Transgender Kathoey and gay men using tourist-zone scenes as ‘social opportunities’ for nonheteronormative living in Thailand

Article (Published Version)


This version is available from Sussex Research Online: http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/104153/

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher’s version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:
Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.
Transgender Kathoey and gay men using tourist-zone scenes as ‘social opportunities’ for nonheteronormative living in Thailand

Paul Statham & Sarah Scuzzarello

To cite this article: Paul Statham & Sarah Scuzzarello (2021): Transgender Kathoey and gay men using tourist-zone scenes as ‘social opportunities’ for nonheteronormative living in Thailand, Gender, Place & Culture, DOI: 10.1080/0966369X.2021.1997937

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2021.1997937
Transgender Kathoey and gay men using tourist-zone scenes as ‘social opportunities’ for nonheteronormative living in Thailand

Paul Statham and Sarah Scuzzarello
Sussex Centre for Migration Research, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

ABSTRACT
This article studies life-trajectories of a specific generation of Kathoey and gay men, born into rural poverty in Northeastern Isaan 30–50 years ago, based on biographical accounts. Subjects are male-to-female transgender Kathoey and cisgendered (masculine-identified or gender-normative) gay men. A ‘sustainable nonheteronormative life’ is one providing sufficient resources of recognition for validating gender identity (Kathoey) or sexuality (gay men), and wealth to be economically viable. How did they strive to make spaces for nonheteronormative living when confronted by ‘blocked’ social opportunities of double discrimination based on transphobia (Kathoey) and homophobia (gay men), and class/status? The research unpacks which strong barriers of discrimination confronted them at distinct life-stages, and their agency and strategies to challenge these. Family, work and place are investigated as core social factors influentially defining a person's positioning and life-chances, while shaping their pathway through social space over time. The empirical study reconstructs subjects' lived experiences in distinct life-stages: village childhood; early postmigration city experiences; building lives in tourist-zone scenes; and reaching back ‘home’. The main finding is that tourist-zone scenes present new social opportunities that enable a few to transform their social and geographical displacement away from mainstream heteronormative society into an asset and achieve ‘success’. Tourist-zones transgress dominant (hetero) norms and values, but provide social infrastructures, communities and countercultural norms that support specific forms of nonheteronormative living, albeit dependent on foreign men. By migrating to tourist-zones, subjects stepped out of mainstream society, but over time drew on resources to build new social pathways towards living nonheteronormatively.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 15 September 2020
Accepted 12 October 2021

KEYWORDS
Transgender Kathoey; gay; tourism; social opportunity; Thai

CONTACT
Paul Statham paul.statham@sussex.ac.uk Sussex Centre for Migration Research, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK.

© 2021 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.
Introduction

Nong Toom, a successful Muay Thai boxer, was attributed male gender at birth, but self-identifies as a woman. She became a celebrity, subject of an international film *Beautiful Boxer*, and face of the Thai Tourist Authority's *Amazing Thailand* campaign. Her life-story began in rural poverty, a place where, ‘I was tua pralat (a freak) in the neighbours’ eyes, and brought great shame upon my family’ (Aldous and Sereemongkonpol 2008, 227). Unable to continue education, Nong Toom's exceptional boxing skill was her chance to escape poverty, support parents, and realise her gender: ‘Muay Thai was an opportunity for me to secure a better future for myself. Each victory helped me to provide for my family and also brought me closer to becoming a woman’ (Aldous and Sereemongkonpol 2008, 233).

Few possess the attributes to use professional sport as a route out of poverty while realising their nonheteronormative identity. Here we study a common pathway by which transgender Kathoey and gay men from rural poverty strive to overcome high barriers to nonheteronormative living confronting them in Thailand: migrating to tourist-zones and establishing a life on the scene (intimately) servicing foreign men. There is surprisingly little research on specific nonheteronormative experiences of this life-trajectory. By retelling life-journeys of a generation of Kathoey and gay men, now in middle-age (30–49 years), who took this pathway, we aim to unpack, which strong barriers of heteronormative discrimination confronted them at distinct life-course stages, and their agency and strategies to overcome these challenges. We define a *sustainable nonheteronormative life*, as one that an individual perceives provides sufficient material resources to be economically viable, and sufficient resources of recognition and belonging for validating their gender (Kathoey) or sexuality (gay men). From their unpromising start facing prejudice in poverty, what empowered or disempowered them in their efforts to build a ‘sustainable’ nonheteronormative life at distinct life-stages? How did achieving ‘success’ re-position them relative to mainstream heteronormative social relationships in Thailand?

We acknowledge valuable contributions by queer theory studies on non-heteronormative sexualities and gender identities in Thailand that importantly inform our understandings (see seminal contributions in Jackson and Sullivan 1999; Jackson and Cook 1999; Jackson 2011a). However, this research has a different sociological focus. We examine the interface between subjects’ agency to build sustainable nonheteronormative lives, and the high discriminatory barriers within mainstream heteronormative social relations that systematically exclude them over life-stages. How do people strive for a better life out of poverty with recognition for their nonheteronormative identities, and what social opportunities/constraints shape the pathways of their life-journeys towards this goal?
In their efforts to find a social space to live a nonheteronormative life, subjects faced blocked social opportunities to advancement in society from an early age. First, like all rural poor people, their aspirations for upward social mobility were confronted by the rigid class and status hierarchies that influentially define Thai social relationships, and strongly privilege urban middle-classes. People from rural Northeastern Isaan typically have darker skin, speak a Lao dialect, and are socially looked down upon and stigmatised as peasants by Bangkokian urbanites. Such discrimination persists, although today many rural people are ‘village cosmopolitans’, holding views and outlooks strongly influenced by migration experiences to Bangkok and internationally (Keyes 2014; Rigg 2019). Second, they faced strong institutional and social discriminatory pressures over their respective gender identities (Kathoey) or sexuality (gay men), which raised significant barriers to their progress relative to peers. Importantly, this intersection of persistently strong class/status with strong transphobic (Kathoey) or homophobic (gay men) prejudices meant that subjects faced high social exclusionary pressures, ‘double discriminations’, throughout their life-journeys. Systematic ‘double discrimination’ effectively channels poor Kathoey and gay men towards a few alternative pathways at the margins.

An individual’s agency to affirm gender or sexual identity is importantly learnt and embedded as a social role within specific environments that provide differential opportunities for performing such a role as a sustainable way of life. We look at how social factors -family, work, and place- combine across distinct life-stages and at different geographical locations, to provide social opportunities for sustainable non-heteronormative living, or not. Our original theoretical perspective draws insight from Cloward and Ohlin’s (1960) ‘social opportunity structure’ idea from classic sociology, that some poor people can still ‘succeed’ materially relative to other poor people like them, by stepping outside the mainstream that excludes them and using subcultural alternative social structures on location in their neighbourhoods as resources for empowerment. Similarly, we examine what social conditions and locations provide Kathoey and gay men with ‘opportunities’ to transform their relative social displacement and marginalisation into an asset. Specifically, we find that tourist-zones with nonheteronormative scenes can importantly supply new ‘social opportunities’ and resources for nonheteronormative living.

In the empirical study, we reconstruct the subjects’ lived experiences of social pathways over four life-stages: childhood in the village; early postmigration city experiences; living in tourist-zone scenes; and reaching back ‘home’. We draw on biographical accounts by five Kathoey and three gay men, who by their own evaluations achieved ‘successful’ sustainable nonheteronormative lives. The research does not claim to be representative. It aims to provide deep insights into how subjects understand, first, their own efforts to move out of poverty and achieve recognition for
nonheteronormative living, and second, their experiences of specific discrimina
tory barriers and forms of social exclusion that confronted them on this
life-journey through Thai society. We interpret how subjects tell their own
stories of striving for a social space for nonheteronormative living within a
sequential narrative framework. This allows study of how key family and
work social relationships, and a person’s social embedding in a place, shaped
resultant pathways through life.

