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Online and Offline Sexual Exploitation of Boys, Young Men, and Trans/Third Gender Youth and Adults in Northern Thailand

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ABSTRACT

Globally, anti-trafficking prevention organizations and law enforcement have struggled to keep up with the constantly changing online spaces used for sex trade and trafficking. The current study aimed to understand the current state of online commercial sexual exploitation of boys, young men, and trans/third gender children and adults in Thailand. Using a respondent-driven sampling methodology, data were collected from 94 individuals assigned male at birth, ranging in age from 16 to 39 years old regarding 1) Demographics, 2) Entrance into Sex Trade, 3) Sex Trade & Exploitation in Person, 4) Online Sex Trade & Exploitation, 5) Physical and Emotional Safety, and 6) Accessing Support Services. Results found that the use of the internet for child sexual exploitation and sex trade is pervasive, with the majority of respondents noting participation in both in-person and online engagement with customers. Physical and sexual violence were frequently reported among respondents. Furthermore, gender norms and expectations present unique vulnerabilities for cisgender males and trans/third gender people from accessing and receiving support and services. The results of this study inform comprehensive recommendations for service providers, policy-makers, funders, and researchers, and work toward the UN Sustainable Development Goal of promoting a just, peaceful, and inclusive society.

KEYWORDS


Boys; trans/third gender; sexual exploitation; online; sex trade

Sexual exploitation of children continues to be a public health concern on a global scale. Though recognition of the power of online outlets in facilitating child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) is growing, the literature and experiences of children in the online space remains limited. Further, as much of the anti-trafficking and sexual exploitation movement has focused on cisgender women and girls, the experiences of boys, young men, and trans/third gender youth and adults remain noticeably absent (Trounson & Pfeifer, 2020). The current study aimed to explore this phenomenon by conducting a community-responsive study to understand the experiences of online and related in-person sexual exploitation of boys, young men, and trans/third gender youth and adults in Northern Thailand.

Sexual Exploitation of Children in Thailand

The problem of CSEA is a continued focus in the Greater Mekong Region (GMR), including Thailand. In the past decade, the region as a whole has experienced substantial economic growth. This growth, along with political trouble in neighboring countries such as Myanmar, has led to substantial migration in the region (Tsai & Dichter, 2019). This migration can also include the movement of

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populations vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation (e.g. children) (Jirattikorn & Tangmunkongvorakul, 2023; Tsai & Dichter, 2019). Survivors of CSEA as a whole have reported numerous physical and mental impacts, including increased risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Keane, 2006), suicidal ideation (Hilton, 2008), and anxiety (Kiss et al., 2015). Despite these significant consequences, and the known heterogeneity of survivors of CSEA, the majority of research to date has focused overwhelmingly on women and girls (Miseikaite, 2023; Trounson & Pfeifer, 2020).

Sexual Exploitation of Boys, Young Men, and Trans/Third Gender Individuals

Literature regarding CSEA among boys, young men, and trans/third gender youth and adults in Thailand is limited and has primarily included collaborative research projects with local organizations and communities (Davis et al., 2021; Light Thailand et al., 2016; Moynihan et al., 2018). The literature that focused on cisgender boys and young men has revealed increased rates of child abuse, sexual abuse, conduct problems, and mental health difficulties reported by children who experience CSEA compared to their non-sexually exploited peers (Moynihan et al., 2018). Means of exploitation among boys vary widely, with many noting experiencing exploitation through online means such as circulation of images and/or pornography (J. Davis et al., 2013; J. D. Davis et al., 2017b). In one such study, 29% of young boys and men who were survivors of exploitation reported having been filmed for pornography as one form of involvement in the sex industry (J. D. Davis et al., 2017b).

Though even more sparse, literature on transgender and third gender youth and adults in Thailand indicates a higher percentage reporting having been filmed for the pornography industry (56%; J. Davis et al., 2017a). Taken together, these results represent early indications of the use of online and virtual means to facilitate sexual exploitation and involvement in the sex industry, a trend which only grew during the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 and the Growth of Digital Sexual Exploitation

Though a concern prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (J. Davis et al., 2017a; J. D. Davis et al., 2017b; Mubarak, 2015), global crime detection agencies reported a significant increase in child exploitation material from Thailand, as well as other Southeast Asian countries (Rahamathulla, 2021). As with many other in-person industries, the COVID-19 pandemic substantially disrupted daily life and brought many activities typically done in person to an online environment. This change was also accompanied by a growth in online sexual exploitation and abuse of children worldwide (Interpol, 2021), facilitated by various online mediums such as social media, adult webcam sites, and online dating groups (Roche et al., 2023). In addition to easy access to the internet and these mediums, the rise in online sexual exploitation also brought to light the ability and consequences of being able to broadcast abuse and exploitation around the world (Rahamathulla, 2021).

Anti-trafficking organizations and law enforcement globally have struggled to keep up with the constantly changing online spaces used for sexual exploitation and trafficking (Grubb, 2020; Hoyer, 2017). The lack of internationally agreed upon regulations regarding online sexual exploitation presents a significant limitation to combatting and prosecuting these crimes. While Thailand, like other countries worldwide, has a legal framework for protecting children online, effective and efficient enforcement and prosecution of such cases is growing (Rahamathulla, 2021). Taken together, there remains a significant need to address the ongoing concerns of boys, young men, and trans/third gender youth in Thailand navigating online spaces.

