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HEADLINE: Emerging from the shadows

SUBHEADLINE: Whatever you think about prostitution, sex workers are prominent and prolific in every community. A recent seminar in Bangkok gathered representatives from around the Asia-Pacific region to give a united voice to the problems sex workers face

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Anisul Islam Hero, known as just Hero, a Bangladeshi professional dancer and social worker, lived up to his name last Sunday in Bangkok's Patpong soi 2.

Decked out in a red and gold dance costume, his jewellery and traditional anklets studded with bells sparkling through the dark, he turned a page in the history of one of the most popular dance styles of India, Bharata Natyam.

Originating from the south of India, Bharata Natyam is a highly cultivated dance form which has been handed down over the centuries by teachers in temples. A direct descendant of devotional dances performed since the 10th century, it is still being performed to elite audiences.

But last Sunday evening in the smoky and electric atmosphere of the Riffifi bar on Patpong soi 2, sex workers were the overwhelming majority of viewers of Hero's performance.

"I feel very proud to have been able to perform here. I think very few Bharata Natyam artists would dance in a bar, on such a tiny stage and for an audience of sex workers. But I understand the atmosphere and give my full support to their action," said Hero, in a sweat after having performed a dance entitled Keertanam, dedicated to the Hindu God Shiva, traditionally performed at Nataraj temple in Chidambaram.

At the farewell party of an international seminar initiated by the Bangkok-based rights group, Empower, the 40 or so sex workers, from 11 countries in the Asia-Pacific region, seemed determined indeed to emerge from the darkness of preconception and illegality. And if possible, to move closer to the sphere of art.

"Sex is an art. Sex workers are artists!" the crowd exclaimed with conviction. "We are experts not only in sex but also in culture," said a radiant Tiny, a representative of sex workers in Malaysia and leader of the evening programme.

But more seriously, if not artists, the sex workers gathered last week for a five-day seminar supported by the Japan Foundation Asia Center and the Ford Foundation, were demanding to be granted the status of workers in order to be protected by labour laws.

"Sex work is work," is the message the group wants governments, authorities, communities and the media to acknowledge. This status would secure them the same rights as other professionals and would consequently _ according to the advocates of this theory _ help suppress under-age prostitution.

"Prostitution is not a criminal activity. It is an economic issue. Prostitution is not a moral issue. It is a social issue," the representatives of the Asia-Pacific Network of Sex-Workers declared in a joint statement issued at the closing ceremony of the seminar.

``Decriminalisation is identified as the most effective way to ensure the safety and promote the rights of sex workers," reads the statement. ``With decriminalisation, prostitution will no longer be covered by criminal laws, it will be covered by labour laws, public health policies and child protection laws. Sex workers will then have access to health and welfare services, information and education. Discrimination and stigmatisation will be reduced."

Brought together for the first time ever to discuss exclusively the problems linked to prostitution, representatives from Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Burma, Malaysia, Bangladesh, India, Australia, Hong Kong and Japan, joined by some peers from San Francisco, also intend to push for the release of a regional charter on sex workers' rights.

``We are expressing our position and our expectations, hoping that we will be heard everywhere in the world. We are not an animal species, we are in no way stupid _ we can help to solve some of society's problems," commented Chanthavipha Aphisuk from Empower, referring to issues such as child prostitution, narcotics control, HIV/Aids.

She continued: ``We will carry through with our work, keep closely in touch and meet again on the occasion of the sixth Asia Pacific Aids Summit in Melbourne."

The seminar opened up with great commotion and hearty drinking at a welcome party on November 15 at Concrete House, the Empower foundation's national office on Tivanon Road, Nonthaburi. The morning of the following day was dedicated to a visit to Kredtrakarn Protection and Occupation Development Centre where some 250 under- age sex workers are being detained. The afternoon was devoted to the opening of a mini exhibition at the headquarters of Empower in Patpong, featuring artwork created by sex workers from around the globe. From the story of Victoria Schneider, who won a court battle against the city of San Francisco and was awarded \$755,000 (32.4 million baht) for an illegal strip-search conducted by a sheriff's deputy, to the collection of items from the everyday lives of sex workers in Patpong and Sukhumvit , the life of sex workers was presented from many different angles.

The evening was spent at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand (FCCT) on Phloenchit Road for an open discussion. The two following days were devoted to a workshop held behind closed doors in the outskirts of Bangkok.

``The seminar was very successful because it made very concrete statements in terms of needs and demands of the sex workers in the region. We looked at more ways to communicate, to talk about what will come next," commented Polly, a representative of Australia and member of a community-based organisation called Sex Workers Outreach Project (Swop), aiming to minimise the transmission of STD's and HIV/Aids.

Whatever the authorities' views on the matter _ who at first were quite reluctant to allow the conference to take place in Bangkok and ordered the police to monitor the participants' movements _ a great strength and synergy have arisen from the five-day meeting.

No need to look very far to find a source for their confidence and sense of legitimacy. Often referred to as the world's oldest profession (only spies might fight over the title), prostitution has millions of workers all over the world.

In Thailand alone, estimates of the number of prostitutes in the mid 1990s ``run from tens of thousands up to nearly three million", according to Guns, Girls, Gambling, Ganja: Thailand's Illegal Economy and Public Policy published by Pasuk Phongpaichit, Sungsidh Piriyarangsarn and Nualnoi Treerat. The generated income is estimated to amount to hundreds of billions of baht.