Before proceeding, we discuss usage of terminology. People in the study
are male-to-female transgender Kathoey and cisgendered (masculine-identified
or gender-normative) gay men. We use the term Kathoey as a Thai-specific
category for people born with a male sexual physiology, but a feminine
gender identity. Kathoey does not equate directly with the Western term ‘trans’ (Winter 2011). It is a broader identifier including a range of male-to-
female gender identifications: some people take hormones or undergo sex
reassignment and cosmetic surgery to live fully as women; some dress in
feminine-styles in specific settings; while others live as visibly effeminate
men. Participants often used ‘Kathoey’ self-referentially. This is not unprob-
lematic, because Kathoey is used socially with negative meaning. Still, we
use Kathoey as an analytic category that is in and of Thai society. It needs
noting in this context that Thai social understandings and terminologies for
sexuality and gender are culturally distinct. Traditionally, society had a tri-
partite gender and sex categorisation: masculine men, feminine women, and
Kathoey (Jackson and Cook 1999; Jackson and Sullivan 1999). Gay male
participants are masculine-identified or gender-normative homosexuals. We
acknowledge Kathoeys’ and gay men’s life situations are not the same,
because they face heteronormative social pressures based on different forms
of discrimination and prejudice. Discrimination against Kathoey is transphobia
against non-normative gender presentation, while against gay men is
homophobia against non-normative sexuality. Primarily, this study focuses
on Kathoey, while gay men add further nuance to understandings of how
strong heteronormative social pressures shape life-journeys in Thai society.

Next, we briefly contextualise nonheteronormative living in Thailand,
before outlining our ‘social opportunities’ perspective. Then, we outline meth-
ods, before presenting our detailed analysis of the subjects’ lived experiences
in four distinct stages of their life-course. Finally, we evaluate what mattered
in determining the subjects’ chances to achieve their goals, by transforming
their relative social and geographical displacement into an asset.

LGBTQ+ Thailand: ‘gay paradise’, but for tourists

In Asia, Thailand is comparatively tolerant towards LGBTQ+ people: the state
decriminalised homosexuality in 1956, Buddhist teachings do not declare
homosexuality immoral, and homophobic violence is low. Thailand was a
1960s pioneer for gay tourism and hosts cities that are significant global gay venues (Jackson 2011b). Like their heterosexual counterparts (Sunanta 2020; Statham 2020, 2021), these venues are premised on available sexual encounters, provided by low-income locals, and questionable, but heavily state-sponsored, stereotypes depicting exotic, sensual, caring and sexually-open Thais. In this way, LGBTQ+ communities emerged within commodification processes defined by Thailand’s specific globalised state-sponsored development, characterised by deep penetration of foreign capital, cultures, and people, including 38M tourists p.a. (Statham et al. 2020). Commodification is typified by the high public visibility of Thailand’s large Kathoey community. ‘Ladyboy’ bars are famous attractions for tourists, while Kathoey beauty pageants provide national television spectacles. As world-leading authority Jackson states, ‘More than gay men or lesbians, the kathoey is the iconic face of queer Thailand’ (2011b, 35).

Thailand’s marketed international reputation as a ‘gay paradise’ conceals a different reality for Thais. Basic LGBTQ+ rights against hate speech and discrimination were enacted only in 2015, while people who undertake sex-change surgery still legally keep their birth-allocated genders on official documents. Systematic discrimination prevents gay and transgender people entering many professions (Suriyasarn 2014). Generally, society is characterised by rigid hierarchies of age, gender and status/class that prevents social mobility and reenforces strong heteronormativity. Culturally, Theravada Buddhism emphasises nonconfrontational values for relations with family and community, but those transgressing social norms face sanctions. Exclusionary practices against individuals who do not comply to expected social roles are subtle, not direct (Van Esterik 2000), but still damage life-chances. Mainstream society tolerates visible LGBTQ+ communities in city enclaves that support tourism, but are often socially stigmatised as prostitution zones.

The participants in our study were born into rural poverty in Northeastern Isaan between 30 to 50 years ago. They are a generation who lived through the social upheaval of rapid social and economic transformation that brought limited acceptance of LGBTQ+ people. Mostly, however, they tried to achieve nonheteronormative living without legal redress to transphobic and homophobic acts of discrimination and prejudice. Our aim is to tell their stories.

‘Social opportunities’ for nonheteronormative living: family, work and place

Today, most prominent research on opportunity structures discusses ‘political opportunity structures’ to explain degrees and forms of collective action (e.g., Tarrow 1994). Instead, our perspective draws on Cloward and Ohlin’s (1960) earlier idea from classic sociology on poor people, that an individual’s
‘social opportunities’ to realise goals strongly depends on their differential access to supportive social structures. ‘Social opportunity structure’ is a framework of socially structured means and rules available for individuals from a group to achieve their aims and interests, that are culturally defined, purposeful and goal-oriented. Social opportunity structure is especially relevant for us, because it provides an explanation for how some members of a marginalised subcultural group can achieve their aspirations and goals, specifically by drawing resources from the alternative social infrastructure of which they are part on location, and which transgress mainstream social norms.

Cloward and Ohlin argued that some poor people could overcome their marginalisation and achieve upward social mobility, if they could access ‘illegitimate’ supportive social structures outside of mainstream channels. This moved beyond Merton’s (1957) theory that *anomie* results when people face persistently ‘blocked opportunities’ to access mainstream social structures that would allow them to achieve culturally recognised goals. Importantly, Cloward and Ohlin (1960, 148) demonstrated how specific social environments, such as neighbourhoods with violent criminal gangs, not only provided values and learning skills for some poor people to take on such roles, but also, and crucially, the supportive social infrastructures of community networks and economic activity -albeit illegal and illicit- that sustained the role after it had been achieved. This means that neighbourhoods built on marginalised subcultures that transgress mainstream social norms can provide ‘social opportunity structures’ for a limited number of people who have the specific attributes, abilities, and who the fit the specific subcultural norms and values, that allow them to prosper in such social settings. In other words, some marginalised people can ‘succeed’ on location, albeit often at the expense of other marginalised people. This core finding is substantiated by important research from other traditions, for example, Bourgois’ (1995) famous ethnographic study of drug communities in the Puerto Rican subculture of East Harlem.

We do not associate legitimate efforts by people to realise their gender and sexuality as deviant behaviour in the stigmatising way of 1960s criminology perspectives. We oppose states (including Thailand) that criminalise or treat nonheteronormative behaviour as psychologically deviant. However, Cloward and Ohlin’s main point provides sociological insight on how and why Kathoey and gay men can thrive as subcultural community groups within the limited channels and restricted geographical parameters of tourist-zone scenes, while their lives remain ‘double-blocked’ by discrimination elsewhere.

Kathoey and gay men’s chances to realise their nonheteronormative identities are not equally open to all, at all times, and in all places. They are strongly shaped by specific sets of social structures and relationships that
subjects have access to, and which confront them, at specific times and places over the life-course. A key idea is that the social lived experience of being Kathoey or gay is not only defined by individual psychological attributes, but importantly by a person’s differential access to specific social structures and relationships that are available, especially on location in places where they ‘make a living’ and ‘build a life’. In this study, nonheteronormative scenes in tourist-zones built to service foreign men are the places that matter, by providing ‘social opportunities’ for poor people to strive to live nonheteronormatively. There an individual can access supportive structures, resources, values and learn skills and exert agency to be Kathoey or a gay man, as an identity and social role which they take on, and develop over time, but which is also attributed by the community in social settings in that place.

