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Bachelor Thesis

***Female Prostitution in Thailand
- looked upon a victim-agent framework***

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Abstract

Prostitution in Thailand has increased over the last decades and the topic has made frequent appearances in the academic debate with discussions about whether women in prostitution are *victims* or *agents*. Victim is defined in this study as someone who is powerless in society and has no control of their lives, whilst agent, is someone who is confident, has a clear goal and can act accordingly. However, less frequent are the voices of the women themselves and how their perceptions correspond to the academic debate, regarding the discussed concepts *victim* and *agent*. The purpose of this study is to try to understand how women's perceptions of their self-image correspond to the academic debate and to two organizations, working to respond to the needs of women in prostitution.

This study draws on a field study in Bangkok and Patong, Thailand, and has been conducted with semi-structured interviews and observations as part of an ethnographic approach. Interviews were made with women in prostitution working in bars or the streets, members of the sex workers' organization EMPOWER, and women previously involved in prostitution but now working at the organization NightLight.

The findings were analyzed in relation to a conceptual framework where the concepts *victim* and *agent* were linked to the theoretical positions of a conventional structural and rational choice analysis.

The findings show that the women's 'choice' to move from their villages and enter prostitution seem to be a rational economic decision wherein the women are *agents*. Although, when the women arrive to the cities they become tied to the socio-economic structures and lose their *agency*, and instead become *victims*. Some of these women are able to reclaim their *agency* by turning to the organization that best mirrors their self-image.

The outcome of the study shows that it does not help to discuss the concepts regarding whether women are *victims* or *agents*, because the results show that it can be seen as the women can carry both concepts, but that they appear in different time periods of women's lives.

Keywords: Thailand, Prostitution, NightLight, EMPOWER, Victim, Agent

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List of Abbreviations

CATW	Coalition Against Trafficking in Women
EMPOWER	Education Means Protection of Women Engaged in Re-creation
GAATW	Global Alliance against Traffic in Women
ILO	International Labour Organization
MFS	Minor Field Study
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
SIDA	Swedish International Development Agency
STD	Sexually Transmitted Disease

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Topic and Problem Formulation

During the last decades there has been an increase in international sex-tourism. A lot of attention has been given to Southeast Asia, where there has been rising numbers of women in prostitution. Thailand is one country that has obtained particular focus as the sex industry has become highly visible (Steinfatt, 2002:11). It has been stressed that Thailand is the only country where foreigners fly specifically for the purpose of sex, and that Thailand is the country that has the largest tourist-related prostitution involving straight men (Thorbeck and Pattanaik, 1988:2).

Prostitution, although not unique to Thailand, is today prolific in Thai society. According to estimations in the beginning of the 1990s there were around 150, 000 – 200,000 women in prostitution in the country and same estimations were made in year 2000 (Boonchalaksi and Guest, 1994; Brody, 2006). Boonchalaksi and Guest (1994:39) have argued that, “the bodies of Thai women have become one of the bases for the Thai economic growth”.

The income gained from prostitution comes indirectly mainly from tour companies, bars, hotels, massage parlors, member clubs, golf clubs and mail order brides. It seems as if even though prostitution is illegal the government efforts to curb it are weak. Shown from their unofficial efforts to indirectly promote prostitution, through tourism with advertisements of beautiful Thai women (Ibid:18). Brody (2006:195) states that, police, military and government officials also are involved in the sex trade which really makes it a dilemma and discrepancy in the society.

On the contrary, we can see several Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) in Thailand who are responding to the needs of women in prostitution by trying to prevent or directly change the situation for the women, by helping out financially, giving out loans, or providing schooling opportunities. EMPOWER is an organization with members who are sex workers, and these women argue for sex work to be accepted and made legal in the society (Empower Foundation, 2011a). NightLight, on the other hand, is an organization that sees the women in prostitution as exploited and want to offer intervention through alternative employment in their jewelry business (NightLight, 2011a). These responses and interventions are based on diverse perspectives on prostitution, whether they see it as a conscious ‘choice’ or if they consider women forced into prostitution.

There is also a differing perspective held amongst scholars, when discussing the phenomenon of prostitution in academic debates in the literature, where there are mainly two visible approaches to prostitution; either they see the women as a *victim* or an *agent*. These approaches can be divided into two theoretical positions, where the feminists and scholars in the ‘West’ seem to draw upon a structuralist approach, whilst feminists and scholars from developing countries have brought attention to explore women’s agency and their rationality in their ‘choices’, even going as far as calling the women entrepreneurs. These theoretical positions will be explored in chapter 3, *Conceptual framework*.

In these academic debates in the literature though, the women in prostitution are seldom included, and few seem to have listened to their voices; discussions about prostitution and its women go on regardless. When they finally are included, their words have often been edited or embedded in other people’s views on Thai prostitution. This can be seen as problematic, since we do not know how a woman’s self-image relates to these different perspectives in the debate. Therefore, a study that seeks into this unexplored problematic nature seems highly relevant.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to try to understand to what extent the perceptions from the women in prostitution correspond to the victim agent concepts in the academic debate and how women’s needs can be traced in the organizations work.

With this purpose in mind, I obtained this insight and understanding by conducting a field study in Thailand, where perceptions of women in prostitution were included through interviews, together with the organizations EMPOWER and NightLight’s perspectives.

1.3 Research Questions

The following questions will help guide the study.

1. What are the women’s needs, as either victims or agents?
2. How do the NGO’s fulfill the women’s needs according to the interviewees?
3. Do the women see themselves as victims or as agents?

The first and second question will be answered through the findings and the third is of more analytical character and will therefore be answered in the analysis part.

In sum, the undertaking of the study is to take a closer look at prostitution as a phenomenon by embracing the women's own narrative, to gain a better understanding on different basic assumptions and working strategies against the background of the *victim-agent* debate.

1.4 Relevance of the Study

'The Thai prostitution problem' has brought a lot of attention over the last decades, and the sex-tourism industry in the country has become widely known even in Sweden, mainly because Thailand has become one of Sweden's main tourist destinations. While the subject on sex-tourism and prostitution are many times framing the picture of Thailand, the exclusion of perception of women in prostitution is highly noticeable (Van Esterik, 2000; Brody, 2006). And therefore it is imperative to stress women's perception of their self-image and needs, since they are the main actors. Women's perception should further be known to NGO's and policy makers, in order for them to get a wider understanding of the phenomena, as well as to contribute to a wider understanding among tourists about 'the problem'. Furthermore, knowing women in prostitutions' position to the victim-agent debate can contribute to how we can discuss theoretical understandings.

For the NGO's this study could contribute to possible suggestions for future working strategies, and obviously, if current strategies correspond to women's perception of needs. Consequently, the study is very relevant from a research perspective.

Arguing from a normative assumption, prostitution is normally not something societies strive to have, for several reasons, such as unequal gender relations, risks with spread of diseases, abuse, and it cannot be seen as a long term economic solution. The women in prostitution also run the risk of becoming trafficked abroad, due to great international demand. Furthermore, it often produces a negative picture for the country. Yet, EMPOWER's perspective of women in prostitution as agents and seeing 'sex work' as an ordinary economic activity is somewhat challenging towards the normative, and therefore EMPOWER's understanding is important to highlight because it is also the reality.

Bringing all of this together illustrates why this study is highly relevant.

1.5 Method and Conceptual Framework in the Local Context

To be able to answer the research questions, a minor field study (MFS) was conducted in Bangkok and Patong in Thailand, during two months in November and December of 2011. The study is a qualitative study with an ethnographic approach, allowing for the researcher to integrate with the people in the field to conduct observations, interviews and dialogue

(Aspers, 2011:33), and a well suited and relevant method to use and look into this study's problem. Interviews were conducted with women working in prostitution and represents two organizations, EMPOWER and NightLight, working to intervene and provide after-care to women in prostitution. The organizations will be presented below. The conceptual framework is illustrated in a figure with the concepts *victim* and *agent* and linked to two theoretical positions and will help to analyze the findings from this study.

1.6 Presentations of the Organizations EMPOWER and NightLight

I will here give a presentation of the organizations EMPOWER and NightLight who are one of the main focuses of this study, it includes a look at their approaches to prostitution. By presenting them here in an early stage of the study will provide the reader with the necessary knowledge to follow the coming chapters.

1.6.1 EMPOWER

EMPOWER is a Thai grass-root organization created in 1985. It grew out of friendship between 'sex workers' and a Thai activist. Starting out as a small project to investigate prostitution, sex tourism and issues of exploitation in the 'entertainment industry'¹, the organization became a place where the women could share their life experiences, strengths and skills. They felt that they needed to raise their voices against the unavoidable blaming and discrimination from the community (Empower: 2007,IX-X).

The members of the organization are activists and women who are still working at bars in red-light districts, but also teachers who are volunteers at the various centers disseminated across Thailand. Usually the women can come to the EMPOWER centers to study English, Thai or take computer classes during the daytime, and work at nights in bars. The women can come and go as they want, since it is something they join voluntarily. Hence, the centers work as meeting-points, where access, support and assistance are available for the women workers in what they call, the 'entertainment industry'.

The name Empower stands for "Education Means Protection of Women Engaged in Recreation". Education is significant for Empower, since they believe that education can turn into more power for the women. They teach the women about the law and human rights issues and provide them with information about HIV/AIDS. The organization argues that 'sex

¹ Entertainment industry is what women mostly from EMPOWER call the bars and clubs in the red-light districts.

workers' have opted for English classes to be able to communicate better with their clients. Other education opportunities offered by the centers are: drama classes to improve their self-confidence, leadership, public speaking, and art (Ibid, XI).

Empower is unique in the way that they provide a space for the women allowing their voices to be raised. Moreover, the organization offers the women in prostitution a non-judgmental environment where sex work is seen as work, and the women do not have to be ashamed (Empower Foundation, 2011b). Empower's main goal is that the women who work as 'sex workers' deserve to have the same rights as other workers. The women of Empower further argue that they did not 'end up' in prostitution, they applied to work there. Therefore, they do not consider themselves as victims either. Thus, they challenge the mainstream approach, as they want to legitimize and legalize prostitution.

1.6.2 NightLight

NightLight is an international organization committed to addressing the complex issues surrounding trafficking and prostitution, by catalyzing individual and community transformation. In Bangkok, Nightlight operates as a business and a non-profit NGO (NightLight Foundation). They also have branches in the United States. The organization was created in Thailand in 2005 to address the lack of opportunities for women in prostitution, and to provide them with alternative work through employment in its jewelry business. At NightLight, the women have the possibility to design jewelry, learn about accounting, inventory, technology and marketing. The women working at NightLight have all been involved in prostitution somehow, but now left it, which is a requirement from the organization in offering them alternative employment. However, the founder and the volunteers of the organization have not been involved in prostitution.

NightLight's vision is to intervene to provide hope, and rescue sexually exploited women and children, to enable them to discover their dignity, and to provide a program of holistic transformation, empowering them to live and work in their community (NightLight, 2012a). They seek to do this through bar visits to raise awareness about the risks involved in sex work, and about other available opportunities.

Apart from employment, they further provide education through scholarships to the women who usually cannot afford to go to school. Life-skills training and physical, emotional and spiritual development are offered to women seeking freedom. NightLight builds support networks internationally to intervene and assist women, men and children whose lives are negatively impacted by prostitution (NightLight, 2012b).

1.7 Limitations

During my study in Thailand I ran into some very practical limitations. I arrived in Bangkok Thailand during the worst flooding in the country for decades. That created some obstacles for me, Bangkok, where I was supposed to conduct my study was flooded. Instead, I flew to Patong Phuket, for the first week of my study. In the end it worked out well, because EMPOWER, one of the organizations in my study, had an office there. It was informed by contacts that it was hard to get in contact with EMPOWER, because they often get criticized by people from the West for their open view on prostitution, and have become fatigued of moral sermons. When I finally got in contact with them in Phuket and later on also in Bangkok, they showed no sign of this, instead they were very curious about me and my study.

