

Bodily Practices and Subjectivities of Lao Migrant Female Sex Workers in a Thai Border Town

Theeraporn Chaimala^{1*}, Pimpawun Boonmongkon¹, Suchada Thaweesit², and Nattawut Singkul³

¹ Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Mahidol University, Thailand

² Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University, Thailand

³ Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Archaeology, Silpakorn University, Thailand

* Theeraporn Chaimala, corresponding author. Email: theeraporc@gmail.com

Submitted: 21 November 2024. Accepted: 5 May 2026. Published: 19 June 2026

Volume 35, 2027. pp. 391–408. <http://doi.org/10.25133/JPSSv352027.020>

Abstract

This study examines the bodily practices of Lao female sex workers in a Thai border town, focusing on how these practices are shaped by subjectivity and negotiated within a context of transnational mobility and legal ambiguity. Employing a qualitative research methodology, the study draws on in-depth and narrative interviews, as well as participant observation, with 20 Lao women. Findings show that bodily practices—such as cosmetic surgery, skin whitening, and emotional labor—are strategies of negotiation and identity-making within the ambiguities of borderland sex work. By foregrounding the body as a site of negotiation and agency, this study contributes to scholarship on migration and gender studies by illustrating how bodily practices serve as proactive tools for self-fashioning and agency within the complexities of borderland sex work.

Keywords

Body practices; Lao women; sex work; subjectivity; Thai border town

Introduction

In the era of globalization, cross-border migration has become widespread, driven largely by economic disparities and unequal opportunities. In low-income countries where access to education and employment is limited, many workers—especially women—tend to migrate to countries with stronger economies in search of better prospects and to escape poverty (Appadurai, 1996; Castles & Miller, 2009). In Southeast Asia, globalization and ASEAN integration have further accelerated regional female mobility, particularly into informal work, including domestic service, entertainment, and sex work (Phongpaichit, 2012; Xayamoungkhoun & Harkins, 2023).

Rather than merely being macroeconomic shifts, globalization and regional integration in Southeast Asia restructure everyday life by reshaping labor markets and gendered expectations. In a region marked by deep inequalities in wealth and livelihood opportunities, these processes facilitate not only the movement of capital but also the circulation of transnational media, cultural ideals, and normative models of femininity. Consequently, as structural transformations reshape local consumption patterns and social values, migrant women—especially those from neighboring low-income countries—face intensified pressures to embody specific ideals of beauty, emotional labor, and sexual desirability as survival and mobility strategies (Appadurai, 1996; Castles & Miller, 2009; Sassen, 1998).

Within the specific geography of the Thai-Lao border, these structural shifts have manifested in a steady influx of Lao women into entertainment venues—critical, liminal sites where migration regimes, informal economies, and gendered power relations intersect. These border zones function as spaces of profound ambiguity, where legal regulations, moral discourses, and social identities remain fluid and contested (Donnan & Wilson, 1999). While regional studies often emphasize the vulnerability of women within “trafficking hotspots” (Zheng, 2009), the situation along the Thai-Lao frontier reveals a more complex interplay of economic pragmatism and gendered responsibility.

Far from being peripheral, these border economies are central to regional labor systems, in which women’s migration pathways are shaped by economic dependence and familial expectations (Xayamoungkhoun & Harkins, 2023). In these precarious environments, Lao women do not merely exist as passive victims of inequality; rather, they actively navigate stigma and survival through everyday practices that shape their aspirations and identities in a way that challenges dominant victim-centered narratives of migrant sex work (Carter, 2020).

Female sex workers in these borderland settings are subject to multiple and often contradictory social expectations related to beauty, desirability, sexual appeal, and bodily cleanliness. These pressures generate increasingly intensive and complex bodily practices, including cosmetic surgery, skin whitening, vaginal douching with saline or feminine hygiene products, and the use of antibiotics such as ampicillin to maintain cleanliness and tightness and to eliminate odor. Substances such as *Somadril* are used to manage confidence and emotional strain, while emergency contraceptives are taken to sustain readiness for frequent sexual encounters (Hardon et al., 2013; Kukul, 2006; Yu, 2013).