The Current Study

The current study aimed to fill current knowledge gaps in working to understand the experiences of sexual exploitation and abuse among boys, young men, and trans/third gender youth and adults in Northern Thailand. Given the known recent increases in the use of online means for exploitation, the

current study also has a specific focus on the landscape of online sex trade and sexual exploitation. By examining a broad scope of experiences related to sex trade, exploitation, safety, and access to support services, it is hoped that this research will inform service providers, stakeholders, and researchers to better understand and serve this population.

Methods

Participant Consultation and Inclusion

It should be noted that an intentional effort was made, where possible, to involve potential and known respondents in the development and production of the research itself. For example, using a respondent driven sampling method was based on the idea of co-production and Article 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognizing that sexually exploited respondents are experts of their own experiences and context. Further, youth survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse were engaged via a local anti-trafficking organization to voluntarily partake in a focus group regarding the questions to be asked in the current study's survey instrument. Their feedback and voice were heavily taken into consideration in implementing changes and finalizing the survey instrument prior to data collection.

Survey Tool

The online survey focused on gathering data regarding several areas relevant to the lives of participants. These areas included 1) Demographics, 2) Sex Trade and Exploitation Online and in Person, 3) Sex Trade, Exploitation, and Income, 4) Physical and Emotional Safety, and 5) Accessing Support Services. The survey was researcher-constructed and included primarily close-ended questions requiring respondents to choose one or more options that applied to them. The questionnaire was first constructed broadly by the research team and then given to a focus group of boys and young men who had experienced sexual exploitation and sex trade for feedback. The questions were revised and finalized based on this feedback. Qualitative questions were asked to follow up on questions regarding reasons for remaining in the sex trade and what respondents wanted others to know about involvement in the sex trade. Given that not every respondent was required to answer them, the qualitative questions were not analyzed, but some quotes are included to supplement and add context to quantitative findings. Given the broad range of topics covered, the specific survey items are described in more detail throughout the Results section below.

Participants

We collected survey responses from 102 young people assigned male at birth using respondent-driven sampling methodology. Respondents were included up to the age of 39 to capture potential victimization in adults. Eight individuals were excluded due to age beyond 39 years old and the final sample size was 94. Respondents all reported working in the same geographic area.

Recruitment and Data Collection Procedures

Prior to data collection, all recruitment and data collection procedures were approved by an external Thailand-based ethical review panel made up of four local academic researchers. The current study used a respondent-driven sampling (RDS), (Heckathorn, 1997) methodology to collect responses. In partnership with a local service provider (Urban Light Thailand), RDS in the current study involved the intentional inclusion of potential respondents (youth and adults involved in the sex trade in Northern Thailand) in the creation of the survey measure as well as in the recruitment of respondents. Regarding recruitment, the current RDS methodology involved three phases. The first phase consisted of the recruitment of 10 seed respondents

that met inclusion criteria for the current study. The service provider's outreach team was responsible for identifying potential seed respondents from massage parlors, bars, public places, and internet cafes (typical areas in which the organization's staff had been conducting outreach trips). Additionally, the organization's case management team was responsible for identifying potential respondents from the group of boys and young men who attended the organization's drop-in center. Finally, the organization's social worker/community development officer also assisted in the data collection, particularly in the recruitment of trans and third gender respondents from known community settings.

The 10 initial seed respondents were made aware of the inclusion criteria for the study and completed an online survey. These respondents then provided the link to the survey to other known potential respondents (Phase Two) who then provided the link to the survey to other potential respondents (Phase Three). In total, Phase One seeds recruited an additional 50 respondents and those 50 Phase Two respondents recruited an additional 50 respondents. The first phase gathered responses from March 25 to April 14, 2021, and the second phase from June 10 to June 24, with one final respondent submitting their survey on July 17, 2021. It is worth noting that the COVID-19 outbreak caused significant delays in the data collection process. Firstly, due to the outbreak and subsequent lockdowns, it was necessary to pause the data collection for a period of time. Recruitment was also complicated by the continued closure of spaces frequented by the target population, including bars, markets, and other public areas.

Respondents who completed the survey were given 300 THB (\$8.50 USD). For each referral of another respondent, the individual making the referral received an additional incentive of 200 THB (\$5.50 USD). Referred respondents indicated the assigned code of the individual who referred them in their consent/assent form, which was separated from the research instrument. Thirty potential respondents noted that they declined participation due to insufficient financial incentive and/or fears of legal retribution.

Note on Sex Trade and Exploitation

The current sample represents responses from both children and adults. As such, in analyzing the respondents' answers, much of the following findings outline experiences of child sexual exploitation, sexual abuse, and rape both online and in person. Children cannot sell sex as they are not able to consent. Any reference to children meeting/seeing customers for sex or trading sex represents sexual exploitation, abuse, and rape. This is true even where a child "appears" to consent or "initiates" an exchange.

Findings

Participant Demographics

During data cleaning and analysis, the authors recognized a significant split in respondents based on gender identity. Specifically, approximately half of all respondents identified as cisgender males, and the other half identified as trans or third-gender individuals. Furthermore, the majority of trans/third-gender respondents were recruited by the same seed (Seed 9) and likely come from a group who know each other. Given the known differences in experiences between these two groups, the authors made the decision to expand on the study findings by noting differences based on gender identity where relevant.

Of the respondents, approximately 5% ($n = 5$) were under the age of 18 at the time of responding, and 37 (39.3%) fell within the UN definition of youth (age 15–24). All respondents reported being assigned male at birth (AMAB). Forty-six percent of respondents identified as male, 36% as third gender, 15% as transgender women, and 3% as "gay." In the current study, those who identified as

Table 1. Demographics.