Since the women at NightLight spoke Thai and their English skills were limited I decided to have an interpreter. After having good contact with a woman at NightLight the decision was made to let her translate. She had worked at NightLight for six years and knew the women well, and they trusted her, which I considered to be an important factor considering the subject. It could be argued to be a limitation because the interpreter can be seen as biased since working at the organization. Still, I chose her because it was important for the women to feel more comfortable during the interviews; otherwise they might not have been willing to participate in the interviews at all. To find another interpreter would instead have been time consuming, and would have created difficulties for me to be allowed to perform the interviews at NightLight with the women.

1.8 Delimitations

The study has a few delimitations that are of importance to stress here. One of them is the choice to only interview Thai women as Thai prostitution is this study's focus, while knowing the fact that there are many women in prostitution with other origins. Another delimitation is that, men and children are not included in this study. Being aware that there are many men involved in prostitution in Thailand as well, the delimitation had to be made because there is not enough available data to seek into the problem of male prostitution and no organizations working responding to this in Bangkok as far as I know. Children were excluded since they are special to interview within this subject with its sensitivity, I also consider my own delimitation as a researcher was not mature enough to accomplish such a study on various points.

There are also bar managers, customers, families of the women interviewed, as well as the civil society and the government with the politicians who are all secondary stakeholders in this study and providing a fundamental part of the subject, who are not interviewed since they were not the main focus of this study also because there was a limited amount of time in the field and to write the thesis after coming home.

The study offers one perspective on how to approach the question of victim and agency in prostitution. This is not the only possible perspective, nor does it attempt to address the perspectives of all of Thai society. Hence, the intention is not to create any generalizations out of this study.

Moreover, since the focus was on two tourist sites in Thailand, the study did not look at domestic prostitution, where mostly Thai men are found as customers. This was a conscious choice, because the study would then have become too broad and possibly turned in another direction. That kind of prostitution is also difficult to unveil because it takes place underground. This study, does not attempt to find out whose opinion is 'right', there are no right answers. Nor does it aim to find a scapegoat for women's entry into prostitution.

1.9 Disposition

This study is divided into eight chapters. In this first introductory chapter (1), there is a presentation of the topic and problem formulation, it also includes the purpose of the study, research questions, relevance of the study, and a small presentation of the two organizations that are a great part of this study. Moreover it includes limitations and delimitations.

Chapter (2), *Relevant Literature* aims to provide the reader with information about what is said in the literature related to this study.

Chapter (3) looks at the *Conceptual Framework* used in this study. In this chapter the concepts used in this study are being put in relation to two theoretical positions. It also includes a figure on how the concepts are looked at.

In the following chapter (4), *Methodological Framework*, is where the methodology and methods are described in more detail. The chapter also outlines my pre-understanding and selection of interviewees among a few other headlines.

After that follows chapter (5), *Background* that covers information about the history and law of prostitution in Thailand, the status of the woman in relation to Buddhism and the tourism sector and its relation to prostitution.

In chapter (6), the *Findings from Interviews* are presented, followed by a summary of findings and answers to the research questions.

Chapter (7) is the *Analysis* where the findings are analyzed in relation to the conceptual framework including the theoretical positions.

The last chapter (8), *Conclusion*, summarizes the main findings and, also brings up some questions that can be further studied.

2. RELEVANT LITERATURE

Following here is a review on the existing literature discussing various aspects on prostitution and its women. This is presented in order to identify the current research into this study.

I have not found any study that is conducted in the same way as this one, by capturing the narratives of women working in bars and the streets, from the organizations EMPOWER and NightLight. What I have found are similarities on different parts of the study problem, however, no study where the point of departure are the women in prostitution voicing their perceptions.

The prostitution research in Thailand in recent years has accentuated how the Thai state maintains prostitution in their society because it generates income to the Thai economy indirectly from bars, clubs, hotels and tour companies. The research is often based on two different basic assumptions. They are essentially, that some view prostitution as work and ‘sex workers’, as they call them, should be eligible to the same rights as other workers in the labor market, since they are the ‘agents’ in the process (Thorbek, 2002:220).

The other approach views prostitution and its women as ‘victims’ since it is an oppression and abuse (Gangoli and Westmarland, 2006:2). These approaches do have two distinct theoretical positions, where the former leans towards a conventional rational choice approach and the latter can be seen as relying on a more conventional structuralist approach. The arguments from the two positions will be presented below.

2.1 Different Approaches to Prostitution

In the academic debate, the question often evolves around whether the decision to enter prostitution is coercion and force, or based on a conscious ‘choice’ founded on economical reason. Seen from many of the women’s harsh living conditions and those who actually have been forced into prostitution the decision to enter based on ‘choice’ have been questioned. Thorbek (Thorbek, 2002:222) states that, what needs to be acknowledged is what alternatives the women had. It could be between begging and prostitution, or between working in a factory with poor working conditions, long hours and bad payment and prostitution. Thitsa (1980) argues that, entering sex work cannot be a choice. Instead in her perception, those who enter are powerless. She further asserts that Thai women have a lower position assigned to them by Buddhism, which is the foundation forming social, cultural and spiritual life in Thailand. Based on that, male Buddhist Thais are supposed to join Buddhist monk-hood, while this opportunity is not given to women because of their lack of karma. Although, by entering

prostitution she can use the income as a means to support her family and from that she can *earn merit* and climb the karmic ladder and might be reborn as a man (cited in Gangoli and Westmarland, 2006:199). This argument from Thitsa, implies that Thai women have no agency in their lives or in choices they make.

Another argument that scholars debate and disagree upon is if prostitution can be called work. Authors have stated, after talking to activists of 'sex workers' rights, that prostitution to them is a job like any other. Contrary to this, others, including women's rights movement, define it as degrading and dehumanizing (Kempadoo, 2005:xxiii; Jeffrey, 2002:xvi).

Leslie Ann Jeffrey (2002) is one of few authors that have put emphasis on the women in prostitution, which was done by interviewing a few women to collect material for her book. She argues that the structural constraints enclosed with prostitution as a 'choice' is mostly evident in the developing world. Meaning that your choices are limited in what labor options the society can offer you. Furthermore, Jeffrey, who draws upon a constructionist approach, but also on poststructuralist feminist theory, which according to her uncovers how constructed categories, such as prostitute, whore and victim are imposed on the women. She claims that there is no singular prostitute. The women themselves need to be recognized and the concepts of victims or whores only constrain and structure their lives (2002: xvi).

Moreover, in the academic scholars discuss if prostitution is 'choice' or force, and whether it is, work or exploitation. From those points they also argue about the concepts *victim* or *agent* and which they think the women relate to. The arguments from radical feminists reject sex work as exploitative and it cannot be perceived as a form of work. This can signify that they identify the women as *victims*, and place them in a category of women who need to be 'saved'. Liberal feminists have, according to Cameron and Newman (2008:35), argued that prostitution does not have to be exploitative, and instead it is believed that, the women are able to decide over their own bodies and can make their own choices. Therefore these women are identified as having *agency*.

Phongpaichit continue in this line arguing that, sex work can be seen as an entrepreneurial move when women leave their villages to seek job in the cities. She further argues that the women who move are responsible, as they fulfill their duty as good daughters, and from that they derive *agency* (1982:25). Kamala Kempadoo (2005) is another author that argues in the same line as Phongpaichit, regarding her argument on entrepreneurial moves by women. Kempadoo further claims that, women take initiative by moving to improve their living conditions.

Drawing from this outline above, one can summarize it as, they tend to focus more on the improvement of women's labor conditions in prostitution and how they can influence policy makers in modifying the laws to their advantages. Considering that entry to prostitution often can be an entrepreneurial move it can be seen as a rational choice trying to maximize the gains.

Whilst other feminists, often from the West have pointed that prostitution must be suppressed since it is an example of sexual exploitation, which in this overview has been seen by authors to be blamed on structural factors, such as religion and cultural factors, where women are perpetuated by a strongly patriarchal society. On the contrary, feminists' from Asia often underline the role of the American military in Thailand and the global economy as structural factors of the spread of prostitution (Jeffrey, 2002).

2.2 Women activism in the Thai context

Women activists in Thailand have over the last three decades held strikes, protests and complained for better working conditions and against sexual harassment and abuse of the women in prostitution. The women's allies were at first few in number. Later on, the middle-class and elite organizations started to focus on victimization of women in prostitution and trafficking rather than their working rights. The middle-class and the elite with non-governmental organizations achieved to draw the strongest voice on prostitution policy and also to draw attention to the social problems of prostitution. They saw prostitution as an exploitation of the Thai women within the global economy (Jeffrey, 2002:63ff).

This view is also shared by the NGO; Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) who adhere to the opinion that, prostitution is exploitative and is a form of trafficking. And that all prostitution is abusive, even if it is on a women's consent. They further maintain that prostitution should not be decriminalized or considered as a form of work (CATW, 2011). An opposed stance to CATW is found in The Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) where liberal feminists perspective are represented. They, argue that 'sex workers' are workers and consequently prostitution should be decriminalized, since the current law penalizes women, further meaning that if prostitution was decriminalized, they then could be protected under the labour laws. GAATW state that women can make a choice to enter prostitution and should be treated as *agents* in the process. (GAATW,2011).

2.3 Conclusion of Relevant Literature

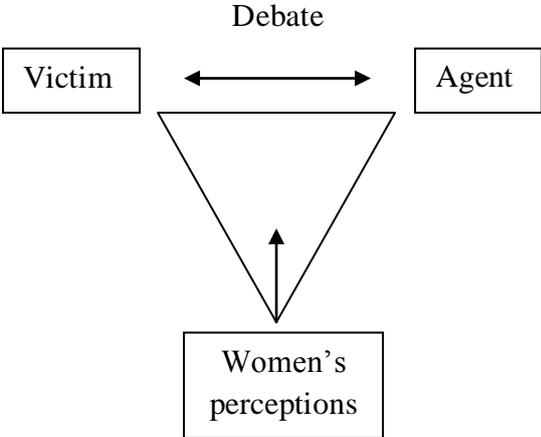
What is evident from the abovementioned literature is that authors usually want to present the women in prostitution according to their views and many times it fits into the concepts of *victim* or *agent*. Their perspectives derive from their theoretical positions and from that they argue what is best for the women according to them. What is notable is that the scholars arguing for women's *agency* many times are coming from Asia (in this study authors Phongpaichit, Gangoli and Pattanaik) while those who argue that women are victims, and are often Westerners (authors Jeffrey, Brody and Westmarland). However, both 'camps' seem to find explanations for why women are in prostitution in a structural analysis. Yet, those arguing of women's decision and *agency* can seem to relate to a rational choice analysis, as they see women making entrepreneurial decisions.

Voices from the women in prostitution are missing to respond to these perspectives and approaches on prostitution. Instead it creates a blurry perception and generalizations of the Thai women in prostitution. Van Esterik (2000) and Brody (2006) have stressed that the voices of women in prostitution are seldom heard. Modest research has been conducted with the goal of portraying the women's perceptions on prostitution and their self-image. Based on these loopholes of missing women, is where this study fits in.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study has started from a bottom-up approach, where the point of departure is the perspectives from the women. This study has a framework that will help to guide me as a researcher. Illustrated in figure 1, my *victim-agent* framework depicts the concepts, *victim*, *agent* and link up to the academic debate around those two concepts. Further, the viewpoint I try to take is the perceptions from the women in prostitution, from bars or the streets and those representing the organizations, and try to challenge the academic debate from their point of view.

Figure 1. Victim-Agent framework



Later on in the study the results will be analyzed following this framework. Using this, it creates a women-centered approach where it brings out the perceptions from the women. I will further aim to show here, how the conceptual reasoning of *victim* and *agent/agency* can be theoretically interrelated, which will help to place the answers from the research questions to a more theoretical understanding in the *Analysis chapter*. It will be done through the theoretical positions of a *structuralism* and *rational choice*.