These bodily practices extend beyond individual health maintenance, becoming routinized strategies closely tied to labor, survival, and adaptation to dominant ideals of femininity and sexual desirability within borderland sex work economies (Lorber & Martin, 2011). At the

same time, these women are stigmatized as members of “a high-risk group”, rendering their bodies targets of biopolitical intervention through state-led public health surveillance, prevention, and treatment programs (Hardon et al., 2013; Phrasisombath et al., 2012).

A review of existing literature on “bodily practices” among female sex workers – particularly Lao women in the borderland sex industry – reveals significant conceptual and empirical gaps. Previous studies have largely focused on exploitation and violence in precarious border contexts, women’s agency and self-management strategies, reproductive health and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and emotional labor in entertainment settings (Birger et al., 2024; Cepeda & Nowotny, 2015; Ma & Loke, 2019; Phrasisombath et al., 2012; Senawong, 2019; Singkul et al., 2019; Thaotawin, 2006).

While these studies offer valuable insights, they remain predominantly framed with a public health, biomedical, and policy-oriented perspective that emphasizes risk, control, and prevention, leaving limited analytical space for examining sex workers’ lived and embodied experiences. More recent scholarship has begun to challenge victim-centered and legalistic interpretations. Faudzi et al. (2024) emphasized the intersections among law, culture, migration, and gendered labor in Southeast Asia, while Carter (2020) called for reframing migrant sex workers’ narratives to foreground agency and lived experience. Nevertheless, the body remains under-theorized as a site of negotiation in specific borderland contexts where legality, morality, and market forces converge.

A critical gap in the literature lies in the lack of in-depth analyses that conceptualize the body as a site of practice, negotiation, and identity reconstruction under conditions shaped by power, discourse, and borderland ambiguity. While existing studies frame Lao sex workers as passive victims or biomedical risk groups, this study advances the field by conceptualizing the body as a site of agency, negotiation, and fluid subjectivities (Pylypa, 1998; Scheper-Hughes & Lock, 1987).

Accordingly, the “bodily practices” of Lao women working in drinking venues along the Thai-Lao border should not be understood solely through a biomedical and behavioral framework. Rather, the body is approached as a “site of practice” intimately connected to diverse subjectivities and power relations, through which women navigate, resist, and negotiate dominant discourses and structures of control within highly ambiguous legal and moral environments. Drawing on Foucault’s (1978) concept of biopower, this study examines how sex workers’ bodies are simultaneously self-managed and regulated through institutional mechanisms such as health surveillance and disease monitoring. At the same time, Connell’s (1987, 2002) theory of gender embodiment underscores that femininity is enacted and sedimented through bodily discipline, affective labor, and everyday performance, shaping women’s negotiations with clients, brokers, and family members.

Therefore, this study aims to examine and describe the bodily practices embedded in the everyday lives of Lao women engaged in sex work along the Thai-Lao border, and to understand their subjectivities within the intersectional context of migration, gendered expectations, and borderland ambiguity. By foregrounding the body as both a target of regulation and a site of negotiation and meaning-making, this study contributes to anthropological debates on embodiment, agency, and migrant subjectivity in Southeast Asia.

Research methods

This qualitative study aims to understand the bodily practices of Lao women working in drinking venues along the Thai–Lao border and how these practices are connected to their subjectivities. The research was conducted between April 2019 and January 2020. The research site– a province in Thailand’s northeastern border region– was selected purposively. This choice is grounded in empirical data, specifically the 2015 Mekong sub-region human trafficking report, which identified this corridor as a primary entry point for Lao women entering the sex industry (Political Science Association of Kasetsart University, 2015; Senawong, 2019).

To ensure relevance to the research questions, participants were selected through purposive sampling and engaged via in-depth interviews. The study involved three target groups: (1) Lao female sex workers aged between 18 and 35 years who were living and working in the study area, specifically in drinking venues or similar entertainment venues. These participants had experience managing their own physical health and beauty, were able to communicate in Thai, and provided informed consent; (2) Drinking venues owners with more one year of experience managing such establishments, who were included to offer contextual insights into venue operations and their relationships with Lao workers, and who also voluntarily agreed to participate; and (3) NGO or private-sector health staff with at least one than year of experience working with migrant labor, particularly in the areas of migrant health services and policy, all of whom provided informed consent.