	Total (<i>n</i> = 94)	Cisgender Males (<i>n</i> = 46)	Trans/Third Gender Respondents (<i>n</i> = 48)
Age (Mean)	26.2	25.0	27.3
Nationality			
Thai	92 (98%)	44 (96%)	48 (100%)
Myanmar	1 (1%)	1 (2%)	0 (0%)
Laos	1 (1%)	1 (2%)	0 (0%)
Education			
Primary	17 (18%)	15 (33%)	2 (4%)
Early secondary school	15 (16%)	11 (24%)	4 (8%)
High school	29 (31%)	16 (35%)	13 (27%)
College/University	32 (34%)	3 (7%)	29 (59%)

“gay” and male were identified as cisgender. In total, 49% (*n* = 46) of respondents identified as cisgender males and 51% (*n* = 48) identified as trans/third gender people.

Full demographics are outlined in Table 1. Notable gender differences include age and living circumstances. Overall, trans/third gender respondents reported a higher average age (27.3 years old) compared to cisgender males (25.0 years old). Regarding living circumstances, 5% of respondents reported currently being homeless. All five unhoused respondents were cisgender males. Across gender, 20% (*n* = 19) reported living with someone who was also trading sex. Fifty percent (*n* = 47) lived with people who knew they traded sex and the other half noting that the people they lived with either did not know they traded sex (27%, *n* = 25) or they were not sure (23%, *n* = 22).

Sex Trade and Exploitation Online and in Person

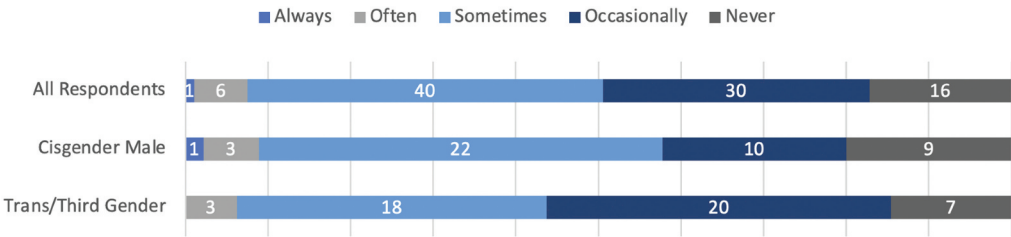
Respondents were asked through which means they engaged with customers and were asked to check all that apply out of three options including 1) meeting customers online (via the internet or an app) and providing sex online, 2) meeting customers online (via the internet or an app) and then meeting in person for sex, and 3) meeting customers in person and providing sex in person. All but five respondents (95%) had at least some experience engaging with their customers online. While meeting and having sex with customers in person was slightly more common than meeting online and having sex in person, the majority indicated having at least some experience having online-only sex with 43% (*n* = 40) saying they engage in it “sometimes” and 32% (*n* = 30) indicating that they do it “occasionally.” These results are represented in Figure 1 and appear relatively consistent across gender.

Respondents were also asked about when they began trading sex (i.e. were first sexually exploited) both in person and online. Trans and third-gender respondents were older on average (19.8 years) compared to cisgender males (18.2 years) when they first traded sex. Nearly one in five trans/third gender respondents (18%) and almost half of cisgender males (45%) were sexually exploited online prior to the age of 18. In total, participants were 26.2 years old on average when they started trading sex online. Trans/third gender participants reported an average age of 27.3 years old and cisgender males 25 years old when they first started trading sex online. Of note, most trans/third gender respondents were recruited from the same seed and may therefore represent a narrower range in age (i.e. that seed may have known only others around their same age). This finding should be taken within this context and not necessarily as a representation of the broader trans/third gender community in sex trade.

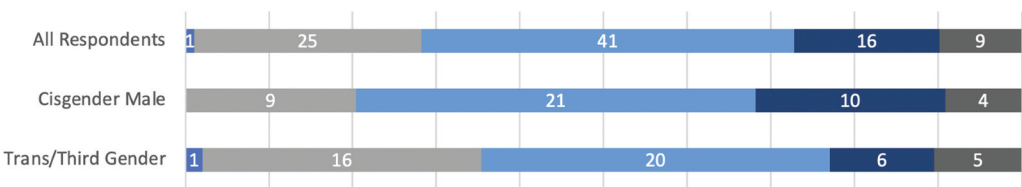
Activities in the Sex Industry

Respondents were then asked to indicate the kinds of online sexual activities and they had engaged in. They were provided with a list of sexual activities and asked to choose the one that was most frequent in their experience. Options included: 1. Being photographed or videoed by customers for porn sites; 2. Being photographed or videoed by customers for personal use; 3. Sending sexual photos or videos to customers; 4. Live streaming sexual acts alone for customers; and 5. Live streaming sexual acts with other people for customers.

Met Online and Sex Online



Met Online and Sex in Person



Met In Person and Sex in Person

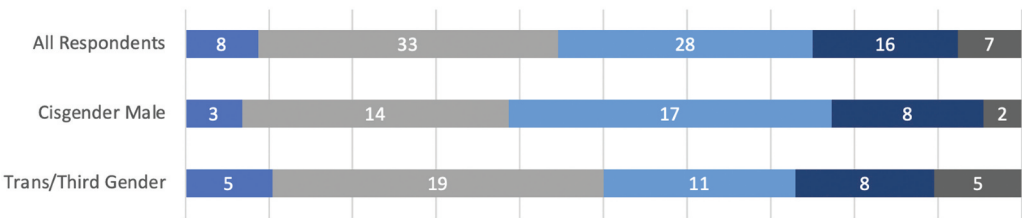


Figure 1. How do you meet your clients and where do you provide the services (online, offline).