Starting with the concept *agency*, which refers partially in this study to reasoning by Kabeer (2001:21), who argues that *agency* is one dimension of power and “the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them”. *Agency* is according to her, not only visible action, but also include meaning, motivation and purpose. It can further encompass more economically determined action, such as bargaining, negotiation, deception, resistance and protest. *Agency* can also be both individual and collective reflection and action. When acting according to this line of thought, the person is here called an *agent*. An agent is someone who

is confident in their actions and has a “voice”. This reasoning of *agency/agent* will here be related to a rational choice perspective.

The rational choice theory is interpreted from Conteh-Morgan (2004), although knowing that he is not the originator of rational choice theory. He claims that rational choice theory is seen as an individual interest theory. The decision on how to behave is always based on cost-benefit analysis, where the individual always make a judgment of the costs for attaining a certain goal, in order to establish whether action is "profitable" or not, and see either positive or negative sides in a coming decision.

This point of view can be seen as a challenge against common wisdom, since prostitution is often seen as a socially deviant behavior. One similar example of a rational choice perspective given by Conteh-Morgan (2004:106) is child participation in warfare. He argues that, decision to volunteer for economic reasons is often driven by socio-economic factors, and not a completely free decision. Poverty, hunger or shelter might drive children towards participation in rebel groups, who can provide with shelter, food and income. Frequently, these children come from the most marginalized and poorest part of the society, with shattered and troubled backgrounds, and therefore easy to recruit. Consequently, they see the negative sides of no hope or future at home, while joining a rebel group or wearing a uniform can offer prestige and a feeling of importance, all influencing on the decision to participate.

Following from this reasoning, it can be argued that the concept *agency* lies in a *rational choice analysis*, being in line with the goal oriented action argument. While, this concept and analysis further can be put in relation to a micro approach (*ibid:23*) which I will here interpret it into this study.

The micro approach focuses on human beings, behavior of individuals, and psychological analyses on human problems, with emphasis on tensions, fears and anxieties and therefore corresponds to rational choice theory, where action often is a response to problems. That can also put in relation to the *agent* perspective, since the *agent* definition here, is someone who have a clear purpose with their decision and have the capacity to act independently making an own choice, frequently in economic terms.

However these approaches to people’s choices and behaviors might not create a complete understanding or the ‘right’ understanding of a problem, in this case a connection to the *victim* concept. Therefore, I will bring in structural analysis which can adhere to the macro approach that underscores structures and systems in the society, and is more sociological leaning towards the *victim* perspective. In the macro approach, explanations to understand a person’s behavior and how for instance a person enters prostitution, can result in a structural analysis,

where a person act a certain way, because they are affected by structural factors that can constrain their choices, such as socio-economic limitations (Conteh-Morgan, 2004:13).

If deprived by choices it can make people powerless and more vulnerable to example, exploitative labour, which can in this study be factory work or prostitution. From this reasoning, the *victim* concept can be linked to a structural analysis. Since *victim* here is described as someone who are out of control of their life decisions and express powerlessness about their life, and lack of confidence. These *victim* descriptions can therefore seem to have arisen from structural factors, described as, economic and social including culture, norms, religion and traditions. Since this study's focal point is individual's perspectives and to understand those we might need to look for explanations in the whole society.

In the analysis part later on in this study, I intend to use these theoretical positions linked to the concepts in the figure, to support a more nuanced analysis of my findings, in relation to the women's perceptions. Moreover, it will mean that I not only present the concepts from the academic debate and reasoning by Kabeer, but also give the study more depth together with the theoretical positions and show if they can interact.

3.1 Definitions

In order to understand this study's definition of certain frequent used words in this study, it is significant to explain them to what they refer to in this context, in order to avoid misunderstandings as the words can be defined differently depending on your own point of departure and context.

This study only looks at the tourism-oriented prostitution meaning, that it focuses mostly at tourist places where foreigners are the customers, and not looking at the domestic related prostitution since that takes place at more hidden parts of the cities. **Prostitution** is a flexible category and can be defined in different ways. Prostitution, according to Thai law is illegal, however the establishments where it takes place is legal as long as the business is registered. Working on the streets is therefore illegal, and it is where most of the arrests take place, and it is up to the police to decide whether or not the woman is a prostitute. According to the Thai law prostitution is the exchange of sexual services for material gain (ILO, 1996), arguably a vague definition considering that, sexual services are not defined, and therefore definitions are up to the police to determine, whether the person is a prostitute or not.

Women in prostitution is the description used most often in this study. I consider this description to be most value-neutral and indicates that I am not taking position of either 'camp' in the debate on prostitution. In Sweden and Thailand the word used most is

prostitution, because it is used in law texts and government reports. When interviewing the women I did not use any of these words, but let them use the word they found appropriate. That way it does not judge or point her out as a victim or an agent, and aims to stay as neutral as possible in the research.

Sex worker is used by the organization Empower. ‘Sex worker’ is their profession according to the organization. In this study, the term ‘sex worker’ will be used when it refers to the organization Empower and its activists. Kempala Kempadoo (2005:151) argues that sex work is a profession and an initiative for women to increase their and their families’ living standards.

Moreover, I will clarify two other important concepts in this study, namely victim and agent. A person who is perceived as *Victim* in this study is described as powerless either in the society or in work or having no control of their lives. They can further be described as passive, with a lack of confidence, and someone who is easily exploited (Levett, 1993:48). On the other hand, an *agent* can be referred to as aforementioned someone who is confident, have a goal what they want to achieve, and have knowledge how their action can contribute to something (Kabeer, 2001:21).

4. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter there will be a presentation of the choice of methods that are used in this study.

4.1 Methodology

My approach to gaining an understanding of women's self-image, and EMPOWER and NightLight's perception and work on prostitution, has its point of departure in a qualitative research. When the study seeks understanding from perspectives of persons in the field, a qualitative study is according to Creswell (2009:16) well suited. It further suits well, when the quest is to find the meaning of a phenomenon, something that would not have been reached to the same extent with a quantitative study (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2008:17). The methods used in this study will help to construct knowledge from interaction within the field. This knowledge will further be created through an understanding from perspectives of the actors' realities.

4.1.1 Minor Field study

The aim of field studies is to collect primary data in different cultural settings where people are the subjects of the study (Mikkelsen, 2005:124). Therefore it seemed to suit a study of this nature, having the purpose in mind. Interviews were conducted in the cities of Bangkok and Patong Phuket, where I had found the centers and offices of the organizations which are part of this study's main focus. The first and sixth week of the study was conducted in Patong and the rest of the time was spent in Bangkok.

NightLight was of great importance of this study, because it was through them I had my first contact with the women in the bars. I spent a lot of time out on the streets making observations and with the organizations, to grasp as many impressions as possible of the environment. Spending time with the organizations gave me important input and knowledge not only regarding their work and interaction in the field, but also knowledge about the larger context concerning other matters in the society. The ability for me to perform interviews and observations in two cities expanded my knowledge and understanding about prostitution and its complexities.

4.2 Method

4.2.1 Ethnographic approach

Qualitative studies can involve various methods within the same research. To reach the aim of this study an ethnographic approach was used. Ethnographic method is explained by Aspers (2011:21) as an interpersonal method, meaning that the researcher is integrated in the field with those who are being studied in order to understand the objects of the study. The tools for this are participatory observations, interviews and dialogue. The ethnographic method accentuates according to Aspers (2011), the interpersonal contact to understand the purpose of the acts that is being shared by the objects.

By having the ethnographic method as approach, it was suitable to be in the field and interact with people, observe, and create a dialogue with those being studied through both individual and group interviews. The aim to use this approach was to gain knowledge and understand the people of the study, in this case, women in prostitution and the organizations working with women in prostitution.

Aspers further argues that, the foundation for a researcher with an ethnographic approach is social interaction, and since the purpose of my study was to hear people's views and understand its actors and activities to further improve my understanding of the phenomena, interacting with them was a requirement to reach that purpose (*Ibid: 37ff*). And therefore, this justifies the choice of an ethnographic method.

Every process of what the actors do and why they are doing something and identifying the meaning of it can only be interpreted by looking at the whole picture of those people being studied. Following this reasoning, the researcher can further his/her interpretation by taking it to a more abstract and analytical level, which is being done with theoretical concepts and analytical or conceptual frameworks, something that is also undertaken in this study, explored in chapter 3.

As the intention, in this study is partly to understand the subject through mostly empirical material, it also means that it is important to recognize that the reality are constructed according to how the people/actors' studied understands it (first order construction). This demands that the researcher depicts the people/actors expressions and point of view of the subject, so that the people studied, later on can recognize their stories and see possible links when interpreted to theoretical concepts (second order construction) that can create a greater understanding (*ibid:46ff*).

4.2.2 Pre-understanding

According to Aspers (2011:38) pre-understanding has its foundation in the researcher's everyday understanding and it is a necessary and inevitable part of reaching conclusions. My pre-knowledge of prostitution in Thailand has been gained from several trips to the country. On these trips I have come across the phenomena of prostitution and always wondered what the women's decision to enter was based upon and how they perceived themselves. My image of prostitution and its women have varied, from when I was very young and first visited Thailand, and wondered if the women liked their job, because they smiled and looked so happy. When I grew older, I started to feel sorry for the women and thought that nobody could chose this work voluntarily they must be forced or not have any other options.

However, after reading an extended amount of literature on the subject I have gained more knowledge regarding the different views on the subject. I would argue that seeing the field up close before, has created an advantage for this study and my entry into the field as a researcher, since I was prepared for what the field looked like. Hence, my pre-understanding can be said to be established on the existing literature presented in the introductory chapter and my previous trips to Thailand.

The pre-understanding and emotions can only be put aside to a certain level since they will always be carried with the researcher and also are a prerequisite for all of our understanding. A researcher must know what he/she has taken for granted in the research and consequently, what data will not be questioned (Aspers, 2011:38). All of this has been taken into consideration when performing the study and arising problems dealt with accordingly, through occasionally taking a break from the field.

4.2.3 Stakeholder analysis

Identification of stakeholders and their relevance in study is an important part to assess for both for the researcher and the reader. It is important to ask the question of who should participate in the study and who will be affected. Mikkelsen separates between primary, secondary and key stakeholders. Stakeholders can be individuals, groups and institutions who have interests in the research. Primary stakeholders are those who are directly influenced by a research, secondary stakeholders can be middlemen, such as organizations or persons involved somehow in the research, and finally key stakeholders who are part of first and secondary stakeholders having an influence or affect on the research, good or bad (Mikkelsen, 2005:284).

A stakeholder analysis has been done in this study for the simplicity for the reader to follow the findings and later on the analysis of the research. The primary stakeholders here are the women working in bars and the streets and the women who represent the organizations of NightLight and EMPOWER, generally all who participated in the interviews in this study. Secondary stakeholders are customers, bar manager, families of the women interviewed, as well as the civil society and the government with the politicians. All of these are a fundamental part of the phenomena studied, but they have not been interviewed since this study necessarily focuses on women in prostitution and due to the delimitations made for this study.

Aspers (2011:77) argues that, key informants are of importance for the researcher, since they can function as entry points to the field and possibly get you in contact with other actors and situations in the field. Thus, they can make sure that the study moves forward and sometimes eases the stress for the researcher. In this study the key informant was the CEO and founder of NightLight, who showed me a way into the field and allowed me to follow their work up-close. Yet, when following a key informant, the researcher has to be aware that these people generate a picture through the informants' glasses and not the research objectives perspective (Bryman, 2002:285).

4.2.4 Primary Data

When performing a qualitative study with an ethnographic approach the researchers themselves gather the material and produce the material, which is what Aspers (2011) calls primary data. The material was gathered through observations and interviews with questions suitable to this case, this primary data generated the essential material for the study. When using mostly primary sources, the study often has high validity since the researcher is aware of the possible deficiencies, something that cannot be controlled in secondary data (Aspers, 2011:167ff).

4.2.5 Semi-structured Interviews

The interviews were conducted in an open and semi-structured manner, meaning that questions and themes were prepared before and answers from the respondents could evolve and turn into a dialogue (Aspers, 2011:143). By following this procedure it follows the logic of an ethnographic method as mentioned above. Semi-structured interviews also allows for new formulations to be developed during the interview. That allowed me as a researcher to be

flexible and change words that I understood to be misinterpreted by their facial expression or answers.