We identify family, work and place as the influential social contextual factors that shape a person’s opportunities to build a nonheteronormative life. How these factors combine to shape specific ‘social opportunities’ that confront the subjects at different time-stages of their life-journey, and how they acted and made strategies within these contextual constraints and opportunities, is the topic of the empirical study. First, it is necessary to provide some background on the Thai context of family, work, and place.

Family

Family remains the definitive social and economic unit in Thailand. Filial piety norms strongly influence family relationships, whereby children face significant expectations to provide financial and emotional care for ageing parents. Traditionally, burdens were placed disproportionately on female ‘dutiful daughters’ (Angeles and Sunanta 2009), but as family sizes decreased, unmarried gay people increasingly took on caring duties (Jackson 2011b, 30). Family ties and intergenerational social relationships importantly influence how an individual family member moves in social space and place over the life-course. As an ‘opportunity structure’, family provides not only a potential source of emotional support and self-esteem, but also access to resources, social capital and networks vital for individual advancement in society. At the same time, family is a core source of strong pervasive heteronormative expectations that shape social relations in Thailand (Van Esterik 2000). This is why the degree to which family members accept or reject a person’s nonheteronormative identity crucially determines their subsequent social mobility. Family reactions define an individual’s status in the household hierarchy, their extended family networks, and within the community where the family lives, which are important for a person to access the necessary resources of material and emotional support for building a life.
Work

Access to work importantly influences how a person moves in social space over the life-course. As an ‘opportunity structure’, work provides the means to move out of poverty, achieve autonomy, and gain self-esteem, as well as access to useful peer groups, social capital and networks. Work is also a significant marker for public recognition and social status. In Thailand a person’s ability to gain access to professions is strongly shaped by family background and networks, which creates high barriers for poor rural peasants (Keyes 2014; Rigg 2019). Also there is strong evidence for deep institutional discrimination and prejudice in work over decades, leading to the social marginalisation of transgender and gay people (Suriyasarn 2014). Gay people who are ‘out’ face high barriers to professions, while few achieve jobs commensurate with educational attainment. Many conceal their sexual orientation in the workplace, leading to stress, and impacts on performance and career progression. Transgender people face highly discriminatory recruitment practices, with applicants given psychological tests, asked about their sexuality in interviews, and unfairly denied positions (Winter 2011; Suriyasarn 2014). Basic anti-discrimination employment rights only became law in 2015 and are not yet embedded in social practices (UNDP Thailand 2018).

Place

A geographical place embodies a configuration of social space, i.e., specific social structures, values and cultural norms, that shape opportunities for a person to make a living, belong to a community, and fit in a neighbourhood. A person’s life-chances are importantly influenced by specific social infrastructures on location where they live. For poor people there are strong incentives to move to places where they can access work, but they can often afford to live only in deprived neighbourhoods. For Kathoey or gay people, places are relatively more welcoming or hostile to the degree that they sustain nonheteronormative life-styles. This can be supportive by providing access to supportive peer communities, greater chances to express nonheteronormative identities, work opportunities as Kathoey or gay, and a social environment that recognises gay scenes. Decisions about where to make a life will be shaped by the degree to which subjects feel able to realise their gender and sexuality identities and earn sufficiently. As young people, many migrate away from ‘home’ in search of work and liberation from the heteronormative constraints and prejudices. They often land in tourist cities with gay scenes (Jackson 2011a). Such places are highly limited geographical spaces that are disruptions from dominant Thai cultural norms and society, because they are explicitly constructed to cater for foreign tourists’ (sexual) fantasies and tastes (Statham et al. 2020). Pattaya and Phuket
host gay scenes overpopulated by (sex)bars, cabarets, and massage venues that offer a hyperreal space away from the mainstream heteronormative society. Their social infrastructure promotes commodified sexual encounters for foreign men with Thais, on an asymmetric basis. Notwithstanding being commodified as a product for foreigners, tourist-zones can be where Kathoey and gay men experience greater tolerance and experiment in Thai sexualities and gay life-styles (Jackson 2011c, 202; Ojanen 2009, 22). Importantly, tourist-zones provide work for and host established LGBTQ+ Thai communities. This legitimizes membership, provides peer networks, role models, and learning processes about ways to sustain nonheteronormative living.

**Methodology and sample**

The research draws on in-depth interviews with five Kathoey and three gay men born into rural poverty in Isaan, who when interviewed were aged 30–49 years. The eight interviews were selected from an overall sample of ten. We did not include interviews with a middle-class gay man from Bangkok, and a Kathoey student aged 22 years, because their class, generational, and social and geographical mobility experiences differed significantly from the other eight who shared similar characteristics of age cohort, regional, and class/status background. All selected participants had migrated to work in tourist-zone scenes and established long-term partnerships (2–15 years) with ‘Western’ men from North America, Europe or Australia. We recognise that selecting participants in established relationships with foreign men biases our sample towards relatively ‘successful’ outcomes, i.e., those who have experienced greater opportunities for a sustainable nonheteronormative life. However, we study subjects’ own perceptions of their aspirations, decisions, and strategic actions made at specific stages of their life-journeys, so also gain access to their interpretations of harder times, and possible alternative social outcomes. Our study is exclusively from a Thai perspective, i.e., how partnerships can potentially provide resources that transform a person’s chances for achieving sustainable nonheteronormative lives within Thai social relationships and society. There is little space to discuss how nonheteronormative Thai-Western partnerships ‘work’ internally, which remains largely background context.

Interviews were open, but semi-structured, to encourage respondents to recount key events in their life-histories, through which they interpreted and evaluated their formative experiences. Interviewers gathered important factual details, on background, education, employment history, relationship history, wealth and dependency of natal family, migration history, income, access to wealth etc. All interviews were conducted between August 2016 and November 2017 by Thai researchers with personal experience in and sensitivity towards sexuality/gender issues, in Thai language, at
participants’ locations. The sample was recruited using researchers’ contacts, experiences, and links to relevant NGOs. Interviews lasted at least one hour, often much longer. They were recorded, transcribed and professionally translated into English. Table 1 provides details on the sample. Each subject is attributed a letter, which is used to identify them in the empirical analysis. While some researchers prefer using pseudonyms, we decided against this because we felt that names are important signifiers of status, background and time, as well as gender. We were concerned about unintentionally choosing unsuitable pseudonyms that would not adequately represent the subjects. This issue was pertinent as some Kathoey had changed their names. Ultimately, we chose the conservative, if clumsy, approach of using letters, so that the subjects would be represented by their own words.

Our inductive qualitative approach for working across the cases was inspired by insights from interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). IPA uses qualitative data from semi-structured interviews across similar or relatively homogenous cases. The interview material is often biographical and the analyst’s interpretation addresses significant experiences in an individual’s life on the basis of their own everyday account: ‘(T)he accounts which participants provide will reflect their attempts to make sense of their experience … Transcripts of interviews are analysed case by case through a systematic, qualitative analysis. This is then turned into a narrative account where the researcher’s analytic interpretation is presented in detail and is supported with verbatim extracts from participants.’ (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009, 3–4).

To analyse interview material, first, we read the full transcripts several times. From this, we identified family, work and place as determinant social factors, and four distinct chronological life-stages of experiences: childhood in the village; early postmigration city experiences; establishing a life in tourist-zones; and reaching back ‘home’. We then went back and coded how participants cognitively evaluated and ‘framed’ specific experiences and events at the intersections of family, work and place within the four life-stages. A frame is a ‘schemata of interpretation’ (Goffman 1974, 21) that guides cognitive perceptions of reality, while frame analysis is an established method for examining how people understand the world by examining the discourse of their ‘talk’ about it (Gamson 1992).