Sending sexual photos or videos to customers (43%) was the most frequently reported activity. This was followed by more than a quarter of participants (26%) who indicated being photographed or videoed by customers for personal use and one in six (17%) who indicated being photographed or videoed by customers for porn sites. Live streaming was the least common activity, with 12% indicating live streaming sexual acts alone for customers and less than 1% indicating live streaming sexual acts with other people for customers.

Sex Trade, Exploitation, and Income

When asked about how much money respondents earn through sex trade, respondents reported an average of 4,461 THB (\$136.01 USD) a week. The minimum amount of reported weekly income was ฿350 (\$10.53), and the median weekly income was 4,000 THB (\$121.95 USD). Across gender identity, trans/third gender respondents reported making a higher average weekly wage compared to cisgender male respondents. Specifically, trans/third gender respondents reported making on average 5,528 THB (\$165.91 USD) a week compared to 3,268 THB (\$98.08 USD) weekly average reported by cisgender male respondents. Further, no trans/third gender respondents reported making less than 500 THB (\$15.01 USD) a week when the lowest reported average by a cisgender male respondent was 350 THB (\$10.53 USD) per week. There were two exceptional outliers of reported income with two trans/third gender respondents reporting .earning 20,000 THB (\$609.25 USD) and 40,000 THB (\$1,219.51 USD), respectively, which were not included in

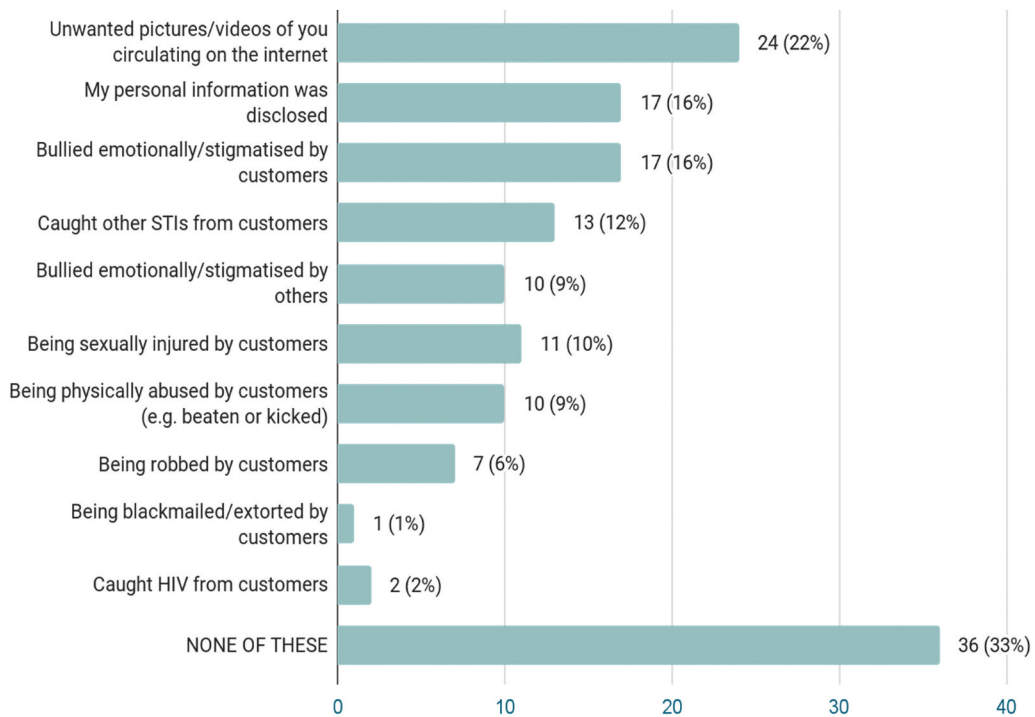


Figure 2. Prevalence of negative Experiences.

the calculation of median or average weekly incomes among participants. In total, respondents were making, on average, 2.5 times the official minimum wage in Chiang Mai, Thailand, for a six-day work week (i.e. ฿325/day, ฿1950/week, Department of Labor, 2019). For trans/third gender respondents, this number was even higher at approximately 2.8 times the minimum weekly wage, and for cisgender males slightly lower but still 1.7 times the minimum weekly wage.

Respondents were also asked that if they had a stable income, would they stop trading sex? Sixty-seven percent ($n = 59$) reported that they would stop trading sex if they had a stable income from another source. Twenty-three percent ($n = 12$) reported that they would not stop trading sex and 6% ($n = 5$) said they were unsure. Gender differences in choosing or not choosing to stop if they had stable income were minimal with only slightly more cisgender males (63%, $n = 29$) reporting they would stop compared to trans/third gender respondents (62%, $n = 30$).

Physical and Emotional Safety

Abusive And/Or Exploitative Experiences

When examining prevalence of negative, abusive and/or exploitative experiences, participants were asked to indicate if they had ever experienced 1) Unwanted pictures or videos circulating on the internet, 2) Personal information being disclosed to others, 3) Emotional bullying or stigmatization by customers, 4) Contracting HIV from customers, 5) Contracting other STIs from customers, 6) Emotional bullying or stigmatization by others, 7) Sexual injury or endangerment by customers, 8) Physical abuse by customers (e.g. being beaten or kicked), 9) Being robbed by customers or 10) Being blackmailed or extorted by customers. These negative experiences and their prevalence are outlined in Figure 2.