Data collection methods

In-depth interviews were conducted with three groups of participants: 20 Lao women to understand their life experiences and bodily practices; two owners of drinking venues to gather insights into the management of such establishments and their relationships with Lao women; and 1 local NGO staff member to provide contextual information on border-related challenges and issues.

Narrative interviews were conducted with four Lao women to capture their personal reflections on everyday bodily practices in the Thai border context. These interviews took place in private, safe locations and began with open-ended questions to encourage participants to reflect on the meaning and reasoning behind their practices. Sample questions included: “How do you feel about your appearance in relation to your work in the drinking venues?” “Which parts of your body do you manage daily to prepare for work?” “Are there specific body parts you feel must be managed to satisfy clients?” and “After performing these bodily routines, how do you feel, and do they affect your work?”

Participant observation was conducted by joining activities with Lao women in entertainment venues throughout their working hours, from opening to closing. The researcher also explored surrounding areas – such as markets, convenience stores, local entertainment spots, and drinking venues – to gain a broader understanding of the women's daily lives and the community context in the border region. Field notes were recorded continuously throughout the observation period.

Access to participants was facilitated through collaboration with local NGOs that work directly with migrant women. This partnership enables entry into entertainment venues and provides introductions to potential participants, fostering initial trust with Lao migrant women. Recognizing the influence of my positionality, I adopted an immersive approach by residing with NGO staff and local health volunteers to engage in the women's daily routines. The deliberate reflexive strategy sought to mitigate power asymmetries and cultivate rapport, establishing a foundation for inter-subjectivity beyond the researcher-subject binary. Data collection ended once saturation was reached.

Data analysis

This study employed narrative and content analysis to understand the bodily practices and subjectivities of Lao sex workers in the border area. Life stories and personal experiences related to bodily practices were collected, transcribed, coded, categorized, and systematically interpreted. Reflexivity and critical reflection on the relationship between the researcher and participants were incorporated to enhance credibility. The analysis emphasized the body as a site of control and negotiation, particularly through discourses of health, morality, and sexuality, using Foucault's theoretical framework as a guiding lens.

Ethics approval

Consent to provide information and to use audio recorders was obtained prior to each interview in accordance with the guidelines. The study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Social Sciences at Mahidol University, with approval number 2019/025.0702.

Results

Among the demographic and social characteristics of the studied participants, who worked in five shops and were aged 22–35 years, surprisingly, none were married; all were single or widowed. Most of them had large family sizes ranging from three to six people, but had fewer children (0–2 children).

Data from Table 1 further reveal that migration patterns span from the rural poverty of Salavan to the strategic economic centers of Vientiane and Pakse. These cities serve as gateways through which Lao women assimilate into urban cultures and access information from Thailand prior to migration. Whereas rural migration is often propelled by economic hardship and kinship ties, moving through these urban hubs represents a deliberate effort to circumvent rural vulnerability. As a result, seeking employment in the Thai service sector has become a normalized pathway for improving family economic status. In addition, some participants had been engaged in this job for a long time (1–9 years). Most of them stayed at their workplace and did not change their workplace often (1–3 times).

Table 1: General Information of 20 Lao Female Sex Workers

Case	Club name (alias)	Age	Marital status	Number of family members (case not included)	Number of children (amount)	Hometown	Work experience (year)	Number of club changes (times)
1.	A	35	Widow	4	2	Vientiane	1	1
2.	A	30	Widow/have boyfriend	6	2	Vientiane	2	1
3.	A	26	Single	4	1	Vientiane	2	3
4.	A	26	Single	3	0	Vientiane	3	3
5.	A	25	Widow	6	1	Pakse	4	2
6.	B	27	Single/have boyfriend	6	1	Salavan	7	1
7.	B	23	Single	3	0	Salavan	2	1
8.	B	24	Single	5	0	Vientiane	2	1
9.	B	23	Widow	4	1	Vientiane	3	2
10.	B	35	Widow	3	1	Pakse	6	1
11.	B	27	Widow	6	2	Salavan	2	1
12.	C	28	Single	4	0	Vientiane	3	1
13.	C	30	Single	4	0	Nakhone Luang	3	1
14.	D	26	Widow/have boyfriend	5	1	Pakse	3	2
15.	D	22	Single/have boyfriend	4	0	Pakse	1	1
16.	D	24	Single	4	0	Pakse	2	1
17.	E	24	Widow	6	2	Vientiane	9	2
18.	E	22	Widow	6	1	Sainyabuli	3	2
19.	F	25	Widow/have boyfriend	4	1	Pakse	5	2
20	F	24	Single	5	0	Pakse	1	2