The interpretive value of studying narratives of how people tell their (sexual) stories is well established (Plummer 1995). To capture the time-dimension of change over four distinct phases, we applied the narrative arc (Statham 2020) approach. Simply stated, narrative arc is the chronological construction of plot in a novel or story. It emphasises the way a story-line develops over time, due to the interactions of individual characters, who make their decisions and act in relation to significant others, while embedded within a broader social context that shapes, and is shaped by, their actions.
## Table 1. Kathoey and gay men sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Highest Education Achieved</th>
<th>Years with Foreign Man</th>
<th>Natal Family Alive</th>
<th>Support for Family</th>
<th>Previous Occupations</th>
<th>Occupation (outside caring for partner)</th>
<th>Income Source</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Origin Place</th>
<th>Primary Location</th>
<th>Property Ownership in Origin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Vocational school</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>Mother, father &amp; sibling</td>
<td>Yes, limited: “when needed”</td>
<td>Factory work; Bar work; Sex-work</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>Loei (Isaan)</td>
<td>Pattaya</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>6 years 6 months</td>
<td>Mother &amp; two siblings</td>
<td>Yes, Regular</td>
<td>Cabaret performer; Bar sex-work</td>
<td>Small health business with Thai Bar owner (with partner)</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>Khorat (Isaan)</td>
<td>Phuket</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Vocational school</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Mother, father &amp; three siblings</td>
<td>Yes, Regular</td>
<td>Factory; Waiter; Dancer at gay bar; Supermarket work; Hotel receptionist</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>Surin (Isaan)</td>
<td>Pattaya</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Mother, father &amp; two siblings</td>
<td>Yes, Regular</td>
<td>Sex-work</td>
<td>Staff at gay bar</td>
<td>Primary: Partner Secondary: Sex work</td>
<td>Sisaket (Isaan)</td>
<td>Pattaya</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>7 years 6 months</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Yes, Regular</td>
<td>Nurse; Factory work; Bar work</td>
<td>Staff at NGO</td>
<td>Primary: Partner Secondary: Employment Partner</td>
<td>Khon Kaen (Isaan)</td>
<td>Pattaya</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Secondary school</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>Mother and five siblings</td>
<td>Yes, Regular</td>
<td>Factory work; waiter; NGO staff; Massage therapist; Housekeeper</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Primary: Partner Secondary: Teaching</td>
<td>Khon Kaen (Isaan)</td>
<td>Bangkok</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>College (by adult education)</td>
<td>2 years 4 months</td>
<td>Mother &amp; sibling</td>
<td>Yes, Regular</td>
<td>Factory; Ice delivery; Bakery; Bar work; sex-work</td>
<td>English and Thai teacher</td>
<td>Primary: Partner Secondary: Teaching</td>
<td>Chaipoom (Isaan)</td>
<td>Pattaya</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Vocational school</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>Seven siblings</td>
<td>Yes, Regular</td>
<td>Factory work</td>
<td>Small massage parlour owner</td>
<td>Primary: Own massage shop Secondary: Partner</td>
<td>Amnat Charoen (Isaan)</td>
<td>Bangkok</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Each story is different. But reconstructing the experiences of a group of individuals with similar shared characteristics within an overall ‘narrative arc’ is a useful interpretive framework that allows for unpacking important factors that shape specific social outcomes, within the range of possibilities available. As we hope to demonstrate, it provides an overall narrative framework of distinct time-stages, within which one can present similar and different experiences of individual subjects, alongside the changing social conditions and relations that shaped their ‘opportunities’ at that time.

Pathways from rural poverty towards sustainable nonheteronormative living

Growing up in poor rural villages: formative experiences

Three decades ago, there was virtually no public space for expression of nonheteronormative identities within expected traditional family social roles of reproduction, marriage and sexual mores in a rural village. It is highly important in Thai culture for families to ‘keep face’ publicly among the village community. This imposes a rigid heteronormative social framework of conventions and expected social roles on children. Children already carry strong cultural obligations of duty towards their parents, especially in poor families, where they can be expected to work from an early age, as well as fulfil future social roles through marriage and producing children, to materially support the family. While poverty is a shared experience that already limits all children's future prospects, Kathoey and gay men face additional discriminatory barriers.

Kathoey, in particular, described harsh experiences growing up, facing prejudice and discrimination from villagers, while becoming self-aware and publicly expressing their gender identities. Such difficulties ran alongside having to renegotiate a devalued status with parents, concerned about facing shame or stigma in the eyes of village community. In Thai culture, the surface and public aspect of appearances carries strong social weight, especially regarding gender and sexuality, while sexual relations, including plentiful fluid nonheteronormative ones, remain concealed behind this veneer (Van Esterik 2000, 201–221). There is social tolerance for sexual variety (number of partners, sexual orientation, erotic practices), but this is conditional on surface appearances being maintained and rules of appropriate context observed.

Negative parental reactions can lead to feelings of rejection, failure and psychological strains. It also needs underlining that in the social framework of village life, family matters a great deal for life-chances: it is not only a source for emotional support and self-esteem, but the predominant supplier of access to resources, social capital and networks, that are vital for an individual’s prospects for upward social mobility.
Kathoey described becoming aware of their gender from a very early age. However, their public expressions of femininity, while still children, placed their family in transgression with the village community’s rigid heteronormative social conventions. Subjects showed significant agency in asserting their female identities into ‘new’ social roles despite facing strong heteronormative social pressures and discrimination:

At school, my friends played fighting. I didn’t like it… I already thought that definitely wasn’t a boy… I lived like a girl. I did housework, washed the dishes, cooked rice, and helped my mom cook food. (A)

There was only me who was effeminate in my village. I was called Kathoey. I did not know what I was that time but I was happy to play with girls (D).

Asked when she knew she was a woman, another expressed remarkable self-awareness and determination as a young person to realise her gender:

Since I had my first memory at around 5–6 years-old and I started taking contraceptive pills in Grade 8 or 9. (B)

Some Kathoey experienced explicit parental rejection and abuse, including being beaten up and shipped out to relatives:

I was very young. My father didn’t like the way I am… He hit me and threw me, so I run away to my aunt’s house. (C)

Others recounted how their marginalisation and social exclusion was mitigated by parental support. A subject talked of her gratitude for maternal acceptance. She recognised this was made in a context of social difficulty, by saying her mother ‘never complained’.

I think [my mother] has known since I was a child, but she was always fully supportive… I was dressed like a woman when I was performing at some special events in the village, like Rocket festival, Sport Day, Laos merit making day. She was the one who prepared my dresses, accessories and make-up. She never complained. (D)

Another told how her parents unsuccessfully tried to ‘rectify effeminate behaviour’ by ordaining ‘their son’ as a monk. Importantly, she interpreted her mother’s disappointment as her perceived loss of a child’s heterosexual reproductive duties and care obligations that are strongly embedded in Thai social norms.

My father. didn’t talk to me for two months… My mother was still kind of OK… As I am the only child, she wanted to see me having a family with a wife and children of my own so they can also take care of her. (E)

Notwithstanding rejections, Kathoey still tried to negotiate a new social space for acceptance by their parents. One way subjects showed agency to re-claim family status was by commitments to high moral conduct
outside the realm of gender expression. This offer to ‘be a good person’ was a strategy to regain merit and recognition, perceived as compensation to parents for the family’s transgression of local heteronormative expectations.

