing home but it did not provide enough income and so she became a seamstress for additional financial support. While working in this facility, she fell in love with a man but later found out that he already had a family. He left her when he found out that she was pregnant and never returned. With a daughter and insufficient income to survive, she decided to sleep with her clients, making an extra 1500 to 2000 baht per night. This participant is a very religious person who believes in the basic teachings regarding karmic formation. In her village, she serves as the chair of the committee that oversees charitable activities of the local village temple and is a well-respected member of her community.

Religion and spirituality are common resources people rely upon when facing traumatic events. According to Brenda Cole, Ethan Benore, and Kenneth Pargament “spirituality is often embedded in the process of coping with major life stressors, such as a diagnosis of cancer. Studies have shown that spirituality is among the most common resources people rely upon when they face with trauma” ([16], p. 50). A study by Roger D. Fallot and Jennifer P. Heckman [17] (2005) based on data from two racially diverse samples of 666 women from Washington, DC and Stockton, California (with history of trauma and Axis I or II diagnosis) asked questions such as: what is the impact of trauma on spirituality and what are the relationships between spirituality and indicators of well-being? The study showed a high level of religious coping in comparison to the general population. Sorajjakool’s [18] (2006) research on Thai women and HIV/AIDS reflects the importance of religious beliefs (Buddhism) and the ability to cope with illness. Many of these studies confirm the experience of sex workers and their inclination toward religiosity in the face of difficult life circumstances.

Cases 9 and 11, however, raise a different type of question pertaining religiosity and the level of difficulty in life. They both experience a moderate level of difficulty. They do not see themselves as having a more difficult life than others and yet they are very religious. They both visit temples frequently, pray daily, practice various forms of Buddhist meditation regularly, and give alms to Buddhist monks or perform other forms of merit-making regularly. However, they also indicated that they have been through a very difficult time in the past. One of the participants experienced a major loss in her relationship while the other had significant financial hardship many years prior where she was not able to provide food for herself and her family. One simple explanation may perhaps be that while conflicts and life’s difficulties are factors influencing these sex workers’ constant participation in religious rituals and activities, the reverse is not the case. Religiosity is not dependent on moral conflicts and life’s difficulties. On the other hand there may perhaps be a more significant role that religion plays in the lives of some sex workers that makes it viable for them to remain in their profession with a certain level of contentment.

6. Conclusions

Underneath the appearance of seduction of many sex workers lies a religious world view that informs and shapes how they come to identify and sustain themselves within the very career that goes against the religious precept regarding sexuality based on the moral teaching of Buddhism. When considering the role of religion among sex workers, there seem to be two important variables

according to these 12 participants that determine the level of engagement in religious practices: the experience of moral conflict and the level of difficulty (financial or life circumstances). Those who experience moral conflict are more inclined to engage in various forms of religious practices, particularly that of merit-making believing that by giving alms to monks or doing charity, these accumulated merits could potentially help to repay for their sins. At the same time these charitable acts can offer a sense of comfort and peace for these participants.

Life difficulty is another important factor affecting the level of religiosity. Participants who described their lives as being very difficult tend to be religious as well. However, there are two participants who, while engaged in religious practices (meditation, visiting temples, making-merits) on a regular basis, indicate that the difficulty in their lives are not different from most people and categorize their level of difficulty as moderate. It is interesting to note that these two participants have been through very difficult periods in their lives in the past. There are many reasons people turn to religion and there are perhaps many possible explanations as to why these two participants are religious. It may be because they have been through difficult periods in their lives and found Buddhism to be essential for their lives, or it could be because they are not confronted with desperate circumstances, and therefore, have the freedom to choose whether to go or not go with clients. It may also be the very teachings of Buddhism that help them survive with basic necessities and hence make survival less stressful. For the most part, when considering the role of religion in the lives of these participants, experience of moral conflict and the level of difficulty seem to play a significant role. Interestingly, while most of these participants will continue to work in this profession, the practice of meditation and merit-making will continue to be one of the most important sources of peace and comfort in their day-to-day struggle with finance, sexuality, and difficult life circumstances.

Reflecting on the lives of these sex workers and the role of religion raises a few interesting questions that will require further exploration. We often do not expect a correlation between sexual immorality and religiosity. We assume that religious people are moral. It is therefore difficult to imagine any connection between immoral activities and religious practices. But what if there was a close connection between the two? What if the very people who engage in sexual misconduct are the ones who go to the temple, practice meditation, and give alms regularly? How do we come to understand the positive relationship between immoral behaviors and religiosity? Further more, what if it is religion itself that makes it possible for these participants to continue engaging in their immoral sexual behavior for their survival since, for half of these participants, it is religion that provides a sense of peace within the experience of conflict and tension brought about by their profession? What if it is religion that helped them accept their life circumstances, enabled them to choose their profession as a method for survival, and offers peace in the chaos of restlessness? Finally, is it possible to conceive of religion as a holding place in maintaining tension between good and evil and consequently a person who is able to resolve internal conflicts through religious practices may be a person who is transitioning into a more authentic spirituality as in case # 9?

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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