Bodily practices of Lao female sex workers in drinking venues

Bodily practices on traits that arouse or attract emotions

Various kinds of body alteration for attractiveness are used by Lao female sex workers in drinking venues, aged 22–35 years old. After arriving in Thailand, incremental body alterations were performed, often more aggressively once they began working in the drinking venues.

Hair coloring and its meanings

For Lao female sex workers living in Thai border communities, this practice can be read through Butler's (1990) performativity, as women re-enact femininity by altering their appearance to conform to Thai aesthetic norms. Altering their natural black hair to brown is seen as a way to enhance beauty, soften facial features, and brighten their appearance. It also serves as a form of social assimilation, allowing them to blend in with both Lao and Thai peers in the communities where they live and work. As one participant described her transformation upon arrival in Thailand:

"When I first got here, the drinking venue's owner took me to get my hair colored. I loved it. It made my face look brighter. Black hair made me look harsh and not pretty."

(Case 15, 22-year-old, Club D)

In this way, hair coloring becomes more than a cosmetic choice—it is a form of identity negotiation, self-expression, and integration into a new cultural and professional environment. It reflects both personal transformation and the influence of communal aesthetic norms within the borderland sex industry.

Skin face whitening: Embodied opportunity and market visibility

The face is considered a vital body part for women, as it is the focal point of a woman's beauty, despite being relatively tiny compared to the rest of the body. Women, particularly Lao female sex workers, rely on their facial appearance—the first point of contact—as a strategy to attract clients. As a result, the face is prized for its attractiveness, making it a region that requires more attention than other parts of the body. Whiteness and smoothness of the face, as well as a more natural look without too much makeup, are very crucial for women's jobs in drinking venues. Because white smooth skin with a natural look increases the likelihood of getting picked by clients. As a result, the majority of Lao female sex workers require extensive whitening skin cosmetic alteration.

"I have to be white too, even if I'm ugly, I want my face to be white too. Most customers will like white faces and clear faces. As for the shape, customers will look at it later but focus on whiteness first."

(Case 14, 26-year-old, Club D)

Rhinoplasty: Confidence, acceptance, and competitive advantage

Lao female sex workers, particularly those who came to work at drinking venues near the Thai border, also show the distinctiveness of their noses, as they saw the significance of a nose that was not as beautiful as that of a group of friends in the same club. The perfect prototype that results in insufficient nasal structure for the individual, necessitating rhinoplasty. The experience of undergoing rhinoplasty reflects a shared understanding among women: that altering the nose addresses a perceived deficiency and enhances attractiveness.

"Before, I didn't have a bridge of my nose at all. I wasn't sure how to do it. So, I decided to have a nose job and told the doctor to get a tall one. I'm satisfied because I look prettier, not like my old face. Other people say that I'm beautiful, so I'm more confident."

(Case 11, 27-year-old, Club C)

Face make-up: Performing femininity as labor

Face decoration or beautification is another technique for enhancing facial appearance. The majority of Lao female sex workers have their own facial decorations, and everyone has their unique cosmetics. After a morning shower, makeup is considered quite usual for functions such as eyebrow shaping, eyeliner, foundation, powder, and lipstick, depending on the desired intensity for each individual.

"If I don't wear make-up or don't dress like that, many times I don't get customers at all. But while I'm using face makeup, I'm still getting customers."

(Case 5, 25-year-old, Club A)

Slimming practices: Self-management and bodily discipline

The body, particularly its shape and appearance, is a critical external bodily domain closely associated with satisfaction and self-confidence in both personal and professional spheres. According to a Lao female sex worker working in drinking venues, nearly everyone had attempted to lose weight. These practices take various forms, including dieting and exercise, the use of diet pills, nutritional supplements, and slimming coffee. Self-management is expected to produce a slender, aesthetically desirable body that can be dressed elegantly. Such bodily practices illustrate Foucault's concept of "technologies of the self," in which women discipline their bodies to align with beauty ideals and market expectations, even at the cost of their health.