Mikkelsen (2005:169) claims that, interviewing is “the practioner’s par excellence in development studies“. This study illustrates a good example of the power of interviewing and how it can open up people and reveal things. Some of my interviews with the women turned into confessions of things they had never spoken about before. They seemed eager, in a way, to tell these things but not having anyone before who took time to listen to them. It did not matter what kind of method was used, if it was a single interview or a small group interview, confessions were still revealed.

4.2.6 Selection of Interviewees

A critical part of a qualitative research using the method of interviews is the selection of interviewees. This selection can follow a range of categories, such as simple random sampling, snowball or chain sampling or a systematic sampling (Mikkelsen, 2005:193). The chosen technique in this study was, snowball sampling. That made it easier to get in contact with more women in the NGO’s. The women interviewed from bars and the streets were approached solely by me and not through any of the organizations. Decisions on who were to be interviewed involved factors, such as who had time and who were willing to participate and in the streets it could be a suggestion of an acquaintance to a woman previously interviewed.

There were no criteria on the interviews that could otherwise lead to limitations of the sampling; also no personal factors were taken into account because that sampling could lead to be biased. Everybody participated in the study on equal grounds, and was also free to participate or not.

4.2.7 Individual and Group Interviews

The number of respondents was 10 from EMPOWER and 16 from NightLight. Noteworthy is that, not all of those interviewed have been in prostitution. Besides that, 22 women were interviewed who worked in bars or on the streets, in different areas of the red-light districts in Bangkok or Patong². Some of those interviews were more informal and rather took the form of conversations due to their harsh working conditions in the bar, with little time off and their prohibition to talk to anybody, especially to women who are not seen as possible customers.

² Information about the interviews can be found in Appendix 2.

Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2008:181) highlight, the importance of informal conversations between the researcher and informant where these are seen as an important complement to the ethnographical approach, which arguably justifies the abovementioned circumstance. The interviews made with women from NightLight were conducted during work hours, because many of them lived far away from work with long travelling times, thus, I did not want to sacrifice their spare time. But, that also meant that I had to respect those who wanted to work and not to disturb them. The CEO at NightLight gave her consent to conduct interviews with the employees, to make sure that it was alright to perform interviews during work hours. It was possible to feel in the atmosphere of who had time, or those who did not want to be interviewed because they were shy or just not ready to tell their stories, as some of them were still ashamed about their past.

The interviews took place in various setups and locations depending on who were interviewed. It varied from large open rooms where the women worked on their jewelry production, the office of the CEO and founder of NightLight, or at the floor in a printing room where the women were working at the same time. The women interviewed from bars and the streets took place either in bars, also one time at the beach. I came in contact with these women by myself and the NGO's did not advise me who to interview. Yet, all interviews took place in the areas of Bangkok and Patong Phuket, where the red-light districts are to be found.

There were five women interviewed at EMPOWER in Patong and the other five from EMPOWER in Bangkok, these interviews were conducted at their centers where at the time the women had gathered to have an English class. Four women from EMPOWER Patong took part in both a group interview and individual ones. The group interview had the same themes as the individual ones but they discussed more freely regarding the topics. These women were not ashamed to discuss their work and could get very serious and personal in their stories even though, others were listening, almost as they were overwhelmed to tell their narrative.

Since the study were a qualitative study with a purpose to seek and establish an understanding from the women themselves, it was of great importance to really hear the views of the interviewees and that they could feel that they could tell me the truth despite, how many people surrounded them. This shows a good illustration of the power of interviewing.

At NightLight the individual interviews were conducted in rooms surrounded by other people most often. One time I had a small group interview with three people because that was the number of women working in that specific room, and therefore it was a good idea to interview them together. Questions for this group interview had the same themes as the individual ones, but I took into consideration that the women might not want to answer very

personal questions about their background when their co-workers sat next to them, therefore I started the conversations differently. Still, that seemed not to matter here either, if they were performed in group or individual, the women opened up anyhow and turned the conversations into personal matters and revealed unexpected things, same as what occurred with members of EMPOWER.

As the study matured and myself as a researcher, the interviews got more and more open. Most interviews were made in Thai, the women's native language and therefore required a translator since I do not speak Thai. My choice of translator at NightLight was, Emily from England, who had worked at NightLight for six years and was at the time of the study, working her last month. She spoke almost fluent Thai, and it was an advantage to have her as she knew the women well and they easily opened up themselves in the interviews since they trusted her.

Yet, there were some interviews that could be executed in English and those were all interviews with women representing EMPOWER as well some women in the bars and the streets. The women at EMPOWER spoke quite good English and my questions were understandable to them, although I received some help with translation from a Finnish woman named Hanna at EMPOWER's center in Bangkok. She was a social worker who grew up in Thailand and spoke fluent Thai. She helped me translate when the women wanted to elaborate their answers and their English was not enough.

Several women told me awful things and heartbreaking stories resulting that I could not hold my tears back. Those stories I will not write about in my essay for respect to the women and also because they are not relevant for the study. Even though interviews left me sad and frustrated I believe that the best way to help someone is to pass the stories on to other people.

All women, gave me very personal stories and were very honest and in depth. Many times the women took over the interviews in a way that I had not prepared for; they talked about things that I hesitated to ask because of ethical considerations. I was careful taking notes during these times and instead I let the recorder tape the conversation, and I transcribed the main content of the interview afterwards. A recorder was used in consent with the women. All women were very friendly towards me.

4.2.8 Observation and participation

The first contacts with the field and the first week of the study was conducted in Patong. It struck me first as a bit frightening to walk around alone in these often dark red-light districts

lit with bright neon-lights. Nevertheless, I had to put these feelings aside since I was going to spend a lot of time on these streets trying to talk to women and later do interviews.

I made observations of women working in bars interacting with their customers and also observations of the women's social life with family members and friends during my time with the organizations. During the observations in the bars I could theoretically have been a customer, but, since I am also a woman, the women in the bars do not approach the same sex in the same way they approach a man. Consequently, these observations gave me very valuable information and substance of the relationship between worker and customer and among the workers, as well as between the worker and their *mama-san* (female bar manager). Observations in the field were not only restricted to the sites where the interviews were conducted but were also situated elsewhere.

Participating with NightLight two times a week for a few hours during their outreach, created an opportunity for me to make close contact with some women in the bars and was good preparation for my interviews later on. This contact furthermore led to increased understanding of the complexity of their life situation and issues they face.

4.2.9 Secondary data and literature

To increase the knowledge about the subject, secondary data has been gathered. Bryman (2002:208) points out, that secondary data provides great advantages for a social science researcher to carry out a study. He argues that, a lot of the data available is of very good quality, because the scholar has often used well established methods to follow up and analyze data.

The secondary data was gathered for the background information and the relevant literature, but also for increasing my own knowledge. Scientific journals and articles were searched for online at: *OneSearch*, *Ebrary*, *JSTOR* and *Google Scholar*. Keyword in the search was: *prostitution*, *Thailand*, *tourism*, *agent/victim*, *Southeast Asia* and *Isan*. They were used separately or in diverse combinations. Together with online sources, books were part of the secondary sources. Books and articles that explored women's agency in prostitution were there less of. Probably because the subject is of sensitive character and therefore it can be seen as controversial to argue for women's agency.

The primary data of the study has been complemented with the secondary data throughout the research.

4.2.10 Triangulation

In order to make the study valid and reliable, a combination of different methodological tools were used, as aforementioned, secondary data, observations, conversations and formal interviews conducted both individually and in small groups. By applying all these tools, the data are gathered and analyzed from various perspectives thereby creating a certain validity and reliability of the data, since you are not dependent on only one source (Mikkelsen, 2005:96; Johannessen and Tufte, 2003:77). Further, this technique allows for the researcher to investigate if the different methodological tools plausibly lead to the same results, if not, it may lead to new interpretations (Johannessen and Tufte, 2003:77).

4.3 Ethical Considerations

Since the aim was to describe partly the perspectives from the women in prostitution, I had to separate my feelings and values and endeavor to be non-judgmental to the stories I heard. I was aware that the subject is sensitive and needed to be approached with carefulness and discretion. The answers could evoke feelings, such as being ashamed or feeling sad about their situation. Consequently, the interviews were performed in a careful manner and the respondents' thoughts and answers were handled with respect. Also, the wishes of those who did not want to be interviewed were respected.

Those who decided to participate were informed that their identity would be protected. Therefore, due to the sensitiveness and personal stories from the women, the names of the interviewees have been purposely left out. Quotations from some of the women's answers will therefore be coded, in order to protect their identity. The interviews that were recorded were made with consent from the women and they were informed that the material was only going to be used by me in relation to this study.

Moreover, the questions to the women were well thought-out and they were read through by my translator who had worked with the subject in NightLight for six years, and my tutor.

4.4 Critical analysis of methods

Given that this study is performed with mostly primary sources as the basic material, the perceptions of the persons interviewed are considered as the truths here. This can be seen as a limitation using a method which relies a lot upon people's ability to give you the information needed in order to perform a good study, although I did identify this in my study. However, it still meant that I as a researcher had to be careful when depicting the interviewee's stories

and present a fair and reasonable story from what the women told me, as Bryman (2002:264) states “to see the world with their eyes”.

As this study is very open and has an ethnographic approach it was a challenge in the field to reflect upon the material gathered and stay impartial and not be affected by the stories, since you as a researcher are almost always in contact with the field and the people being studied. Therefore, I learned that it was significant to sometimes get a break from the field and there gather my thoughts to be able to reflect upon the information.

5. BACKGROUND

This chapter aims to present some background information with an emphasis on the prostitution history and laws in Thailand which the chapter starts off with, and then explores the status of women in relation to Buddhism and finishes with some information about tourism in its relation to prostitution.

5.1 The History and Laws on Prostitution

In this section, I will look at the history of prostitution and national laws and policies and how existing laws look.

Prostitution in Thailand can be dated back at least to the Ayuddhya period (1350-1767). Ayuddhya was a large city by the Chao Phraya river (slightly north of where Bangkok is located today), that had very favorable location for trade with the world and also to control the territory. In 1680s the king ran a monopoly on prostitution in the capital Ayuddhya, where he had bought or enslaved around six hundred women for a range of activities. The women were commonly slaves and were viewed as an object and forced to serve her owners. Under the Ayuddhya time prostitution was taxed and legal by the government, which may have been the starting point for Thailand to draw in state revenue from prostitution (Van Esterik, 2000:172; Boonchalaksi & Guest, 1994:2).

The clientele were then as now, both local and foreigners. Even under these times there was a close relation between the sex industry, migrant communities and economic development. Although, during the earlier times it was mostly the Chinese communities that had connection to prostitution, today there are other foreigners who have migrated and established communities, such as Europeans.

When the Chinese migration of males increased, so did the sex industry, and was mostly located in the Chinese neighborhoods of Bangkok. In other parts of Thailand, as Phuket, the sex industry was unfolded through the growth of coal mining together with Chinese migration. Prostitution during that time did not, however, involve only Thai women. There were also a large number of Chinese women (Boonchalaksi & Guest, 1994:2ff). After 600 years of slavery, King Rama V finally abolished slavery in 1905. Still, some women 'voluntarily' became prostitutes.

Thailand has had four main laws related directly to prostitution; Contagious Disease Prevention Act 1908, Suppression of prostitution 1960, the Entertainment Places act 1966 and The Prevention and Suppression of prostitution Act 1996. Under King Rama V in 1908 the

Contagious Disease Prevention Act was established, with an aim for all prostitute houses to register to keep them under control and to control sexually transmitted diseases, while also collect taxes. Prostitution was in the 19th and early 20th century profitable and to some degree accepted (Boonchalaksi & Guest, 1994:23). The act was replaced in 1960 by the “Suppression of Prostitution Act, B.E. 2503”, that made prostitution illegal and punished women in prostitution, procures and pimps with monetary fines or imprisonment in order to try to curb prostitution, also by making brothels illegal (ILO, 1996; Van Esterik, 2000:174).