A third (33%; $n = 36$) of all respondents reported that none of these events had ever happened to them. The most commonly reported event across gender identities was the circulation of unwanted

pictures or videos of the respondents on the internet (22%; $n = 24$). Having personal information disclosed and being bullied by customers was reported by 16% ($n = 17$) of respondents each, while 12% ($n = 13$) reported contracting STIs from customers.

Responding to Abusive/Exploitation Experiences

Among those who reported experiencing any of the events above, respondents were then asked what they did about it and allowed to check all that applied. All (100%) trans/third gender respondents reported doing something about the event whereas only 60% ($n = 18$) of cisgender males reported doing something. Outlets to talk about these experiences vary significantly based on gender identity. Among trans/third gender participants 43% ($n = 12$) reported telling a friend/family member, 43% ($n = 12$) informed the police, and 11% ($n = 3$) notified an NGO. Among cisgender males 30% ($n = 13$) told a friend/family member, 19% ($n = 8$) informed the police, and 7% ($n = 3$) notified an NGO.

Forced Sexual Activity

Sixty-five percent of all respondents ($n = 42$) indicated that they had experiences in which they were forced to have sex against their wishes (i.e., they were raped). More than a third (35%, $n = 33$) reported that this happens only once in a while and less than a third say that this happens “sometimes”. Only one respondent reported that this happens “often.” One in three (33%, $n = 31$) respondents reported that this “never” happens. Few notable differences are observed between trans/third gender and cisgender males, with trans/third gender respondents being slightly more likely than cisgender males to indicate that they have “never” been forced to have sex against their will (35% to 30% [$n = 17$ to 14] respectively).

Work Concerns

To understand the current concerns of participants related to their involvement in the sex trade, they were asked to rate their level of worry about nine different issues related to their interactions with clients on a 5-point Likert scale from “The most worried” to “Not really worried.”

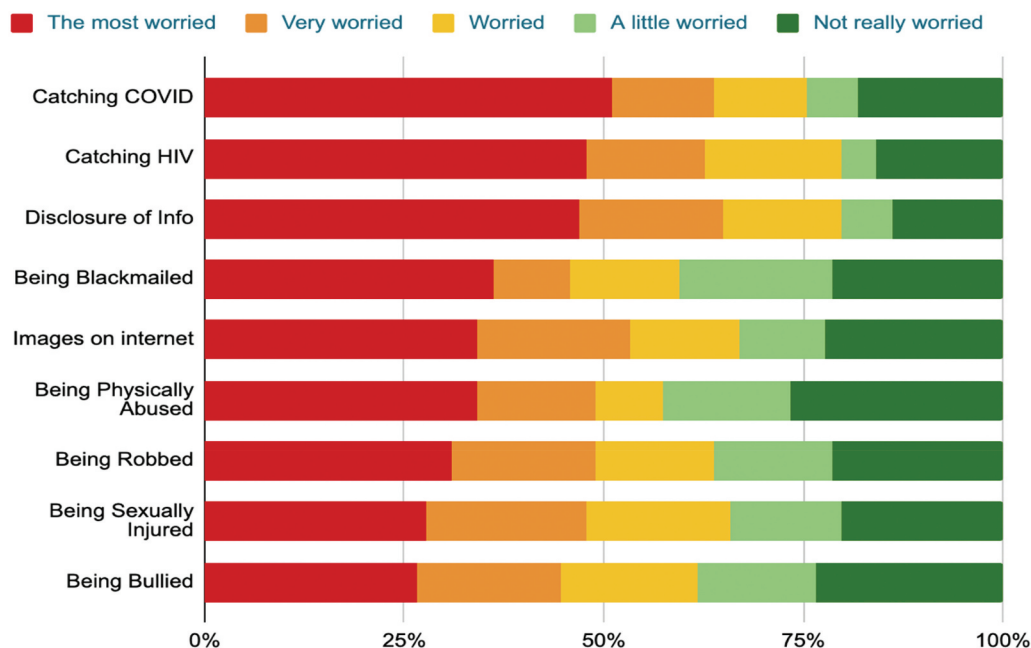


Figure 3. How much are you presently concerned about the following issues? (all respondents).

Table 2. Reporting Work Concerns and Keeping Safe.

	Total (n = 94)	Cisgender Males (n = 46)	Trans/Third Gender Respondents (n = 48)
Would report the following (frequency of endorsement):			
Catching COVID	53 (56%)	20 (43%)	33 (67%)
Catching HIV	9 (9%)	5 (11%)	4 (8%)
Disclosure of Information	10 (11%)	5 (11%)	5 (10%)
Being Blackmailed	23 (24%)	7 (15%)	16 (33%)
Images on the internet	15 (16%)	4 (9%)	11 (22%)
Being physically abused	9 (9%)	4 (9%)	5 (10%)
Being robbed	33 (35%)	14 (30%)	19 (39%)
Being sexually injured	37 (39%)	12 (26%)	25 (51%)
Being bullied	19 (20%)	8 (17%)	11 (22%)
Endorsement of activities to keep safe:			
Carrying condoms	65 (68%)	32 (70%)	33 (67%)
Video chat before meeting	32 (34%)	10 (22%)	22 (45%)
Make sure phone is near	27 (28%)	13 (28%)	14 (29%)
Meet in public places	20 (21%)	6 (13%)	14 (29%)
Tell someone where you're at	6 (6%)	3 (7%)	3 (6%)
Tell someone who you're with	6 (6%)	4 (9%)	2 (4%)

These experiences are outlined in [Figure 3](#) and include 1) Having their images released on the internet, 2) Having their personal information disclosed, 3) Catching COVID-19 from clients, 4) Catching HIV from clients, 5) Being sexually injured by a client, 6) Being physically abused by a client, 7) Being blackmailed by a client, 8) Being robbed by a client, and 9) Being bullied by a client.