"When I drank my diet coffee, my heart trembled and hurt, but I lost weight. Sometimes I get right-sided headaches when the pain is really intense. But that's because I don't want to be fat. If I feel very fat, I will eat a little to lose weight. If I've lost a few kilos, I'll stop drinking coffee. But as the weight rose, I drank this coffee again."

(Case 10, 35-year-old, Club B)

Body skin care: Cleanliness, sensory appeal, and emotional affection

Having white, bright, clear, and smooth skin is considered part of feminine attractiveness, and societal ideals frequently place a premium on white women. This value evolved into a pattern of beauty that extended across society. Lao female sex workers at drinking venues actively internalize and mobilize these cultural ideals, strategically investing in skin enhancement as a form of bodily capital to secure their professional standing. It was considered that the majority of clients who used the service at the drinking venues were primarily interested in the face and body, with white, smooth, soft skin that looked clean and smelled good, which helped attract more consumers and increase income.

"Most clients don't look at our breasts; they look at our faces and white skin. If a person is white, has a pretty face, and has a good body, that person can get a lot of money."

(Case 14, 26-year-old, Club D)

"When I buy the cream to use, I have to focus that it makes my skin look fine and smell good too, because when my skin smells good, and I go near customers, they will like it."

(Case 14, 26-year-old, Club D)

Positioning the body as a service body: Emotional and affective labor

Working at the drinking venues, a club environment, provides food, beverages, conversation, and entertainment to guests, with an emphasis on providing an enjoyable ambiance for dining and drinking. Thus, in addition to a stunning appearance, the caring attitude and manner are critical components of service in the context of drinking venues. As a result, social skills,

gestures, and language can be acquired through experience. Customer-pleasing personality qualities include being well-spoken, kind, providing excellent service, having good manners, being a good listener, being service-oriented, and delighting consumers via their emotions and bodies. By emphasizing service for guests seeking comfort, the club attracts a majority of customers who come not only to dine and drink but also to find care, comfort, ease, peace, respect, pleasure, and satisfaction.

“Caring and enjoyable” is the service’s body layout. Lao female sex workers will attempt to alter their personalities to meet and respond to the requirements of the club’s patrons, most notably through pleasant conversation. Corresponds to Case 5, who has worked in both a gaming institution and drinking venues for four years. She understands that what people desire and like about going to the club is frequently the opportunity to speak with a good-natured Lao female sex worker who is attentive, well-spoken, easy to chat with, and conversational.

“Some clients like nice, caring, or easy-to-talk people. When I am with a customer, I speak kindly and make them feel at ease. I need to know what customers like or do.”

(Case 5, 25-year-old, Club A)

Providing conversation and emotional comfort is another service practice that helps create atmosphere, feelings, and good relationships between Lao female sex workers and guests. As Case 3 notes, working in a club is not only about aesthetics but also about developing a service personality. It is a personality that can make guests feel at ease and talk comfortably with one another.

“When being with customers, I don’t just focus not only being beautiful but also take good care of him and to make him feel comfortable and get more peace of mind.”

(Case 3, 26-year-old, Club A)

Representation of “Lao identity”. In addition, the process of working as waitresses in drinking venues is also involved in their own transformations. Studies have also found that, in addition to personality traits, speaking, pampering, and smiling are important. The style of dressing under racial identities is also what some customers wish for.

“Most of the customers who come to the club like the sex worker who is Laotian. I’ve met a customer who said they’d give me more money if I changed my dress into the sarong and Lao women’s shirts together, saying he wanted to see it because he liked it.”

(Case 19, 25-year-old, Club F)

Subjectivity of Lao female sex workers in drinking venues

Daughterhood, responsibility, and familial survival

The Lao female sex workers are a significant factor in the mobility of workers throughout the country. The majority of Lao female sex workers were from Luang Prabang province, Selvan province, and a few from the capital Vientiane, which is located in a rural place. The majority of them hailed from agricultural or gardening households. They are economically impoverished, have a large family of three to five children, and have only finished elementary

or secondary school. As a result, family members, the majority of whom were first or second children, were forced to abandon their studies in order to support their families.