Despite this effort, the prostitution business flourished and spread because of the Vietnam War, where Thailand served as a rest and recreation place for US troops who visited the country and also for those 70,000 combat troops stationed in the northeast. The Americans had women in prostitution as girlfriends, openly walking around on the streets, compared to the Thai and Chinese customers, who instead visited brothels. Even though the 1960s and onward was the time when most laws were established with intention to diminish the sex industry, it was also the time when it expanded the most (Boonchalaksi & Guest, 1994:23; Van Esterik, 2000:175).

The “Entertainment Places Act of 1966” intended to empower the police to be able to close a place where prostitution occurred, and to give the Social Welfare Department abilities to send women to rehabilitation where they could be provided with education and vocational training. It has been argued that the aim was to evoke some kind of moral sense with this effort (Boonchalaksi & Guest, 1994:20).

In 1996 the “Prevention and Suppression of Prostitution Act, B.E. 2539” was enacted, which is the central legal law prohibiting prostitution also known as the “Prostitution law”. The law defines prostitution as:

“sexual intercourse, or any other act, or the commission of any other act in order to gratify the sexual desire of another person in a promiscuous manner in return for money or any other benefit, irrespective of whether the person who accepts the act and the person who commits the act are of the same sex or not.”

(ILO,1996)

This law allows for massage parlors, go-go bars and karaoke bars to be regulated and licensed in order to operate. Though, there were and are still loopholes for bar managers and brothels to operate without being licensed, it can include that the customer pay a fee to the bars and take out the girl from the bar, hence, she is not on their property any longer and they cannot be charged (Gangoli and Westmarland, 2006:13). It is also widely known that it is common

practice for bar managers to bribe police to maintain their business and that police inform bar managers when they will do raids and tell them to have a certain amount of money ready.

Since the law is ambiguous, and difficult to define it is still hard to prosecute potential offenders. The entertainment places seldom register their business, because of fear of being prosecuted by authorities. Therefore, for many women in prostitution, the law is more of a hindrance because they cannot seek help from authorities when being abused or harassed for their fear of being arrested. The illegal status of their work leads to many other violations of the rights of the workers, such as right to equal protection under the law, to perform their work and perhaps most importantly to have access to social services and health care. Thus, this has brought up the question of legalizing prostitution for women to enjoy legal protection and social benefits (Brody, 2006:194f).

The enforcement of the laws has mainly been an act to silence human rights defenders and ease the pressure from United Nations who in 1960 campaigned for abolition of prostitution. Furthermore, the law from 1996 was mostly a response to the increasing HIV/AIDS problem that created a bad picture of Thailand, getting in the way of its top-tourist destination image; therefore, stricter penalties were imposed. From the 1990s the government has collaborated with brothel owners to enforce condom use to lower the HIV infection rates and other sexually transmitted diseases (STD). The efforts paid off, from 1989 the condom use rose from low 14 % in sex acts to 90 % in 1994 (World Health Organisation, 2000).

5.2 The Status of Women in Relation to Buddhism

Authors like Jeffery (2000), Mills (1999) and Van Estervik (2000) have brought up the importance of the culture and the religion in Thailand and how it relates to the women's low class in society. Buddhist practice, privileging men over women by giving the men the Buddhist order of monks, has consequently, made western feminist blame Buddhism as patriarchal. It has often been argued that, women have it harder to climb up the ladder of merit and cannot become monks. According to the deep rooted Buddhist concept *bun khun* "debts of merit" the children owe their parents not only respect and gratitude, but they should also give them assistance with money and labour.

The family in Thailand is focused around the females which can be described as matrilineal, as she is assigned the family home, although the senior male has the authority. It is the adult children's responsibility to take care of their family at old age (Mills, 1999:76). Essentially it is the women who are responsible to provide for the family, and be responsible for the economy, in that account it might be why she is given the home.

Before industrialization the women sold food to meet the needs, however, lately it has led them to seek work in the sex industry for the lack of opportunities in the rural economy. Entering prostitution can fulfill traditional obligations of being providers and 'dutiful daughters' which can create a tolerance for her work and justified option by her family. While Buddhism plays an important part in the Thai society it is important to understand it in relation to gender relations and also the sex industry (Jeffery, 2002:xii; Mensendiek, 1997:164f).

5.3 Tourism in Relation to Prostitution

Thailand started after the Vietnam War to promote development for international tourism and Thai prostitutes were a feature of this promotion. Travel agencies organized sex tours running from Europe and East Asia to Thailand drawing in large revenues to the state. The export of agricultural goods and the agricultural sector saw a decline when the country turned its focus on the foreign exchange from tourism that had started to outgrow all other businesses by becoming the largest sector of foreign exchange. Thus, farmers had to turn to the industry sector instead to make a living. Consequently, that created critical views on tourism and its effect on the population, and the question has been raised from a critical point of view whether this change has done more harm than good for the rural people, and of course the women (Mensendiek, 1997:171f).

While tourism continues to grow, the demand for more women in the service sector increases. Male tourists visiting Thailand outnumber females because the sex industry has become a known attraction. Although, it must be stated that not all males are there for buying sex some say that they believe that in buying a woman, they are helping to support the woman and her family, and therefore only pay the woman for her company. The women in prostitution work in Bangkok, as a result of the rural-urban migration, but also in other popular tourist destinations such as, Pattaya, Phuket and Ko Samui.

One of the most dangerous risks associated with prostitution, is the possibility of contracting STD's, especially HIV/AIDS, and yet, the establishments are averse on the issue of safe sex policy, since they are worried about losing customers, who prefer not to use condoms (Mensendiek, 1997:173). Many of the NGO's working with responding to the needs of women in prostitution in Thailand are providing them with education about diseases and giving out condoms, a very important work and something that has contributed to lowering the numbers of STD's in Thailand (World Health Organisation, 2000).

6. FINDINGS

In this chapter I will outline the findings from the interviews and put in relation to the research questions. The chapter begins with a presentation of some general background information from all the women, in order to be able to understand the motives behind their entry into prostitution and then to be able to see the phenomena in a larger context. Secondly, the answers from the women in the streets and bars follows, and then the answers from the women in the organizations are presented. Finally, it will be narrowed down and be summarized in relation to the first and second research question.

The findings demonstrate the answers from the three studied groups, which are: EMOPWER, NightLight and the women in prostitution from bars and the streets. The chapter is divided into sections separating the answers from the three groups. Which will make it clearer for the reader to understand who the answer comes from, though, it will be anonymous. However, I will code the different quotes and statements from the three groups, the letter B refers to the women in the bars/streets, E for EMPOWER and NL refers to the women at NightLight. Furthermore, the reference will have a date, when the interview took place and in the appendix the reference will also be linked to a city where the interview took place.

6.1 Background of the Women

The women interviewed and spoken to in this study were in the ages ranging from 16 to 42 years old. They had worked in prostitution between one month to ten years. One of my interviewees revealed that she was 16 years old, and had worked in prostitution since she was only 14 years old (E1, 2011-11-10). Social influences of family and friends together with curiosity and attraction of seeking adventure in Bangkok and tourist places appeared to be strong motivators for migrating and entering prostitution. For some of the women this was their first employment, while others had first worked at a factory but then turned to prostitution because they wanted more freedom, less working hours, while also, earning more money. The factory conditions were described as harsh with long working hours and a bad environment, on the other hand it was also described by some women as good and they liked it. Items produced in the factories included everything from ketchup to surfing boards.

Money and less working hours were the main reasons given by the women as to why they entered prostitution and continued with it. The vast majority of respondents had children that they had given birth to when they were in their early twenties. The children often lived with

her family in the village. The women were all very grateful for the help from their parents and said that it was not ideal to live in Bangkok or Patong with children, when having to work in the evenings and nights. Many of the interviewees also pointed out that they never wanted their children to find out about their work, as they were ashamed and also afraid that their children one day would take after them. Because of this, there seem to be a limit in the desire for money and freedom. The women were very eager to indicate that they of course wanted to spend more time with their children if they could, and when time allowed they visited them, although, it was often the case that they only saw them once per year. Conversations about their children were a sensitive topic and mostly brought tears.

When being asked if their parents knew what work they did in Bangkok or in Patong, the answers I received were: no they do not know and if they did, they would be very ashamed of me; or, that they know and are not happy with it, but they wanted the money sent to them frequently. Others said, yes they know, but do not acknowledge it openly. One interviewee said that her mother-in-law knows about her work and is very ashamed of her, calling her a whore and has forbidden her to visit one of her children that she takes care of. Yet, the mother-in-law still required remittances to be sent every month to her (B1, 2011-11-25), implying that, their work is in a way accepted as long as they keep sending money.

Almost all women assessed the importance of family and their obligation to take care of the parents, siblings and also the extended family who in a way is the immediate family and inseparable, especially when money appeared the women implied. Remittances were sent to their home villages every month and some answered that they sent home every other month. A recurrent answer was that their families requested for more and more money as time went on. Many women expressed that their father, brother or uncle frequently spent the money on alcohol, gambling and debts. The women also thought their families bought unnecessary items, such as expensive modern agricultural products, new TVs or motorbikes.

The level of education among the women varied from five to nine years. Some stated that the reason for dropping out of school was to help at home with farming or having to seek work in the urban center or tourist places. What is important to acknowledge, is that not all women who are poor and lack education seek work and end up in prostitution.

One of my most interesting findings from the background information was that of all the women interviewed, approximately 80% came from the Northeastern (Isan)³ region and had migrated to Bangkok and Patong in search for employment. NightLight asserts that a majority

³ See Appendix 1 for map of Thailand and Isan.

of the women migrating to Bangkok come from *Isan* (NightLight, 2012c). The rest were mainly from the North. Northeastern Thailand is the poorest region in the country and has a large marginalized population. Looking closer at the region of *Isan*, it is evident that they have a stigma that follows the population back in the history of Thailand. The region was sparsely populated until early twentieth century and did not attract much attention from central Thailand until the settlement took place mostly by ethnic Lao people. Lao rulers tried to escape Thai (at that time Siamese) domination of *Isan* region, but failed when the king in Bangkok strengthened its authority over the area and its population, partly by imposing new cash taxes. The centralized control from Bangkok over *Isan* was aided substantially, by the construction of railways, and communication of telegraph systems in 1900. Even though the ruling of *Isan* followed by some opposition from the population in the region they still remained subjects of the direct rule of Bangkok. Consequently, it took some time before the Thai nationalism promoted by the king, spread to the remote areas of North and Northeastern Thailand (Mills, 1999:33f). The people in *Isan* have experienced a disproportionate small contribution from the development that Thailand, especially Central Thailand experienced during the 1970s economic growth (Mills, 1999:32). The *Isan* region and its relation to the whole Thai society will be developed in the analysis part.

6.2 Perceptions from the Women in Prostitution Working in the Bars and the Streets

This section presents an overview of answers from interviews with women working in prostitution in bars and the streets in Bangkok and Patong.

6.2.1 Self-image and Life Circumstances

Women's perceptions of their self-image and work, was a difficult subject to discuss with them. In the beginning they all showed me happy faces stating that they liked to dance and that it was a freedom in their work that they liked. An interviewee said, "I can choose my working hours and which customer I want. If I don't want a man, I don't take him" (B2, 2011-12-16).

But then asking the question of what they really thought about taking customers, our conversations and their facial expression changed and became more serious. They expressed that this is the only work they can get. One woman said, "I cannot do anything else I have no skills, no education and no money. I am from *Isan*, other Thai women always look down on me" (B3, 2011-12-8). Another woman said, "It is a tough life you know, it is not as easy as

for you, everybody at home is poor. You can be whatever you want to be, I cannot” (B4, 2011-11-25). These two quotations taken together, picture stories frequently heard from those working in prostitution – inadequate education, and ‘no options’ for other economic activity in the underdeveloped villages of *Isan*. Coming from *Isan*, seem to make the people subordinated from the rest of the country, and give them a stigma.