As long as I am a good person. He (father) asked me not to get involved in drugs. He allowed me to drink but not to smoke. Then slowly, slowly he started talking to me. (E)

I was relieved when I told them (parents) I am now accepted by others as long as I’m a good person. (C)

By comparison, gay men’s formative experiences are clearly distinct. Their nonheteronormative behaviour lacks the public visibility of Kathoey, so was concealed, if acknowledged at all, within the family, to preserve outward appearances of conformity with strong heteronormative expectations. One recounted how his parents allowed him to stay overnight with another boy with whom he was close and later had sexual relations (H). He pinpointed this as the time his parents became aware of his sexuality though it remained undiscussed. Confronted by a social world defined by strong heteronormative family expectations, the gay subjects told how they repressed or suspended expressing their sexuality until a later age. One actually explained how in contrast to Kathoey, village society was largely in denial or ignorant of cisgendered gay male sexualities, leading to feelings of isolation:

I lived in a rural area where people didn’t understand that there was such a thing like being gay. They knew transgender men liking the same sex... But they didn’t know of men who were not effeminate and could like the same sex. I think there were only me and another boy in the whole district who were gay. (G)

The same man made clear that another factor inhibiting his expression as gay was that his adolescent life was primarily taken up by helping his family survive in extreme poverty. There were no opportunities for socialising. Asked about having a first boyfriend at 21 years:

My adolescent life wasn’t like others. My family was so poor that I couldn’t afford trendy clothes... Either I worked all the time in factories, or stayed home because I had no money to go out. (G)

Subjects responded to these highly unfavourable opportunities for building nonheteronormative lives by migrating to cities, in search of work, and away from scrutiny at ‘home’. This aspiration to migrate in search of a better life was common for rural adolescents of their generation, when a mass exodus to cities, and abroad, became a driver for Thailand’s unprecedented social transformation and economic development (Rigg 2019).
Postmigration experiences in the city: marginalisation, precarity and sexual liberation

After social constraints of village life, subjects saw migrating to cities as a new ‘opportunity’ to earn sufficiently through paid employment to move out of poverty and assert their respective gender and sexuality identities. Kathoey in particular found their efforts to penetrate mainstream Thai social relations in city life met restrictive barriers of social convention and prejudice. Once more, the public visibility of Kathoeys’ gender identities made their experiences of discrimination more direct and resulted in social marginalisation. Kathoey discovered their visible femininity was a strong barrier to accessing work in mainstream occupations. They recalled experiences of workplace discrimination and difficulty gaining work equivalent to qualifications. One person recounted being driven out of a hospital by co-worker prejudice and institutional discrimination despite possessing good qualifications:

Despite having a degree, I wasn’t… accepted to work in a private hospital or any others because I am a feminine… I did my make up once when I was doing the night shift at the… hospital and colleagues filed a complaint to Human Resources… I was asked to leave the job as I didn't pass the probation period. (E)

Kathoey also found that although there were new opportunities for nonheteronormative relationships, that they were still confronted by pervasive social restrictions of heteronormative family expectations. Again, their visible transgressions of conventional social roles faced censure from Thai families not wanting to ‘lose face’. One subject told how her first relationships with Thai boyfriends were stopped by the families to avoid bringing social stigma. Clearly, the high class/status of her boyfriend's family, where the father was a high-ranking state official, was an added factor.

His sister… reported our relationship… I then got a call from his father asking me to end the relationship… His father was working as a senior governmental official at Royal Thai Police. He said he is not retired yet and our relationship could jeopardize his reputation. I also had another Thai boyfriend after him, but I was asked to end the relationship by my mother. (B)

This demonstrates how mainstream urban middle-class society was effectively socially ‘blocked’ to Kathoey from poor rural backgrounds and their male partners. Leaving home did not mean moving beyond the family's social influence. Facing ‘blocked opportunities’ to mainstream Thai society because of transphobic discrimination in work and social relations, Kathoey recounted moving to tourist-zones. The person driven out by the hospital talked about how after unrewarding low-paid factory work, she set out for the tourist city, Pattaya, aspiring to earn more by engaging on the (sex) scene with foreigners.
Earlier I worked in a garment factory in Bangkok. My friend told me that I could earn a good pay in Pattaya as there're a lot of foreigners out there and they pay you well. (E)

From a young Kathoey’s perspective, living in precarity on the social margins, tourist-zones offer new ‘opportunities’ to earn sums unachievable elsewhere and experiment in social and sexual relations outside of the strong heteronormative constraints of mainstream society. Within Kathoey circles, this aspiration to move to tourist cities and have relations with foreigners is an established ‘cultural script’ (Jongwilaiwan and Thompson 2013), i.e., a commonly established and resonant way of viewing the world, as a pathway to escape poverty and achieve gender recognition:

An older transgender in Loei (Isaan) once told me, "Why don’t you find a foreign husband? My friend went to live abroad and became a "Madam"… you’re not ugly. Why not try? Maybe your life will be better." So I came here (Pattaya). (A)

Since I was a child… I found other senior people having foreign boyfriends…They are both Kathoey and women who were observably wealthy. (C)

While this aspiration leads to agency, it is also the case that Kathoey are pushed towards work servicing foreign men, because their efforts to make a viable nonheteronormative life elsewhere fail. As people from rural poverty, they face ‘double discrimination’ from mainstream society, by class/status as ‘peasants’ and transphobic as ‘Kathoey’, which explains why they have very narrow opportunities to make a life outside of sex-work for tourists. Some talked about how their lives drifted towards sexualised forms of work, driven by aspiration, but also by social channelling into stereotypical ‘Kathoey work’.

We… moved to work in Bangkok. I was encouraged by my friend... to come to Pattaya... At the beginning, our starting work was a waiter. Yet, there was a day that numbers of dancers were lacking and I was encouraged by Mamasang to go on stage dancing while wearing only underwear. (C)

I could not get a job caused by bubble burst economy in 1997. As I am Kathoey and was aimless that time… I contacted my friend. Subsequently, I moved to Phuket… (B)

Kathoey see their life-opportunities channelled into a precarious existence on the margins of tourist bars and sex-work. While this life-trajectory is something they assert is part of their self-identity and agency, there can be little doubt that such life ‘choices’ result from double ‘blocked opportunities’. Others confirm this finding. Winter’s (2006) study of 198 transgender people, found 153 in employment, but few middle-class professionals despite many being graduates. Major occupations were in tourist cabarets, beauty salons, and sex-work bars.

Subjects acknowledged the precarity, health risks and dependency of this existence, but saw it as an inevitable pathway:
If you come to Pattaya, you have to start working in a bar. There will be people coming into your life. If you know how to protect yourself, you can stay for a long time. Don’t fall for the sweet words of men who don’t want to use condoms. (A)

Some avoided the risks of the sex-industry, but made their lives sustainable by freelancing, using their day-time jobs in tourist services to generate sexual encounters:

I was responsible for welcoming customers at the front check-in counter... I got many Thais and foreign customers approaching and taking care of me. (C)

Notwithstanding the exploitative basis of the sex industry, tourist-zones that host Western expatriate communities, and large inflows of male sex tourists, offer opportunities for Thais to experience validation in nonheteronormative sexual relations according to a new set of norms. As Jackson (2011c, 202) outlines, this can lead to new nonheteronormative social spaces and liberating experiences: ‘Rather than being “Westernized”... Thai queers may find the space and opportunity to experiment in new ways of being Thai.’ Similarly, Winter argues, ‘(sex-work) provides some with nightly reaffirmation of an identity as female’ for Kathoey (2011, 261). Of course, sex-work can also lead to rape, drug abuse, and entrapment in poverty, so this potential for ‘liberation’ needs to be contextualised within a social environment of exploitative work that results from deep societal discrimination and marginalisation.