Apart from poverty, which is the primary reason why the majority of Lao female sex workers go to neighboring countries in search of a job, additionally, according to Lao culture, customs, and beliefs, children's responsibility is to demonstrate "filial piety" for their parents, which is often required of a lady. As a result, the majority of Lao female sex workers must work and strive to earn money to support their families, as is required of a daughter in the duty of bearing the burden and raising the family, particularly among women who are the oldest daughter or second child, and must strive to earn money and ensure the family's well-being to live.

Additionally, Lao cultural traditions and beliefs place great emphasis on "gratitude" towards parents and the role of women in fulfilling the family's expectations of caregiving. This cultural value further compels them to seek income opportunities to provide for their families and ensure a better quality of life for those they leave behind.

"I decided to come to this job because of the burden and the need to send money to my home. I have one child and my parents, as well as the eldest child, it's like a burden to take care of. I have three younger siblings, so I have to send them to study as well. I want them to get higher education because I haven't had the opportunity in the past."

(Case 5, 25-year-old, Club A)

Becoming Beautiful, Modern, and Competitive

A woman's "beauty" functions as a critical form of capital that commands attention and facilitates professional success. For Lao female sex workers along the Thai border, attractiveness—encompassing facial features, skin complexion, and overall physical appearance—is indispensable. Beyond mere aesthetics, beauty gives these women the bargaining power to select clients and negotiate on their own terms. Thus, investing in bodily transformation becomes a calculated move to secure greater success. Within the context of globalization and consumer culture, women interpret dissatisfaction with their bodies through dominant beauty discourses that emphasize self-improvement and competitiveness. Investment in cosmetic products and bodily modification thus becomes a strategy for enhancing market value and life opportunities, transforming beauty into a convertible form of embodied capital that can be exchanged for social and economic mobility.

Beauty like a Thai star or "Net Idol"

The Lao female sex worker operating within these drinking venues often adopts or compares herself to established models of beauty, typically embodied by Thai celebrities or net idols. The icons are celebrated for their facial and physical attractiveness, which is perceived as a form of physical capital that facilitates professional achievement and social mobility. In an industry that commodifies appearance as a tool for success, many Lap women seek to alter their bodies to emulate these ideals. This ideal model functions as a normative stereotype, dictating the transformation of the female body to conform to admired standards.

Having a Thai celebrity as a role model catalyzes bodily investment, prompting women to pursue specific courses of action—such as cosmetic surgery—to achieve their desired aesthetic. The decision to undergo rhinoplasty, for instance, is heavily influenced by the

reputations of specific cosmetic institutes and the signature looks of actresses or internet idols who have successfully navigated plastic surgery. Consequently, by the time these women enter the workplace, their bodies have already been restructured to conform to market-driven beauty standards. This strategic alignment is often informed by extensive digital research, in which women carefully select medical practitioners associated with high-profile celebrities to ensure the quality of their bodily investment. As one research participant detailed her selection process.

"I choose the clinics in which a lot of celebrities trust and use them. I research these clinics on Facebook and Instagram."

(Case 8, 24-year-old, Club B)

Assembling a Body Distinct from Village Women

For Lao female sex workers in drinking venues, bodily beautification functions as a strategy for differentiating themselves from domestic femininity, often described as "village women" or housewives who remain at home. Unlike women who do not rely on appearance for income, participants emphasized continuous bodily work—dyed hair, facial and skin whitening, make-up, cleanliness, and cosmetic surgery—as essential to survival and competitiveness. These practices operate as technologies of the self (Foucault, 1978), through which women discipline and transform their bodies in response to market demands. As one participant explained,

"Normal women are at home and not keen to get their noses done because they are at home and don't want any beauty. Although there were some people who had done the nose job, they weren't keen on doing it that much. I've done my nose now; I also want to have a beautiful chin and beautiful eyes and eyebrows. Because I have to use my face to make myself look good and clean. So, when anyone sees it, they think I'm beautiful and want to use the service. Sometimes, a customer who runs away from his wife at home and meets a woman who is not beautiful doesn't work out. Because he wasted money, he wanted to change the atmosphere."