Moreover, their ‘choices’ and options instead of moving to Bangkok or Phuket and enter prostitution would have been to stay in their villages and work as a laborer in a factory, but the salary there was minimal, and they said that people were treated like slaves in factories. It was no salary to support your family with and further recounted the importance of being responsible women. This implies that their ‘choices’ are limited to bad or worse according to them, but from a rational choice perspective, it is still a choice, since the available alternative is considered even less favorable.

Several women expressed that, their goal was to find a *farang*⁴ she could marry. The fairytale is that the man would take care of her by supporting her and her family, and they could escape poverty. In their eyes, all *farang* men are rich. When asked to elaborate why they sought to have a relationship with foreigner instead of a Thai man they responded, “Thai men are all bad, they drink alcohol, gamble and beat their women” (B5, 2011-11-25). An answer I received from almost all the women. The drinking and gambling was something that was also verified through my observations. When I walked in the early morning at the streets in both Bangkok and Patong, I saw men sitting on the sidewalks with friends drinking and gambling.

It was difficult for the women to explain a vision for their future and dreams. At first, they did not understand the question but after re-formulating a few times, I received the answers, such as moving back home to Isan and become a rice farmer but more commonly was, to move back to Isan and sell things like clothes, food or have a restaurant. An answer that can be put in contrast to this, is three women I met who studied at the university, they said that they did not see themselves as weak women or a *victim*, instead prostitution was a conscious choice made by them and was only a “quick-fix” solution to income to be able to continue their studies. They alleged that they could not understand women who did this for years, in their eyes; they were whores and looked down on them.

The answers from this group of interviews have signified everything from a low opinion of their self-image, and hopelessness regarding their situation; as well as it also showed an entrepreneurial side, with an agency image from some of the women.

⁴ Farang is the word for foreigner in Thailand, and can be both a man and woman.

6.3 EMPOWER's Perceptions on Prostitution and themselves

What is significant to highlight again is that the women of EMPOWER are members and activists, thus, they gather at the centers to associate with other women in the 'entertainment industry' and to attend voluntary classes.

The women I interviewed representing EMPOWER gave me very powerful impressions from the beginning, indicating that they were strong women. They seemed to have very good self-confidence, in how they moved and spoke of themselves and their work. They had no problems of talking about their work since they were proud of it. When I asked how they perceived themselves in their work, they expressed that they were strong, sexy and powerful women and did not want to be labeled as *victims*. The concept *victim* was expressed spontaneously by the women.

One woman said that, the society looked on them as weak, and that they were a disgrace and embarrassment to their country (E2, 2011-12-14). Everyone was well aware of the stigma associated with their work. Though, it is an activity that is highly visible and prevalent in Thailand, it is not tolerable or accepted amongst the Thais, especially, the middle-class, academics, media and the ruling class. They all believed that if prostitution was decriminalized, the women could instead be protected under the Labor law and the Health and Safety law, and no longer be classified as criminals under the law. They could then be accepted in the society.

6.3.1 Approaches and Working Strategies

EMPOWER's members argue that the women need their work in prostitution and therefore they started an organization that can struggle for labour rights. The women in Thailand are the head of the family and main provider of money to their families. EMPOWER's central thoughts are based on the idea that the women who work as 'sex workers' are women who have taken responsibility to care for their families and for themselves, and therefore entered prostitution to earn money. When asking them what the money is used for, the unanimous answer is for remittances, then for university fees, clothes, make-up, bribes to the police, a new house in their village or a tractor, comparable with answers from interviewees of the first group (bars and the streets). The members in Patong also stated that they bought gold for their salary, one woman said it was, "to look rich like people in Bangkok" (E3, 2011-11-10).

From the interviews, the greatest dissonance in the answers between EMPOWER and those women working in bars and the streets is regarding money. Where members of

EMPOWER, answered that they used most of their money for university fees which only three did in the former group. This indicates the importance of education for these women.

The organizations' aim is to empower women in the 'entertainment industry'; this is done through education primarily through English and health classes which are seen as important tools. Teaching them the language most of their customers speak makes them powerful in the relationship with the man and helps to minimize the exploitation and gives better working opportunities. Thereby, admitting that they are to some extent being exploited in their work. Leading to another question posed to the women: how is it to work in the bars? "Life is not easy you know, you are being watched all the time either by customers or by mama-san or manager. We all struggle" (E4, 2011-12-19). It was apparent that their happy faces are mostly just a mask they put on in their path to attain their goal, whether it is an education fee, gold or simply a nice dress to act as if they are part of the middle-class and consuming society.

However, a great majority of the women outlined that it would be good to find a *farang* who could spoil them. Also that, in their relationship with their customer hardly ever was love involved, even though they could tell the men that they loved them it was only said because they knew that they would be given more jewelry or money.

A vast majority of women pointed out that, if their voices were included more often in debates, books and newspapers, they could claim their point of view regarding their work and would no longer be invisible in the debate. They wanted to reach out with their message that prostitution should be legal and that they should have labor rights as other workers. I was informed by the women that this is a choice made by them and nobody forced them to enter the 'entertainment industry'. Though, none of them said that they went into this work because she wanted to or because it sounded fun. EMPOWER's measures to reach out so far, have been through their own radio channel and newsletter where they talk about life and struggle faced by women in prostitution.

The responses from EMPOWER indicate that, they feel strong, powerful, and as good women supporting their families, However, there are difficulties for them to carrying out their work, since they are firstly stigmatized by the society, and secondly as their work is illegal they are vulnerable, because they have hardly any rights.

6.4 NightLight's Perceptions for the Women in Prostitution

So far, I have presented the answers from the women in bars and the streets, and the women representing the organization EMPOWER. Here I will present NightLight, the last group of the representatives in this study.

Almost all the Thai women working at NightLight have in some capacity, been involved in prostitution either, for a very short time or for a longer period of their life. In terms of requirements to be part of NightLight, the women have to be committed to the organization, meaning that they have to leave the sex industry completely and work 40 hours weekly. Although, there have been some women who have ‘relapsed’ and gone back to work in prostitution, many of these women have then almost directly gone back to their work at NightLight. Annie Dieselberg CEO and founder of the organization said that, prostitution has an attractive force and pulls the women back in. It becomes like an addiction, where the addiction is fast cash and drugs, which are easily available in the bars/clubs.

These women like the others come mostly from the *Isan* region where also they have children living with their parents. The self-image and descriptions of themselves have, according to their responses, changed after starting work at NightLight. Before, they were scared and felt insecure about themselves and uncertain of their lives. Now their view of themselves is one of respect, and they have found peace with themselves. To help them reach this point, they are offered therapy to help them deal with trauma from their past. The women pointed out in the interviews how they now had started to feel worthy again because of all the help they have received at NightLight. An interviewee said that taking customers was frightening and she was very worried all the time and stressed over having to take so many customers to earn a living. When she heard about NightLight she was relieved that there were other opportunities for her (NL1, 2011-11-17).

However, several of the women I interviewed were of course first shy when they started to talk about their past and also ashamed, something that probably will always be carried with them. Still, after the interviews went on, they opened up and revealed things they had never told anyone before, they said. In one interview a woman actually admitted that she had worked in prostitution. Something she had never spoken about so openly before, because she did not work as long as the others in prostitution and therefore believed herself to be superior to the others (NL2, 2011-11-17). That highlights the importance that they really needed someone to talk to, who listened to them. This was further confirmed from my interviews in the bars and at EMPOWER, where I experienced the same pattern.

6.4.1 Approaches and Working Strategies

NightLight’s strategies are, according to Annie Dieselberg, (CEO and founder) of NightLight, based on voices of women working in prostitution. According to women she talks to, their main driving force into prostitution is to earn money to support their poor families. After

trying hard to find out what they really wanted to do and what their dreams were, they first answered that they were too dumb and useless to do anything else; all they could do was to sell their bodies. However, after pushing them, they said that they wanted to sell things, and that was when Annie got the idea of starting NightLight (NL3, 2011-11-25). At NightLight the women work with the jewelry design and create the jewelry, they also learn accounting and other aspects of running a business, among additional opportunities.

At the organization the exposure to Christian faith is strong, many of the women expressed that they now had found God. At NightLight it is not required that you are a Christian or become one, but it is preferred if you come to church with them to their morning meeting. Several of the women interviewed had now become Christians after being with NightLight for some time.

Annie said that the women who wanted to start to work at the organization were the ones who had either been in prostitution for many years and now were too old or too tired of it, or it was the ones that just had started and found it upsetting or shameful. To those who had worked for awhile it was hard to reach out to, since they were used to their large income. Moreover, Annie says that, the money they can offer at NightLight is not something they get wealthy on, but it does offer them a sustainable livelihood. Further she stated that they can offer twice the minimum wage⁵ to what the Thai law has established (NL3, 2011-11-25). Accordingly, the salary at NightLight is not their initial reason for choosing to work there, as working in the bars can give up to roughly ten times of that. However, since working at NightLight does not require any education the payment is good.

The women's families have come to accept the fact that they now earn less and cannot send as much money as before; instead this role is sometimes transferred to their sisters. Still, this was hard for some families in the beginning to accept, and one woman said that her friends could not understand how she could choose work that paid so little money compared to what she had before (NL4, 2011-11-29).

Even though the women earn less money at NightLight, they state that they had found another way to use money; they now have a fixed income every month and have learned how to save income. Previously when they worked in the bars the women underlined that they often spent money on clothes, make-up, rent, movies and alcohol, other than the remittances they sent home and that nothing was left to save. The answer to the question on what they

⁵ Answer from Annie Dieselberg from NightLight, that the women earn 6-7500 bath/month (approximately 1500SEK/month) at NightLight, which was according to her more than twice what the Thai law has established for Bangkok.

spend their money on corresponds to the aforementioned groups' answers. Some of the women at NightLight also said that they thought of the Thai man as, irresponsible, lazy and that they often gamble and drink. A few women had relationships with *farang* men, which can be seen as a response to the aforesaid.

Furthermore, the organization arranges group activities, such as singing classes and English classes or other activities that they like. The women seemed to like these group activities and were happy during these times; it could also be argued that they felt safe with this group, as they shared a common past and hence, did not have to be ashamed around them. While many of them were from Isan they also shared the Isan speech and Isan food which connected the women even more.

The findings from the answers from NightLight have showed that, their self-image have improved after starting working there; they are not as insecure anymore. The organizations strategies have therefore proved to be successful and effective. Women's perceptions in this group regarding family and money are the same as in previous interviewed group. The dissonance between the groups is regarding how they see/saw their work in prostitution; the former group was proud while NightLight's women were insecure and scared.

In the next section there will be a summary of the findings in relation to the first and second research question.

6.5 Summary of Findings and Answers to Research Questions

In this chapter I have shown my findings based on my interviews with the women from bars and the streets, EMPOWER and NightLight. All shared their stories of their backgrounds, perceptions on their self-image and the organizations work towards prostitution. Here it will be narrowed down and the first and second research question of the study will be answered together since the answers merge into one another.

The questions are: what are the women's needs as victims or agents? How do the NGO's fulfill the women's needs according to the interviewees?

What one can recognize in EMPOWER when tracing their basic assumption is firstly that, they see women's agency in her 'choice' to enter prostitution. As pointed out several times throughout this study is that women who take responsibility for their families are 'good' and dutiful women and their decision to seek jobs elsewhere to be able to receive an income for the family is when they can be depicted as having agency. This can also be explained as an entrepreneurial move which Phongpaichit's (1982) and Kempadoo's (2005) have pointed out in their defense of prostitution (see *Relevant Literature* chapter). It can moreover be put in

position to a rational choice assumption where the women act individually but from collective interests, the collective being their families in this case, who are an important factor to why women enter prostitution. As a result EMPOWER's needs as agents in prostitution is labour rights according to the interviewees.

The women's migration as a response to the economic constraints in the regions where they come from further emphasizes structural factors at work. Therefore, NightLight's strategy to employ women in their business is highly relevant in relation to many women's perceptions of needs especially for those feeling tired, trapped and powerless in prostitution, picturing themselves as victims. Since they are further faced with structural limitations that constrain their opportunities, NightLight can be an organization that can fulfill their needs.