Gay men’s experiences of migrating to cities and displacement towards tourist-zones were broadly similar to Kathoey. The main differences were relative and once again derived from their nonheteronormative behaviour being a less publicly visible challenge to mainstream social heteronormativity. Gay subjects in the sample witnessed relatively less direct workplace discrimination, which allowed greater chances for work away from the formal sex industry. However, poverty remained a life-shaping factor, so that wealthy foreign men and gay tourist scenes remained attractive opportunities compared to factory work. Gay men also gravitated towards work in service sectors -bars, massage- that facilitated intimate informal encounters with foreigners.

However, family social control still remained influential. A gay man, who married, told how his generation faced strong pressures to conform ‘publicly’ to heterosexual norms by marrying:

Some of my gay friends had to get married to women in order to make their family happy. (H)

As for Kathoey, the desire to escape Thai social restrictiveness made the idea of an imagined better nonheteronormative future with a Western man attractive. A gay man recalled vividly how Pattaya embodied this promise of a previously unimaginable luxurious life-style combined with the excitement of sexual liberation through encounters with Western gay men.
The first time I walked by the beach I felt it was a dream city come true. I felt Pattaya was like New York. People dressed up nicely and the city filled with foreigners. I loved to interact with them so I looked for any jobs to make a living here. I was out of jobs until... working in a bar... I saw European man kissing with Thai man for the first time. I was so excited.

His sense of liberation contrasted starkly with his descriptions of how his efforts to keep a space in his family met subtle but strong heteronormative pressures, in that his sexuality is tolerated, but not discussed:

I feel uncomfortable with my family... They know but they never ask. I used to take my mom to eat out with my boyfriend. She didn't ask.

Building a sustainable nonheteronormative life on the scene

As years pass, Kathoey and gay men learn the social rules for survival and ‘getting on’ in the tourist-zone. This is the place where their respective ‘opportunity structures’ for building sustainable nonheteronormative lives is socially embedded and geographically located. Notwithstanding their commodification as a sexual product, Kathoey and gay men experienced greater tolerance, liberation, and felt belonging in tourist-zones. Importantly, tourist-zones host established sizeable LGBTQ+ communities and scenes. This social environment legitimizes Kathoey and gay identities and groups. It provides a location for social structures and communities that support ‘opportunities’ to learn about and perform the social roles that can sustain a nonheteronormative life, by providing access to peer networks for emotional and financial support, role models, and know how (social capital) about how to get on.

Kathoey subjects created, reaffirmed, and participated in a specific Kathoey nonheteronormative lifestyle, by their agency in subcultural social milieu or neighbourhood scenes. At the same time, the scene was a social infrastructure providing ‘opportunity structures’ that made living such social roles possible. A Kathoey discussed her daily routine in a way that underlined her sense of belonging and conviviality passing time with the peer community of ‘people like her’ located in Pattaya: ‘I walk to the manicure shop which belongs to my friend. Many transgender go there to extend their nails and chitchat. They share their experiences. My friends work in the bars and they talk about who they went out with. We have fun talking. I eat with my friends.’

Paradoxically, it is the subcultural transgressions of tourist scenes that makes them a location where Kathoey have at least some ‘opportunities’ to access the means to build a sustainable nonheteronormative life. A poor person’s agency to become Kathoey is not only a personal act of self-identifying as a woman, but becoming Kathoey is a social act, that is performed as a specific role, as a recognised way of living and life-style as part of a Kathoey
community, that is specifically embedded within, dependent on, and located in the social environment of scenes. This perspective on why and how Kathoey can thrive as a subcultural community group within the limited channels and restricted geographical parameters of tourist scenes, while their lives remain ‘double-blocked’ by discrimination elsewhere, fits Cloward and Ohlin’s (1960) sociological insight, that subcultural social structures that transgress mainstream norms also provide specific ‘opportunities’ for some people from that subcultural group to prosper on location in that social environment.

After learning the rules of the game, through encounters with clients and engagement with senior peers, Kathoey generated strategies for achieving a better nonheteronormative life, beyond precarious low-paid (sex)work. They chose from limited options available to climb the social ladder of the scene. At the apex stands the aspiration to establish a long-term relationship with a wealthy foreign man. This was perceived as the ultimate goal, a ‘jackpot’, that would provide security, materially, and in wellbeing, in contrast to a series of short-term sexual encounters. When recounting this aim, a Kathoey vividly expressed her agency and determination to achieve this goal:

I decided that I will fight. If things don’t get better, I won’t go back home. I saw some people who were uglier than me and they had a foreign boyfriend. Then why can’t I also have a foreign boyfriend? (A)

Another subject looked back and outlined her motivations as material wealth, being able to exhibit a demonstrably ‘successful’ life-style, and achieving upward social mobility relative to mainstream society:

To have a comfortable life, a house, a car, golden jewellery and everything that others don’t. I just wished I had everything as... the person who had nothing before looking at others who were wealthy, so that they won’t be able to look down upon me. (E)

However, it is a highly competitive field and demand for wealthy foreign suitors significantly exceeds supply. Many Kathoey do not fully realise the aim of a long-term foreign partner security and remain dependent on serial encounters with foreigners or low-paid service work. Our sample was selected because they ‘successfully’ achieved enduring partnerships, but even among this group, some lived for years in search of this goal.

One Kathoey talked about how she worked for eleven years as a hotel receptionist, ‘freelancing’ with clients, before her life was radically transformed overnight, by meeting a 65 years-old New Zealander. Notably, her partner initiated the consolidation of the relationship into a partnership, first by entrusting her with significant sums, then by buying a business, a bar that she subsequently co-owned:
(H)e saw the advertisement on the business sale of a beer bar posted on my Facebook and he wanted to start the bar business for me. He asked me to deal with this...and eventually he transferred another 270,000THB (8640USD)...We were not that... close that time. (C)

Foreigners looking for long-term partnerships with Kathoey are a relatively small pool of men, who are likely to be older, and looking to keep a foothold in Thailand, through retirement or setting up a business on the scene. This matters because it means a Kathoey person also brings important resources to the partnership, including social capital, language ability, local knowledge of the scene, contacts, etc. that are essential for a foreigner to run a business, own property and live in Thailand. Two years after starting out with the New Zealander, she was a wealthy person, receiving 40,000THB monthly allowance, after consolidated ‘gifts’ of a house and car.

All Kathoey subjects in the sample recounted radical life-transformations that were funded by established relationships (2–8 years) with significantly older Western men (30–49 years older). Aged between 30 and 40 years at the interview-time, they received substantial monthly allowances, ranging from 10,000 to 40,000THB (320 to 1,275USD). At the higher-end, this is roughly equivalent to three times the average national monthly wage (15,000THB) and twice that of Bangkok (21,000THB), based on National Statistical Office estimates, January 2020. At the lower-end, this is enough to live off, or supplement living well, not least because partners provide substantial additional financial or material ‘gifts’. Not all experience a very high degree of upward social mobility, but still sufficient to sustain a better nonheteronormative life than before. One whose allowance is two-thirds the average wage, accepted her British partner’s financial limitations (E). Another received considerably more, but continued to supplement this with sex-work to meet growing life-style aspirations (D).

While gaining security and wealth underpinned Kathoeys’ strategies to partner foreigners, there were also emotional incentives. Some expressed genuine affection, companionship and love for their partners, appreciating their new social role as a ‘Thai wife’ (*mia Farang*). One outlined her feelings of liberation and greater esteem as a woman in a relationship with a foreign man. Interestingly, she depicted Western sexuality norms as more tolerant than Thai. She contrasted her attachment to her partner with earlier exploit-ative relations with Thai men, that were characteristic of discriminatory Thai society:

Love can happen to everyone... For Thai culture... stigmatization in sexuality is clearly shown... Besides, he (Thai partner) also did not treat me as a 100% woman... he only took me to the specific places for Kathoey group as he was afraid to be judged by surrounding people in general places. Money is important factor to Thai man to be with Kathoey. (B)
Subjects saw their intimate services and looking after their partner’s interests and properties, as an ersatz job, which is how it is seen by their peer community. This ‘partnering work’ is time-consuming, not least because foreign partners are significantly older and often require eldercare. ‘Partnering work’ usually displaces formal work as a primary income source. Typically, subjects move out of low-paid jobs, while building up autonomous resources to support their own futures.