Among all respondents, the highest levels of concern were related to the possibility of catching COVID-19 from clients, catching HIV from clients, and having personal information disclosed to others. Conversely, respondents reported the least amount of concern related to the risk of being physically abused by clients and being blackmailed by clients. In total, about one-fifth of the respondents reported that they were “not really worried” about each concern option.

Several notable differences were evident when considering the level of concern across gender identity of respondents. Specifically, results revealed that trans/third gender respondents were more likely to be “most concerned” about images of them circulating on the internet (41%, $n = 20$) in comparison to cisgender male respondents (26%, $n = 12$).

Reporting Negative Experiences/Work Concerns

Respondents were also asked about which of the noted work concerns would be serious enough to report. Full results for this question are presented in [Table 2](#). Fifty-six percent ($n = 53$) of respondents would report if their images were circulated on the internet, but trans/third gender respondents were more likely to report this (67%, $n = 33$) compared to cisgender males (43% $n = 20$). Cisgender males were more likely to report disclosure of personal information but generally less likely to report almost all incidents compared to trans/third gender respondents. The most frequent response to whom they would report incidents was the police (41%, $n = 39$). When asked what would encourage them to report negative experiences, 34% ($n = 32$) of all respondents said that being able to remain anonymous would encourage them to report events. Compensation was noted as an encouraging factor primarily for cisgender males (20%, $n = 9$) compared to trans/third gender respondents (4%, $n = 2$).

Keeping Safe

As outlined in [Table 2](#), when asked about ways they keep themselves safe before meeting with customers, the majority of respondents (68%; $n = 65$) reported carrying condoms at all times. Across all gender identities, carrying condoms at all times was the most frequently endorsed safety measure by both trans/third gender (67%, $n = 33$) and cisgender male (70%, $n = 32$) respondents. Notably, trans/third gender respondents were more than twice as likely as cisgender males to note that

they video chat before meeting in person with a client (45%, $n = 22$) or meet in public places (29% [$n = 14$]; compared to 22% [$n = 10$] and 13% [$n = 6$], respectively, for cisgender males).

Accessing Support Services

Given the broad landscape of services accessed by respondents (psychological, medical, legal), the broad terms “service providers” and “support services” were used in asking about their experiences and perceptions with meeting these needs.

Knowledge, Use, and Perceptions of Service Providers

Most respondents (73%, $n = 69$) reported learning about service providers that could help them from their friends. Other sources of information about support services included colleagues (32%, $n = 30$), sexual health programs (23%, $n = 22$), advertisements (18%, $n = 17$), and outreach workers (15%, $n = 14$). A small number of respondents (4%, $n = 4$) reported learning about service organizations through their family.

Despite the many sources of information, only 51% ($n = 48$) of respondents reported actually receiving services from any organization. When asked why, 21% ($n = 20$) of respondents reported that they did not need help or services, and 11% ($n = 10$) did not qualify for services. Notably, cisgender male respondents were more likely to report not meeting the criteria for services (15%, $n = 7$) compared to trans/third gender respondents (6%, $n = 3$). This exclusion of males from services, especially those aimed at helping sex trafficking survivors, is a known phenomenon as it is widely acknowledged that cisgender females are the primary target population for most anti-trafficking efforts in Thailand and around the world.

Respondents who reported engaging with services were also asked about their perceptions of organizations that provide services. They were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: 1) the organization was helpful, 2) the staff understood what I needed, 3) I was able to get the help I needed, 4) the staff was judgmental, 5) the staff did not care about me, and 6) I did not meet the criteria for services. In general, most respondents indicated that the organizations were helpful (96%, $n = 46$), the staff understood their needs (94%, $n = 45$), and they received the help they needed (94%, $n = 45$). However, a similar majority of respondents also reported that the staff was judgmental (88%, $n = 42$), with a smaller percentage noting that the staff did not care about them (29%, $n = 14$). While the pattern of responses was similar, the frequency of agreement differed greatly based on respondents' gender identity. Cisgender males generally reported less positive perceptions of organizations and staff and were more likely to report that staff did not care about them or that they did not meet the criteria for services. The one exception to this pattern was that trans/third gender respondents more often reported that staff were judgmental (93%, $n = 27$) compared to cisgender males (80%, $n = 15$).

Challenges to Opening Up to Service Providers

Respondents were asked about the biggest challenges they anticipated in opening up to service providers. The most common challenge was the taboo surrounding sex and sexuality (57%, $n = 54$), which was consistent across gender identities. The next most frequent challenge was feeling misunderstood (18%, $n = 17$), which was more commonly endorsed by cisgender males. Other challenges, such as worry about immigration/legal status and not wanting experiences to define them, were noted more often by cisgender males. A few challenges were exclusively noted qualitatively by either trans/third gender respondents (“ethnicity/cultural identity differences”) or cisgender males (“family touching genitals,” “seeking help is a sign of weakness”).