However, one problem can be detected from the findings in the interviews is that almost all women would like someday to move back home, in many cases home is the impoverished region *Isan*. The problem is that they most likely still will be trapped in poverty. Many of the interviewees addressed that prostitution is not a long-term job and not something to get rich on. Because most of the interviewed women from all of these three groups said they spent the salary right away on remittances or shopped with the rest. NightLight has implemented a strategy towards this problem, by creating a savings account for the women they employ and taught them about the importance of saving for the future. While EMPOWER does not address this problem in their work, though, members pointed out issues of saving and a desire to move back home and have a good life. This it would seem is a situation EMPOWER would have to address, to fully include these women's perceptions of needs in their work and look at things more long-term, also because it could strengthen women's agency.

Both of the organizations work has appeared to respond very well to the different needs of what the women perceive to be important. The women working at NightLight, who formerly were in prostitution said that their self-image had improved and they were not ashamed or insecure any longer, and had instead become more confident. This confidence derived from therapy sessions, Christian featured activities such as, praying and singing. Whilst, the members of EMPOWER seemed to have had good self-confidence from the start and were not ashamed at all of their work thus they instead put focus on other strategies. In the sense there are women expressing different needs and therefore approach different organizations.

The members of EMPOWER necessitate labour rights as other Thai citizens. Their strategies do not question the 'sex worker's choices; instead, members opt for more skills, especially English education which they can receive at the centers and are very satisfied with. They asserted that this give them a greater confidence and a sense of control in their

relationship with their customer. EMPOWER could push the women to go back to school and help them save money for education, a strategy that would respond more fully to women's perceptions of needs. All women recounted in general that education was of importance and something they required more of. The women at NightLight did not stress that they required English to the same extent as the women in the bars or the streets and EMPOWER, instead they emphasized more general education, since many of them had left school at a very young age.

In this sense, both organizations strategies are successful and corresponds to women's different needs either as victims or agents. Women in the bars/streets perceptions of needs could also correspond to either of these organizations as they described similar needs as women in either at NightLight and EMPOWER, and could therefore be directed to either one of them.

7. ANALYSIS

In this chapter I attempt to analyze my findings. It will be done with help from my *Conceptual framework* outlined in chapter 3 and the theoretical approaches. This will be done in order to give the empirical material a more theoretical understanding of the *victim-agent* debate, showed in the chapter of *relevant literature*. That further means that it will be based on the women's perceptions from the interviews, also put in relation to the research questions. I will start by answering my third research question since that one has an analytical character and was therefore not answered in the findings.

The question was: do the women in prostitution see themselves as victims or agents?

It was evident from my interviews that the women felt some sort of exclusion from the society mainly because of their work, but also because of their Northeastern heritage. That evoked insecurity about their life situation, as they had difficulties of looking into the future to see an improvement of their wellbeing if not being let into the society. This feeling of being excluded and thus striving to fit in could further be seen as hampering them in their endeavor towards improved living standards and their way to get out of poverty and isolation.

The interviewees in Patong, whom most of them had worked in Bangkok before, answered that they liked Patong better than Bangkok because the people were friendlier and they felt solidarity with people in Patong, probably also because they did not feel the same needs to consume as in Bangkok where the middle- and elite class can be found to a larger extent. These answers were mainly the response from the women in the bars or the streets and also the women at EMPOWER. Although, the women at NightLight described that this was something that they felt earlier, before coming in contact with NightLight and received help while also feeling part of a group .

The answers indicate that the women can be seen as both *victim* and *agent* but in different time periods of their lives. As stated earlier, the women feel that they have a responsibility for their family's well-being and as a response to rural poverty, they move to the bigger cities to seek employment. In these decisions to move, the women can be understood as conscious agents following their goals not only perhaps for the family's well-being but also for themselves in their strife to be part of the modern society. Most of the women interviewed said it was their own choice to move and they were not persuaded by their parents to seek employment.

Hence, when the women come to the cities, they many times face exploitation in factories with unhealthy working conditions and low wages, or in the sex industry where they have no

legal protection and little ‘choice’ to do anything else than submit to the conditions. At that time, most women lose their agency; instead become a victim of labor migration and structural factors, such as poverty and culture, also victim of subordination from the middle- and elite class who look down on them.

The answers from the three groups in this study regarding if they see themselves as victims or agents can be concluded as the members of EMPOWER did not want to be labeled as victims instead as agents while the women working now at NightLight were trying to retrieve their agency after being victims in prostitution. The women from the bars and the streets can be understood as either victim or agent as their answers corresponded to both concepts but as said before the concepts seemed to apply to them in different time periods. However they all seemed to have been carrying both concepts during some period of their life.

Structural constraints and rational choice reasoning’s

What has been apparent from the findings is that we need to look at different structural factors, to be able to understand women’s ‘choices’ to migrate and seek work in the cities, because these factors have affected the conditions in the whole Thai society. This further need to be recognized in the academic debates, from what I have found tend to focus on and blame on only one factor why women migrate and end up in prostitution. Such as only looking at the ‘culture’ or the Thai state, which will be further discussed throughout this chapter.

Women’s decision to move to and enter prostitution can we apply to the reasoning of rational choice theory as aforementioned. Since it can be implied that these women do a cost-benefit analysis before migrating, and from the positive side she sees it as an economic gain for herself and her family, also a sort of cultural gain, by reaching better status of being the dutiful daughter. In addition to this, she sees an opportunity to be part of the modern society, which was only visualized on TV and magazines before. And therefore, in the next step of the migrating process the woman becomes an *agent*, also having in mind, Kabeer’s (2001) reasoning of what agency is. Although, it is important to acknowledge that all women spoken to migrated freely. Hence, the women’s ‘choice’ to move can be interpreted as being anchored to the culture in the Thai society but also influenced and affected by economic constraints. Because of the culture and economic constraints could she also could be seen as carrying the *victim* concept before she migrates. However, even though the choices were limited it was still an own ‘choice’ to move. The other ‘choice’ would have been to stay in their villages and in poverty and not being the responsible daughter the culture seem to require them to be.

When the women came to the cities, they according to the findings entered prostitution right away or started to work in factories. Subsequently or after a while in the factory, they made another cost-benefit analysis in the 'choices' of work, where entering prostitution seemed to be the 'choice' sooner or later for the women in this study, mainly because of more money and freedom, compared to the factories.

Furthermore, put in relation to Thitsa's (1980) reasoning, the women cannot choose to enter prostitution, it cannot be a 'choice' unless they are powerless she argues, and puts blame on Buddhism for women's lower position in Thailand. Understood from Thitsa's argument, the women have no agency in their choices. However, this can be put in contrast to Phongpaichit's (1982) and Kempadoo's (2005) reasoning that, the women's decisions to migrate can be seen as an entrepreneurial move, which further strengthens the rational choice analysis in why women migrate and enter prostitution.

Isan

Regarding the women's lives in the cities, most women highlighted that they sent remittances to their families back home, spending the rest of the money on material goods to act like the middle-class and elite. However, it proved to be a difficult task to be part of the modern society since most of the women comes from *Isan*, a part of Thailand where people are mostly descendents from Laos, being linguistically, culturally and in appearance closer to Laotian people than Thai people. Often, the region is perceived as being in cultural and economic isolation from Bangkok with its rapid growth and thriving industrial economy, whereas *Isan* is seen as a marginalized region compared to the rest of Thailand, and the people seen as outcasts in the society (Mills, 1999:28). This perception of *Isan*, made the women according to the interviews, feel more subordinated and never part of the modern central Thai society. It can be seen as, not only were they subordinated and stigmatized for working in prostitution, but also because they are not really seen as 'Thai', giving them a stigma in two senses.

The history of *Isan* as explained in the findings part, can be interpreted as the people continue to see themselves as predestined for subordination, as the stigma can be traced back in history, and therefore they accustom to the situation.

EMPOWER or NightLight

When people are not affirmed by the modern society and feel neglected for various reasons as aforementioned, is when they seek the organizations. Depending on to what extent their backgrounds has affected them and their self-image, also, how they perceive their current

situation reflect which organization they find compelling. One thing that both organizations give to the women is a sense of belonging/community and feeling part of a group. This is something essential to build their self-esteem. Those women, who turned to NightLight, did it almost right away after entering prostitution or after a couple of years when they got tired of being in prostitution. They were also the ones with a worse self-image, such as, lack of confidence, ashamed about their work and themselves, or had backgrounds that involved abuse. Members of EMPOWER, on the other hand, showed confidence and acceptance of their situation and instead struggled towards labour rights.

In regards to this it is more clear what basic assumptions the organizations have, and it can be argued that NightLight see these women as victims mainly, because of the socio-economic structures, where NightLight place the heavy weight for the women's situation on the culture, arguing that women have an economic responsibility imposed on them by their traditional social role in Thailand.

NightLight's response is to try and 'save' the women from these structures, and reintegrate them into the mainstream society. Their strategy is to create alternative employment and therapy, to help repair women's often damaged self-image. These structural constraints that NightLight acknowledges also correspond to Jeffery's (2002) aforementioned argument that a woman's choice is restricted, if you are to uphold cultural obligation. And therefore it is possible to argue that the culture affects women's self-image and the 'choices' they make.

On the other hand, the members of EMPOWER showed confidence and it can be indicated that they in a way had accepted their situation, and they realized that prostitution was the fastest way to earn large sums of money. Applied to Kabear's (2001:21) reasoning of *agency* it could be interpreted as, prostitution was an economically determined action.

EMPOWER's preference to use the term 'sex worker' instead of prostitutes connotes agency, the term can also explain that they are capable of making their own choices, for instance by being 'sex workers'. Therefore, they struggle collectively for labour rights from where they also could further strengthen their agency and be less discriminated on the labour market, while also lose some of their stigma from the middle- and elite class in the society. By further looking at this through a rational choice analysis, the women would additionally, by opting for English language maximize their economy, because it would give them a better negotiating position with their customers.

The findings from women working in bars and the streets showed signs of either a good self-image, or scared and felt ashamed. Their perception of needs mostly involved money, to fulfill their duty as good daughters. They further felt that they needed education, since it now

was inadequate to create other income opportunities for them. According to their perception of needs, these women could arguably turn to either of the organizations, NightLight or EMPOWER, since their needs conform to either one of them.

Women's perceptions regarding their future

What further came up from the findings was that most women wanted and dreamt of moving back home, in many cases to *Isan*. Of course it was a natural answer for those with children in the region, but it was also a dream for the others as they perceived city life with insecurity. Back home, they wanted to be farmers like their parents or open a restaurant. Yet, by going back they would most certainly face the rural poverty again, since they have not as described from the interviews saved any money. As a consequence, their lives back home will probably be more or less the same as what they first migrated from. As Mills (1999:166) argues, when women resume farming activities, and become mothers and housewives they remain entrenched in the underdeveloped village life. Their farming activities might not yield the profit they need for economic stability and are further faced with the limits of rural employment. Moreover, it would be unfortunate if the women's education they acquired in the cities did go to waste, if they cannot find employment where they can use their skills.

What also is unfortunate is that the women and the organizations hard work to retain agency over their lives could possibly be challenged again when the women move back home facing the risk of becoming victims of the socio-economic structures once more. Generating a possibility that the next generation, the women's children grow up and face the same economic need where also they have to search for employment in cities, leading to a reproduce of Thailand's cheap urban labour force, further continuing what seems like an endless cycle. Mills (1999) has argued that, if the women return to their old lives in the villages they tend to adapt to the situation rather than challenge the socio-economic structures.