‘Success’ achieved by partnering a foreigner raises status within the Kathoey community and allows a sustainable nonheteronormative life. However, unless a person can transform the relationship into tangible assets, life remains set against a backdrop of precarity. This is because while the scene provides an opportunity structure for ‘success’, and supportive peers, it also remains a competitive environment, where relatively few can ‘succeed’. A Kathoey vividly describes this precarity of life on the scene, which underlines the need for resourcefulness and saving tangible assets, when they are available:

One day if the foreigner dumps you or doesn’t send money anymore and you don’t have any money, your friends that you once hanged out with will no longer care for you. I’ve seen many cases. When you’re at the peak, you buy drinks for everyone. But when you fall, everyone steps all over you. (A)

Gay men’s life-trajectories achieved through partnering foreign men were broadly similar. They built lives on the Thai-foreigner gay scene which is often close to but located in different streets, bars or shops than the Kathoey scene. For those in the sample, material rewards exceeded all expectations, leading to radical life-transformations and new possibilities for sustainable nonheteronormative living and high wellbeing. One gay subject whose biography included working in a plastic factory, restaurant, as a masseur and housekeeper, became a full-time carer and companion for his partner, received a high-end salary, regular substantial bonuses, and owned two purpose-built houses worth 3 Million THB that were ‘gifts’ (F). Another owned a massage shop, but received 100,000THB per visit from his partner. He describes a life-style of liberty and luxury beyond all expectations, that he importantly recognised would have been unachievable with a Thai man in Thai society:

I can go abroad and even travel by plane within Thailand… I can also afford to pay for good food, nice clothes and a modern phone. If I had a Thai boyfriend, our earnings would be just enough to pay for our expenses. (H)

In a way, subjects have to step out of Thai society to step up in Thai society. Like Kathoey, gay men’s aspirations for ‘success’ were defined, affirmed and socially embedded in the values of peer communities around scenes. It is against this gay community that they measure their social status and
achievement. A gay man recounted how “success” through partnering opened up new middle-class gay networks to him.

*Interviewer: Do you have a group of friends you hang out with?*

I do, yes… Everywhere. It’s a nurse, a dentist, a hotel general manager…

*Interviewer: They all seem high class people*

They are! (G)

Importantly, he aimed to use this social capital to secure his future by setting up a business with his foreign partner. This demonstrates how his prospects are embedded in the service sector on the scene:

He (partner) wants to start a Thai restaurant in Jomtien Beach with me because I know many people… I know lots of people and have connections. Surprisingly I am respected from a community. (G)

His access to social capital and connections, as well as respect in the community, is also a resource for his partner to set up a business, which again shows that partnering is a two-way exchange that can allow both to prosper on the scene.

**Reaching ‘home’ for recognition: back to the future?**

Re-thinking their lives in middle-age from a position of relative social empowerment, it was striking how often subjects defined their futures through projects for re-building connections back to their natal family and village. All Kathoey had used their wealth to ‘buy back’ materially into family through financial remittances for parents' care and other social needs -typically, a quarter to a half of their monthly allowances- while some had even built houses, to gain merit and status as ‘dutiful children’:

My entire family… benefited from his financial support (D).

While real or imagined intentions to return back to the village is common among migrants from Isaan (Rigg 2019), this took on added significance for Kathoey, who repeatedly expressed strong needs for emotional attachments to family and ‘home’. First, there was a genuine emotional need to be a valued family member, and receive recognition, as a prodigal returnee for their gender, i.e., to be ‘dutiful daughters’; an important cultural obligation for Northeastern women (Angeles and Sunanta 2009). Second, this was self-validation: a way to demonstrate achievement relative to others in a community of heteronormative prejudices. Third, there was a nostalgia for village life, that may or may not be realised as a future project, but stood in opposition to a stigmatised life in tourist-zones.
Interviewer: What’s your life goal? Do you plan to still live here (Pattaya) in the future?

No. If (foreign partner) is no longer here, and I’ve processed the inheritance, I will move back to my hometown. I will build a house and open a small beauty salon. I will look after my nieces/nephews… Who can I depend on in the future? I don’t have any children. Who will take care of me? I have to take care of myself. (A)

I have demolished that shanty house [mother’s] and built my own house. Before I would not feel comfortable when I go back home…In the end, I want to go back home and take care of my mother. I want to stay home and plant the vegetables, take care of chicken and fish. (E)

In effect, subjects are trying to re-negotiate a social space for being Kathoey within mainstream family and village relations. However, they also recognise that there are conditions and limitations on their ability to transport their established lifestyle and personality back ‘home’, not least because of villagers’ prejudice and jealousy.

When I first went home with [partner] the teenagers gossiped about us. (A)

(We were) viewed as wacky people. I saw them gossiping. We just have to let it go as. (family) still live there. (B)

Increased social acceptance by the village community, was importantly restricted and conditional on the degree to which subjects (and their partners) gained merit by financially providing for the family.

At the beginning, I was not accepted by surrounding people. Yet, after our relatives participated… in the wedding ceremony, they are happy to see us happy… he will give extra money to compensate such amount that I give to my family. (C)

One Kathoey even presented the dilemma of feeling relatively stuck, recognising how deeply her life was embedded in the tourist-zone Pattaya and that, notwithstanding limitations, this is where she really belonged in contrast to the village:

I think it is less likely for me to move back there as it is quiet in my hometown. I have been [in Pattaya] for many years…I got used to living here. Not that I like the lifestyle..., but this place has become like a second home. (D)

Gay men’s efforts to ‘buy back’ into family relations and village communities followed a broadly similar pattern. For example, one talked about a remittance house that stands empty, which he employs his sister to upkeep (H). Recognition from villagers was again conditional and dependent on financial contributions. He recounted how his status and acceptance of his gay relationship with a foreigner was founded on substantial donations to the temple:

I have more credibility… I make a 3-4000THB donation while others in the village might donate only 500. People look at us differently (H).
Another recounted how acceptance was begrudingly made within stigmatisation for being a ‘foreigner’s gay prostitute’:

You are judged for being a foreigner’s boyfriend. When I visit my family, neighbours see my car, they would ask what kind of job I do. If I say I have a European boyfriend they’ll give me a look (G).

Overall, our findings indicate that even the lives of the ‘successful’ remain structured over the contradiction between the social and geographical displacements of living in the tourist-zone enclaves that support them, and an at most begrudging conditional acceptance from the mainstream heteronormative communities where they grew up.

**Conclusion: transforming social and geographical displacement into an asset?**

Re-telling Kathoey and gay men’s life-stories of this generation from poor rural Isaan, provides important insights into their lived experiences confronted by ‘double discriminations’ over the last decades. The individual choices that shaped subjects’ lives, and surprising prevalence of lives like theirs, are not chance occurrences. They need to be understood as social outcomes that result from the strong channelling effects of highly significant processes of heteronormative and class/status social exclusions that strongly define Thai society. Each life-stage was permeated by their efforts to achieve recognition for living nonheteronormatively, made against a backdrop of subtle and direct forms of transphobia (Kathoey) and homophobia (gay men), on top of disadvantages of low class/status and coming from poverty.