Discussion

The current study's findings reflect and expand on existing knowledge on the influence of the internet and online media in the lives of children who experience sexual exploitation and adults involved in the sex trade, whether voluntarily or coerced (sexual exploitation; Josenhans et al., 2020). Therefore, the results of the current study can be used to inform recommendations for care providers, as well as researchers working with young boys and gender diverse individuals experiencing sexual exploitation through online platforms.

Online Sex Trade and Exploitation

Though some have previously hypothesized that in-person and online sex buyers are separate populations (Cunningham & Kendall, 2011), this was not reflected in the current results. Most respondents reported using both in person and online methods of engagement with customers. The use of online sites poses a unique challenge for their potential for recruitment of children and young people for sexual exploitation. For example, a child may enter these sites for the purposes of meeting friends or connecting with a community only to encounter someone who proposes entrance into the sex industry and/or a sexually exploitative relationship with a child. Finally, almost a third of all respondents met the Palermo Protocol definition for sex trafficking victim (i.e., they reported beginning to trade sex online prior to the age of 18). This finding was true of just under half (45%) of cisgender male respondents and 18% of trans/third gender respondents in the current study. Though further research is needed, these findings suggest there continues to exist a widespread risk of online sexual exploitation of boys, young men, and third gender youth in Thailand.

Economic Context and the Role of Alternative Employment

Financial instability and the ability to earn money quickly appear to be a pull factor for respondents. When considering gender, age, and earnings, some notable differences arise. Cisgender males in the current study were among the youngest and lowest earners in the sample. Conversely, trans/third gender respondents are somewhat older than cisgender males on average and were among the highest earners in the study. This disparity seems to be a function of the intersection (Crenshaw, 2013) of two facets of one's identity: age and gender identity. Previous literature has established the lower earning potential of younger populations, as individuals are more likely to take advantage of young service providers by offering lower compensation due to reasons such as "lack of experience" or the lowered ability of younger individuals to advocate for themselves, thus rendering them increasingly financially vulnerable (de la Fuente-Núñez et al., 2021). Further, when considering the disparities regarding gender identity, one possible explanation is the continued fetishization of transgender and third gender individuals in the sex industry (Anzani et al., 2021; Griffiths & Armstrong, 2023). This fetishization may motivate people seeking sexual services to pay more for services offered by transgender and third gender individuals. Regardless of gender, respondents reported making considerably more from the sex trade than they could from working a minimum wage job. Most respondents (67%) indicated that they would stop trading sex if they were able to earn a stable income doing something else. The 33% of respondents who reported that they would not stop if they could earn a stable income doing something else may indicate that motivations for being involved in the sex trade move beyond fiscal factors. For example, to fill the training and education needs and wants of this population, certified and/or government funded training programs would be beneficial to understand a) what young men and trans and third gender youth are interested and/or invested in doing and b) what occupations are commensurate with the income of most young men and trans/third gender people in the current sample.

It should be noted that even with additional options, the income made from sex trade is often seen as more stable than that of alternative employment options. One respondent (21-year-old, cisgender

male), noted the sex trade was a kind of “insurance policy or back-up plan” for times of financial crisis. He noted in a qualitative response: “I wouldn’t stop . . . in case my finances crash again. Even if the finances are stable, I would do it because I can get money fast.” This pull of the stable and fast money offered by the sex trade should be acknowledged and considered when providing services to this population. Currently, many vocational and/or career training initiatives provide education but may include limited access to paying jobs (Davis et al., 2017). When there is access to jobs, these are often low wage positions that do not often consider the broader skills and experiences that young people may have. Broader nondiscriminatory and comprehensive support services, including widely accessible education and employment training with opportunities, may alleviate some of the pressure for “fast money” and bring more choice to the employment market for young men and trans/third gender young adults.

Gender and Sex Trade and Exploitation

There were notable differences between cisgender males and trans/third gender participants in the current study. First, cisgender males, despite having similarly high levels of violence perpetrated against them, were less likely than their trans/third gender peers to do anything and/or report these experiences of abuse and violence to anyone. This difference in reporting rates may be related to our findings regarding gender identity disparities in who meets criteria for services. As mentioned earlier, compared to transgender or third gender participants, cisgender male participants were more likely to report not meeting an organization’s criteria to receive services. Thus, it is possible that the lack of services available to cisgender males discourages them from reporting their experiences with abuse and violence. Alternatively, as supported by extant literature, it is possible that social norms related to toxic masculinity and gender norms associated with masculinity may discourage cisgender males from reporting experiences of violence (Forde & Duvvury, 2017; Petersson & Plantin, 2019; Walker et al., 2005). For example, throughout Thailand and much of the globe there remains an assumption and expectation that men and boys are not victims of physical attack and are capable of keeping themselves physically safe and/or fighting back (Bjarnegård et al., 2021). Reporting a physical assault/abuse to an authority figure may then decrease their standing as a man. Intervention is needed to continue to combat this norm and encourage the safe and helpful reporting and reporting outlets. Specifically, cisgender young men and boys may benefit from support focused on alternative and positive ways to express their masculinity or femininity and knowledge that masculinity does not mean suffering in silence.