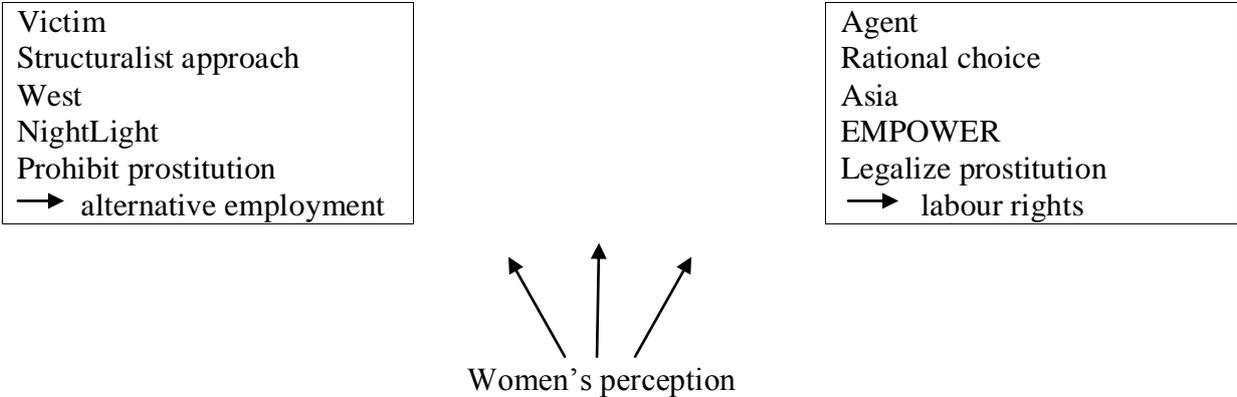
The adaption to the structures in the society is in a way problematic for the organizations who work really hard to improve the conditions for the women, and reclaim their agency through, education, therapy and alternative work. While later on, these efforts only seem be inadequate for the women when they move back home. This point to that, it might be a need to adjust the working strategies in the organizations according to women's future plans and their needs, and not for the organizations hard work to go to waste. One strategy from the organization could be to empower the women to challenge the socio-economic structures, give them confidence to resist conditions of exploitation and subordination and struggle for *agency*. In that way they have an opportunity not to become a *victim*.

Based on this, I also found it necessary for women’s organizations to work together, despite their conflicting basic assumptions. Since, they still have a common goal to help the women, even though they have diverse ways to do it. There can be great benefits of women’s NGO’s working together in Thailand as they can represent a large number of voices and together with scholars make these stories heard to the politicians and hope for action towards exploitative labour conditions and unequal distribution of resources outside of Bangkok.

However, as addressed in the introduction, Brody (2006) have argued that even though prostitution is illegal there are several official persons who want to maintain this business either because they are involved or because it generates a lot of income for the country; which again, complicates the link between prostitution and economic structural factors. Hence, looking from this angle it could be implied that, the Thai government is only acting rationally, by wanting to maximize the country’s income by uphold the tourism sector and from that point there is an underlying assumption that they upholding prostitution. Optimistically seen for the NGO’s working to respond to the needs of women in prostitution, the governmental power of acting and do something about the situation of prostitution in Thailand prevails over the capitalist maintenance of prostitution.

As a result from the findings and analysis I will here outline a scheme showing the concepts *victim* and *agent* connected to the theoretical approaches and show where the authors related to this study from ‘West’ and Asia seem to belong according to their reasoning, while also putting in the NGO’s and their main strategies. The arrows from the women’s perception imply that they can end up in either of the boxes depending on their perceptions and needs at certain time periods.

Figure 2. Scheme showing the connection of the concepts



Summary

In this chapter I have analyzed my findings from this study. What I have found with help from the figure from the *Conceptual framework* is that it does not help to discuss and debate between the concepts of women being *victims* or *agents* in prostitution. It has proved to be more complex, when trying to reason on a theoretical level, where we are often one-dimensional in our reasoning. From what I have found we cannot see the concepts of *victim* or *agent* separately, as the women can carry them both, but the aspects appear in different phases of their lives. Hence, I would argue then that these concepts have to be looked at in different time perspectives, starting when the women leave their villages.

It has appeared from the findings that it is a conscious rational choice when the women move and therefore a very strong *agency*, the women want to earn money and be part of the modern society. But when arriving to the city they are grabbed and tied to the social and economic structures, which are so strong that their possibilities of ‘choice’ disappears and hence, they become victims. To what extent they are drawn into and affected by the structures, can depend a lot on their backgrounds, how their self-image looked before they came to the city, if they have a good upbringing or if it involved abuse and misery. Their backgrounds and self-image has revealed to mirror which organization they later on turned to, or for those who are not part of any organization, who they possibly could turn to. What their future would look like have only been speculations based on the women’s perception of dreams, which pointed to, that they want to move back to *Isan*.

8. CONCLUSION

Prostitution in Thailand has drawn a lot of attention over the last decades. Numerous scholars have debated in the literature over the issue of women in prostitution, as victims or agents. However, what we have seen less frequently in the literature is voices of the women in prostitution, regarding their own perception of self-image and need. This can be seen as problematic, since we do not know if their perceptions relate to the victim and agent pictures, and if the NGO's basic assumptions correspond to women's own perceptions.

I sought to find out how the women's perceptions correspond to the *victim-agent* image (which was put in relation to two theoretical positions) in the academic debate and the organizations work. Findings showed that, the women's need to support families economically, has undoubtedly been an important factor why women enter prostitution, but also that it was out of free will to explore the larger cities of Thailand. The women came mostly from the marginalized region *Isan*, and therefore seen as subordinated from the central Thais. This has resulted in that they carry a stigma from the beginning. The women's perception of their self-image showed that many of them live in state of submission and fear, while they also feel ashamed and hopeless, an image that seems to relate to the *victim* concept.

However, the women working at the organization NightLight felt that they had received help and therefore got their confidence back. They had also learned how to save money, something they had not done while in prostitution. Prostitution and the money they receive from it, appears only to provide a temporary alleviation of poverty, and even after many years in prostitution their situation had barely improved.

A contrast from these women though, was the perception of self-image from the members of the organization EMPOWER. These women showed signs of self-confidence, and indicated that they were strong women and not victims, instead *agents* who had made conscious 'choices' to earn money for their families, by entering prostitution. Nevertheless, they admitted that life was tough, and they struggled daily with problems, such as acceptance for being 'sex workers', hence, also wanting to have labour rights.

It has been evident that NightLight put responsibility for why women turn to prostitution, on structural factors, mainly cultural, but also on the government who indirectly uphold the business and seem to be willing to sacrifice Thai women for economic gain for the country. EMPOWER, also recognize these structural factors, but instead focus on how women actually can be *agents* in prostitution.

Most women said in the interviews that, in the future they wanted to move back to their villages and become farmers or open a restaurant, although, they did not elaborate how it would look financially, having no savings. Therefore, it is logical to assume that they would likely end up in the same economic situation, again becoming victims of economic structural factors in the society.

Leading to my conclusion and result shown from this study that, it does not help to discuss and debate between the concepts of women being *victims* or *agents* in prostitution. We cannot be one-dimensional in our thinking and point to one concept or one theory. On the contrary, concepts and theories can overlap, and can appear in different time periods of a person's life.

To argue that women in prostitution have *agency* can seem to be highly controversial, though, this study has shown that these women have a strong *agency* and are *agents*, when they chose to move and enter prostitution, even if it might be for a short time. It is important to indicate that, all women in this study entered prostitution 'freely', but that there are also many women who are forced into prostitution and whether they have agency or not, is highly questionable. Yet, once the women enter prostitution they seem to lose their *agency*, and become tied to socio-economic structures, and their 'choice' disappears. However, some of them try to reclaim their *agency*, by turning to organizations that reflect their perceptions of need, in this case NightLight and EMPOWER, something that has proved to be possible for some women.

Arguing from a normative point of view, prostitution is not something societies strive to have, since it is evident that a lot of problems arise from it. What has been apparent from the study is that there is a need for policy making and development focused on the outer regions of Bangkok, with an emphasize in education for girls, as this possibly could contribute to strengthen women's position in the society from a young age, and can increase their economic situation. However, emphasizing education will not pay off if investments in employment opportunities in the outer regions of Thailand are not made available. If available, it could reduce women's migration, and it could also favor the women who have already acquired education while in the cities, and therefore it will not be wasted. This can result in other positive outcomes, such as the women would not be as far away from their families (children), would not be exposed to physical harm, addiction of drugs and violated of their basic human rights. Although, an intervention of policy making and development cannot isolate any structural factors, since this study has demonstrated that they are interlinked when trying to understand prostitution. But these interventions might be able to interrupt the cycle of women migration ending in prostitution.

We might also find similar patterns of labour migration in other parts of the world where women have entered prostitution due to oppressive political and economic structures and by a powerful culture. This can perhaps allow for a similar discovery of the victim and agent concepts.

Even though this study was limited to a small group of women involved in prostitution or had been involved, I was still able to highlight and understand their perceptions of self-image and need, and put in relation to the academic debate where their voices have remained largely invisible. Also how their perceptions relate to the organizations work. This altogether gave the study an interesting result.

I will next bring up what we can further benefit from this study and to broaden our view more on the topic.

8.1 Further research

This study has brought forward some interesting findings that could be further studied. One thing that came up was the spending and saving problem for the women and their families. The income the women received from their work went on remittances, and to buy different commodities, to be 'up-to-date', so what were really the 'true' economic benefits from their work to themselves and their families over a longer period of time? This would be interesting to perform in a mixed methods study employing a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Because I believe that it would gain more insight and understanding.

What further would be interesting to study is what happens when the women return home, to *Isan*, what does their life look like? To what extent has their situation changed compared to before they moved? These are questions that I believe a future research could go concerning this topic and would be a continuation of this study.

Finally, I still think it is important that the women in prostitution are heard and that they continue to share their perceptions and needs, and therefore should be included more in research about the subject.

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Appendix 1. Map of Thailand

This map shows Thailand and its regions (Maps-Thailand, 2004).



Appendix 2. List of Interviews

Interviews at Bars and streets (code, date, city)

B1	2011-11-25	Bangkok
B2	2011-12-16	Bangkok
B3	2011-12-8	Patong, Phuket
B4	2011-11-25	Bangkok
B5	2011-11-25	Bangkok
B6	2011-11-15	Bangkok,
B7	2011-11-15	Bangkok,
B8	2011-11-18	Bangkok,
B9	2011-11-18	Bangkok,
B10	2011-11-19	Bangkok,
B11	2011-11-21	Bangkok,
B12	2011-11-21	Bangkok
B13	2011-11-25	Bangkok
B14	2011-11-25	Bangkok
B15	2011-11-29	Bangkok
B16	2011-11-29	Bangkok
B17	2011-11-29	Bangkok
B18	2011-12-08	Patong, Phuket
B19	2011-12-08	Patong, Phuket
B20	2011-12-09	Patong, Phuket
B21	2011-12-09	Patong, Phuket
B22	2011-12-10	Patong, Phuket

Interviews at Empower (code, date, city)

E1	2011-11-10	Patong Phuket
E2	2011-12-14	Bangkok
E3	2011-11-10	Patong, Phuket
E4	2011-12-19	Bangkok
E5	2011-11-03	Patong, Phuket
E6	2011-11-03	Patong, Phuket
E7	2011-12-14	Patong, Phuket
E8	2011-12-19	Bangkok
E9	2011-12-19	Bangkok
E10	2011-12-18	Bangkok

Interviews at NightLight (code, date, city)

NL1	2011-11-17	Bangkok
NL 2	2011-11-17	Bangkok
NL 3	2011-11-25	Bangkok
NL 4	2011-11-29	Bangkok
NL 5	2011-11-29	Bangkok
NL6	2011-11-29	Bangkok
NL7	2011-11-29	Bangkok
NL8	2011-11-28	Bangkok
NL9	2011-12-20	Bangkok
NL10	2011-12-20	Bangkok
NL11	2011-12-22	Bangkok
NL12	2011-12-22	Bangkok
NL 13	2011-12-22	Bangkok

Group Interviews (code, number of women who participated, date, city)

NightLight

NL- Group interview three women not part of the individual ones, NL14, NL 15 and NL16, 2011-11-15, Bangkok

EMPOWER

E-Group interview with four women E1,E3,E5 and E6, 2011-12-14 Patong, Phuket