As children and adolescents, they experienced social marginalisation in the family, and on location in the village community. Growing up in the village, being Kathoey or a gay man did not fit into the heteronormative familial norms and a matrilocal framework of expected social roles of reproduction, marriage, that were a blueprint for prospering in village life. After migrating to cities for work and liberation from strong heteronormative norms that had largely prevented intimate relationships, they experienced workplace discrimination that made ‘getting on’ in mainstream society impossible. Even worse, they found that high social restrictions imposed by families on their having ‘public’ nonheteronormative relationships, followed them to the city. For Kathoey, our primary focus, the social visibility of their gender identities meant that they faced especially harsh ‘double discrimination’. Their life-chances to overcome ‘blocked opportunities’ were not available everywhere, but primarily in the transgressive enclaves of Kathoey scenes in tourist-zones, that offered limited specific pathways forward. Effectively, their social displacement and marginalisation resulting from family pressures, work
discrimination and rejection from mainstream of society, became a geographical displacement to tourist-zone scenes on the periphery.

The Thai state markets poor Thai men and women, as friendly and open to encounters with foreigners, ‘the land of smiles’, within its economic development strategy for tourism, while maintaining the official falsehood that there is no prostitution (Van Esterik 2000; Sunanta 2020). This contradiction of a tourist strategy based on a premiss of cheap sex that also stigmatises and criminalises poor Thai who service millions of male foreign tourists each year, is characteristic of the hypocrisy of class, status and privilege in Thai society. Mainstream urban heteronormative society socially stigmatises tourist cities, like Pattaya and Phuket, but still reaps the economic benefits of mass tourism. The channelling of poor nonheteronormative lives into tourist zones is part of this social marginalisation process. Paradoxically, however, it is the subcultural transgressions of tourist scenes, that makes them a location where Kathoey found at least some new ‘social opportunities’ to access the means to build a sustainable nonheteronormative life.

A specific narrow window of ‘opportunity’ existed in social environments of tourist-zone nonheteronormative scenes. Tourist-zones transgress dominant (hetero)norms and values of society, but also provide alternative social infrastructures, communities and countercultural norms that support specific forms of nonheteronormative living, albeit dependent on foreign men. By moving to tourist cities, subjects ‘stepped out’ of mainstream society and strived to take a new social pathway towards sustainable nonheteronormative lives. This alternative pathway towards a ‘successful’ life combining sufficient wealth with gender affirmation, is socially recognised within Kathoey circles, as a ladder that allows a few to climb to the top. Simply put, tourist-zone scenes present a chance to transform social and geographical displacement from mainstream heteronormative society into an asset. This fits Cloward and Ohlin’s (1960) claim, that those lacking access to socially approved means, can use alternative subcultural social structures to strive for ‘success’ in society.

Subjects built their new lives within the tourist infrastructure of entertainment and hospitality. They became established on a scene, that provided (sex)work, affirmation of Kathoey identities, lifestyles, and relationships with men, resources of social capital and support networks, and access to foreign men looking for relationships. Operating from this social structure, subjects strived to take the next step forward by establishing a long-term relationship with a foreign man. Such men are usually old with residences or businesses in the tourist-zone, who want companionship, and a reliable Thai partner who can provide resources of social capital and ‘know how’ to support retirement and ageing in Thailand. For Kathoey who hit the socially recognised ‘jackpot’ of achieving a long-term partnership, their lives were radically transformed. Most were able to transform their relationship into tangible
assets that provided long-term security, while achieving social recognition and validation for living nonheteronormatively on the scene.

They also used their ‘success’ as basis to ‘buy back’ status within the family and an attachment to the village ‘home’. Here there were contradictory needs and motivations: for parental love and recognition; to fulfil a child’s cultural obligations; social self-validation in the village; and nostalgia. In a sense, this was an aspiration to have their new ‘successful Kathoey’ life recognised and valued by a part of the heteronormative mainstream society, that had previously rejected them. Such desires for gender recognition from the mainstream were only partially and conditionally achieved, because pervasive transphobic discrimination persists in Thai society. Reflecting back on her ‘successful’ life, Nong Toom, the beautiful boxer, made precisely this point (Aldous and Sereemongkonpol 2008, 241): ‘The only things I’m unhappy about are external factors over which I have no control – like what other people think of me and the fact that my gender isn’t legally recognised. If you asked me how womanly I feel, I would have to say that a part of that depends on how much society is willing to accept my new identity.’

Acknowledgements

The authors profoundly thank and acknowledge the significant contributions of Sureeporn Punpuing and her colleagues at the Institute for Population and Social Research (IPSR), Mahidol University, Thailand. A special thanks is due to Dusita Phuengsamran and Niphon Darawuttimapakorn for conducting the biographical interviews of such exceptional detail and quality. All possible errors of interpretation and otherwise in this article are ours. This collaborative research was undertaken within the framework of the Sussex-Mahidol Migration Partnership (http://www.sussexmahidolmigration.co.uk).

Funding

This research was supported by awards from the British Academy and Thailand Research Fund within the Newton Fellowship Programme (grant numbers AF150229 and NAFR1180155).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Paul Statham is Professor of Migration and Director of the Sussex Centre for Migration Research (SCMR) in the School of Global Studies at the University of Sussex, UK. He is Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies (JEMS), ranked no1 in “Ethnic Studies” (2020 Impact factor 5.340 score). Paul has written a number of collaborative monographs, edited volumes, and more than 70 articles in refereed journals and
as book chapters. His earlier research focused on cross-national comparative approaches
to migration, ethnic relations and citizenship, Islam in Europe, and the emergence of a
transnational European public sphere. His current researches “transnational living” that
results from migration, mobility and exchanges between Europe and Thailand with a
focus on “marriage”, wellbeing and life-course. This collaborative research programme
focuses on the impacts of “transnationalism” between Thailand and the West on the
life-chances of Thai people.

Sarah Scuzzarello is Researcher and Lecturer at the University of Sussex. Over the last
decade, she has established a research programme focussed on how transnational migra-
tions and intergroup relations are affected and shaped by gender relations; and on how
institutional discourses shape migrants’ collective identification and life chances. Sarah
works within a cross-national comparative framework, and her research focuses on the
UK, Sweden, Italy and Thailand. Her research has been widely published in leading inter-
national journals and academic presses. She is the Associate Editor of the Journal of Ethnic
and Migration Studies. In 2019 she co-founded IMISCOE’s Standing committee on Gender
and Sexuality in Migration Research (GenSEM), of which she is now the co-coordinator.

ORCID

Paul Statham http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4229-4230
Sarah Scuzzarello’s http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1281-8742

References

Aldous, Susan, and Pornchai Sereemongkonpol. 2008. Ladyboys: The Secret World of
Thailand’s Third Gender. Dublin: Maverik House.

Angeles, Leonora, and Sirijit Sunanta. 2009. “Demanding Daughter Duty: Gender,
Community, Village Transformation, and Transnational Marriages in Northeast Thailand.”

Cambridge University Press.


Harper and Row.

Jackson, Peter A. 2011b. “Bangkok’s Early Twenty-First-Century Queer Boom.” In Queer
Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Jackson, Peter A. 2011c. “Capitalism, LGBT Activism, and Queer Autonomy in Thailand.”
In Queer Bangkok: Twenty-First-Century Markets, Media, and Rights, edited by P. A. Jackson,
195–204.

Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Jackson, Peter A., and Nerida M. Cook, eds. 1999. Genders and Sexualities in Modern
Thailand. Chiang Mai: Silkworm

Jackson, Peter A., and Gerard Sullivan, eds. 1999. Lady Boys, Tom Boys, Rent Boys: Male
and Female Homosexualities in Contemporary Thailand. Chiang Mai: Silkworm.