Participants of the forum advocate that as adults who have willingly indulged in the sex industry _ temporarily or long term _ they should be respected and better integrated.

`` Not alienated", nor `` dehumanised as they stated, but considered as `` decision-makers at home, in the community, at work, nationally and regionally", as `` professionals with an income", as `` important contributors to the economy and culture", as `` HIV and human rights activists" and as `` experts" in their field .

`` Sex work is a profession, it is work. It is a valid occupational choice we engage in to generate income. Yet people have to understand that we are not sex workers 24 hours a day. It is not our total identity," observed Polly.

`` Sex work exists everywhere in the world. One should not close one's eyes to this reality. We are not asking society to pity sex workers or to say that what we are doing is good, but just to understand. We are allowing millions and millions of baht to enter the country," commented a member of Empower, Chiang Mai Centre who didn't want to reveal her name.

`` We are simply asking for the fundamental human rights. We should have equality and a chance for a better life," observed Tiny.

Apart from the friendship, comfort and encouragement the participants gained from the summit, they also had a chance to take note of the disparities of sex workers' quality of life from one country to the other. Those working in Muslim countries like Malaysia or Bangladesh would surely win for the most difficult living conditions.

Prostitution is not only illegal but also contravenes the sharia, the Muslim code of religious law. `` I started working in the sex industry because of the economic recession. It helped me evaluate myself. Yet it is not easy. What are our rights? We get beaten up, we get robbed but no one helps us," said Tiny during the talk at the FCCT, admitting she was a transsexual.

But these tough living conditions don't deter her from pursuing her goal _ to help build a more understanding society. Referring to HIV/Aids awareness campaigns, Tiny explained she could be more efficient and have a better rapport with sex workers than a government official or an outsider.

`` We need so much more time and dialogue with religious groups before being able to talk about legalising prostitution. Sex is such a taboo topic, let alone sex work," the Malaysian representative said.

`` It took 20 years of lobbying before domestic violence was recognised as an offence. It might take another 30 or 50 years before we can talk about the legalisation of prostitution," she added.

On the other hand, the state of New South Wales in Australia stands out as one of the very few places where sex workers can officially register. `` The situation is very different from one country to the next. Since 1995, sex workers in New South Wales are able to register their business, just like opening a shoe shop or grocery store, by applying to the local council for a development application," commented Polly.

`` There are working hours regulations, health care and some equipment is provided. As a result, the incidence of Aids and HIV is extremely low," she added. In this region, it is often the foreign sex workers lacking work visas who have to pay the highest price, forced underground and vulnerable to exploitation.

Whether New South Wales is really the model to follow is certainly another debate. On the plus side of legalising prostitution, the many levels of exploitation and marginalisation would cease to be. And what of the notable hypocrisy apparent in the debate? Andrew Wilson from

the European Community delegation in Bangkok tackled the point at the FCCT open discussion: ``What is your reaction to the fact that so many politicians are clients of the sex industry, while the next day they may condemn it?"

Speaking up

Nat, from Thailand: `I wish society would understand us better. Being a sex worker doesn't mean we are ``lazybones" or ``dirty". It is not an easy choice, nor an easy profession. We have tried many kinds of job but lack education and qualifications. We have often been exploited. But once we have chosen this profession, we wish to do it the best way possible and have pride. The Empower foundation has helped me a lot to understand that sex workers also have rights." ``It is impossible to eliminate prostitution. So it is better to consider the positive side of it; we are doing no harm to anybody and are allowing a lot of money to flow into the country." Kriang, from Thailand: `Society should understand that it is generally a financial trap which drives us to resort to prostitution. In order to provide for the needs of our children and families. No woman in the world is happy to sleep with someone whom she doesn't love. We don't want society to feel sorry for us, but to give us a chance to prove ourselves." Ang, from Thailand: `If Patpong didn't exist, how would all these stalls in the streets survive? We are bringing in so much money." ``I am proud to have attended the ``Patpong University". It helped me raise my two sons and take care of my family. It taught me to speak English and many other things. I am happy to be a ``bad" girl, so I can go anywhere I want _ good girls only go to heaven!" Tiny, from Malaysia: `Many people don't choose [prostitution] as a long-term job but as an option, for a short period of time. Some wish to get out of it but then there are no alternative jobs on offer because of the stigma attached to this job. So it never ends. Even the children of sex workers can face discrimination and be rejected from schools. We have to be respected as human beings, not different from others." Victoria, from San Francisco: `I am proud to say that I am a sex worker. Which other profession could allow me to earn \$100 (4,350 baht) in five minutes? Prostitution has empowered me. It gave me the ability to speak in public, to become independent. It gave me the opportunity to travel around the world. I am happy to welcome many more sex workers in this industry..." ``The harshest thing I have experienced in my lifetime is surely to have lost so many friends to Aids. I feel very lucky to be still here today, able to educate more people about the danger of Aids." May, from Hong Kong: `In Hong Kong sex work is legal but it has become a very politicised issue, with political parties trying to encourage the public to look down on prostitutes. Many parties actually want it to become illegal again." ``Sex workers are often harassed. It has got worse and worse after the return of Hong Kong to China. But it is important to say that it is a non-polluting industry, that sex workers know how to rely on themselves and protect themselves. I wish my son would work in this area, helping to handle the business to improve the situation of sex workers."