Stigma and Tailoring Support Services

In addition to the recognition of the unique needs of boys, young men, and trans/third gender youth and adults based on their gender, support services would benefit from tailoring specific to the needs of people involved in sex trade as a whole. As mentioned in the results section, cisgender males in the sex trade are hesitant to access services that are available to them because their experiences are under-represented in the criterion for receiving services. Thus, agencies providing supportive services should focus on advertising services that are available for a broader range of experiences to provide more inclusive and widespread care. Some ways to accomplish this include the addition of trauma-informed care, attention to cultural and gender sensitivity, and promotion of online safety and protection. Engaging families and communities in prevention and support efforts, as well as conducting research to inform service development and evaluation, is also vital. As revealed in the current results, decreasing financial instability, combating online exploitation, and addressing housing challenges are key factors in promoting safer and healthier lives for this population. Additionally, fostering open communication between people in sex trade and service providers will help ensure their needs are met without fear of judgment or discrimination.

Given cultural norms related to masculinity and resulting internalized stigma (Bjarnegård et al., 2021), a holistic and non-judgmental approach to supporting vulnerable youth and adults involved in the sex trade is needed. To work against conflicting social norms regarding gender and sexuality, service providers would benefit from recognizing the complex realities and motivations of participants in the sex trade. Further, prioritizing harm reduction and safety can help provide youth with the knowledge and resources to keep themselves safe.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Social Service Providers

The provision of stable alternative income opportunities for those primarily involved in sex trade due to economic need is a key aspect of support. This could entail offering training and facilitating access to employment outside the sex industry. Concurrently, efforts need to be invested in reducing the stigma associated with sex trade (Hatzenbuehler, 2016; Wolf, 2019). This is particularly pertinent for cisgender males and trans/third gender people in the sex trade who often face intensified discrimination due to their gender identity and require additional understanding and support from service providers.

The shift toward online platforms in the sex industry also necessitates recognizing and addressing the unique associated risks, including child sexual exploitation. Education and resources promoting online safety, alongside advocating for robust digital protection measures, are integral to this effort. Legal reforms to reduce risks and discrimination faced by people in the sex trade, combined with advocacy and public awareness campaigns to combat entrenched stigma, also hold significant potential in improving the circumstances of people involved in the sex industry.

Recommendations for Researchers

As evidenced by the utility of the current findings and as stated by previous researchers, prioritization and expansion of co-produced research involving survivors is highly recommended (Miller et al., 2022; Wheildon et al., 2023). Similarly, it is crucial to involve children and young people in formulating the policies and programs affecting them, a stance supported by Article 12 in the UNCRC and the ongoing debate about the co-production involving vulnerable individuals. Findings from such research could provide firsthand experiences and valuable insights for those involved in and seeking to leave the sex trade.

Further, a comprehensive conceptualization of the sex industry should be adopted, encapsulating both in-person and online sexual activity. Given the intricate connection between these mediums, a holistic representation of commercial sex is necessary to accurately mirror reality. As posited by findings in previous studies, future research should aim to understand what incentivizes exchange sex, comparing potential income gained from sex trade to earnings from other occupations as well as working systemically to understand and reduce perpetration of violence against people in the sex trade (Davis et al., 2017b; Benoit et al., 2018). Such an exploration could provide service providers with alternatives to propose to those contemplating an exit from the sex trade as well as education and information for those who may not want to leave but wish to avoid unsafe situations.

Child safety and confidentiality should be paramount in project planning, data collection, and results dissemination. This could be achieved through regular discussions with the project team about child safety and external reviews of the study protocol and procedures to ensure the safety of children and all respondents. Equitable partnerships with local communities, organizations, and leaders are integral to the research process. Without such partnerships, researchers risk misinterpretation of study findings and potentially endanger respondents.

Transparency is key, particularly in the presentation of details on study design, recruitment, sampling, and analysis. This allows readers and stakeholders to contextualize the study's findings and their implications for change adequately. Finally, the dissemination of results and findings should not be confined to academic audiences and funders. Community leaders, policymakers, and

organizations should also be included to ensure a comprehensive understanding and broad application of the study's findings.

Limitations

The current study is not intended to be statistically representative of any particular sexually exploited population, but rather to gather a range of opinions, estimates, perceptions and experiences reported, and to offer valuable insight into an under-researched and under-reported area. As noted previously, some potential respondents declined to take the survey for fear of legal retribution relating to the illegal nature of the work. In addition, COVID-19 itself also limited what was able to be done and when. The results of the current study should therefore be taken within this context.

Conclusions and Future Directions

The current research project used a respondent-driven sampling method to understand the current landscape of online and in-person sexual exploitation of boys, young men, and trans/third gender people in Northern Thailand. The findings of the current study were used to inform recommendations for services aimed at helping cisgender and transgender men and boys involved in the sex trade. Specific recommendations related to research practices were provided with hopes of increasing accurate representation of men and boys of differing gender identities that are involved in the sex trade. Though the original study targeted youth, findings showed a great need among adults who were sexually exploited as a child. There remains a significant lack of resources and funding delegated to a) housing and b) services for adults once they age out of historically child-centered service systems and models. As the landscape of online sexual exploitation changes and grows rapidly, the response by service providers, funders, and government entities needs to similarly respond rapidly, and consider the voices and needs of those they aim to serve. This includes the provision of comprehensive survival services including housing as well as the continued survival, financial, and legal assistance to adult survivors of abuse and exploitation as they age out of child services but retain much of the physical, emotional, and psychological consequences of abuse during childhood years.

Finally, to keep up with the growth of online sexual exploitation, the development and funding for outreach in online forums and spaces to potential clients of Urban Light and related services is crucial to reach all potential victims of sexual exploitation that may have otherwise been missed in in-person services.

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