(Case 12, 28-year-old, Club C)

Being more attractive than "women at home" requires Lao migrant female sex workers to engage in continuous bodily work aimed at maintaining beauty, cleanliness, and a well-groomed appearance. Beyond everyday cosmetic use, this includes exercise, dieting, and cosmetic surgery such as rhinoplasty, which are understood as necessary investments to remain competitive and desirable within the service economy of drinking venues. As Case 12 noted, clients visiting such drinking venues expect an experience that contrasts with domestic femininity, making bodily enhancement a strategic practice rather than a matter of personal preference.

Discussion

Subjectivities of sex work: Agency in border space

The findings of this study demonstrate that the bodily and emotional practices of Lao women engaged in sex work along the Thai–Lao border cannot be adequately explained through a

victim-based narrative or deterministic accounts of structural inequality alone. Rather than being passive outcome of state power, moral discourse, or economic constraint, These practices should not be seen as mere adaptations but as embodied negotiations that expand Foucault's notion of biopower. Rather than only being subjected to state control, women actively reconfigure their bodies as sites of agency. In this sense, the body emerges not as a passive surface upon which power is inscribed, but as a medium through which women negotiate survival, value, and moral legitimacy in everyday life (Sanders, 2005; Senawong, 2019; Singkul et al, 2019).

Previous literature has frequently interpreted sex workers' subjectivity through Foucault's lens of biopower, emphasizing how their bodies and identities are shaped and controlled by state mechanisms, public health regimes, and moral regulation (Phongpaichit, 2012). This perspective tends to be a privileged top-down form of control and understates women's everyday practices of negotiation. This study builds on, yet moves beyond, such interpretation by foregrounding women's bodies and emotions as sites of self-work—what Foucault (1988) conceptualized as technologies of the self. Practices such as cosmetic modification, hygiene routines, emotional discipline, and selective engagement with clients are not merely effects of regulatory power, but strategic responses to intersecting pressures of migration, gender norms, familial obligation, and economic precarity. Through these embodied practices, women actively produce value and meaning for themselves under conditions of constraint, thereby complicating binary distinctions between domination and resistance.

Viewed through Foucault's (1988) concept of technologies of the self, the bodily practices of Lao female sex workers—such as managing appearance, health, and emotional comportment—are better understood not simply as self-disciplinary responses to institutional norms, but as contextually grounded strategies through which women negotiate value and survival in borderland economies. These practices are not passive enactments of state or market discourse; rather, they involve creative and adaptive engagements with intersecting regimes of power. In this sense, technologies of the self in borderland sex work are relational and moral, oriented toward sustaining kinship obligations, managing stigma, and securing economic stability—dimensions that extend beyond Foucault's original emphasis on individualized ethical self-formation. Echoing Carter's (2020) call to reframe migrant sex workers' narratives beyond victim-centered paradigms, the findings demonstrate that Lao women actively construct meaning through embodied negotiation in borderland economies.

Several findings of this study resonate with Mills' (1997) notion of the "dutiful daughter," highlighting how women's migration is shaped not only by economic necessity but by moral expectations of filial responsibility and sacrifice. In the Thai-Lao border context, women's endurance of physical strain, health risks, and stigma is framed through obligations to remit income and sustain family livelihoods. Extending Mills (1997), this study demonstrates that the "dutiful daughter" is not merely a moral identity but an embodied one, enacted through everyday bodily practices. Consistent with Angeles and Sunanta (2009), who showed how similar expectations of daughterly duty structure transnational mobility in Northeast Thailand, where women's migration and marriage are framed as moral contributions to family and village advancement. These studies underscore that female mobility in the region is embedded in moral discourses that construct migration as a filial obligation rather than merely an economic strategy.

Such moral obligation is sustained through gendered, embodied performances, a dynamic illuminated by Butler's (1990, 1993) concept of performativity, which reveals how femininity

among Lao women is continuously produced through practices such as softness, attentiveness, cleanliness, and emotional availability. However, rather than treating performativity as the mere repetition of dominant gender norms, this study demonstrates how gendered performances function as tactical resources, enabling women to negotiate income, dignity, and social legitimacy within constrained environments. In borderland contexts, performativity is inseparable from survival, migration, and moral responsibility.

This interpretation resonates with comparative scholarship that conceptualizes subjectivity as emerging through everyday practices under conditions of constraint. Kong's (2006) study of Hong Kong sex workers highlights bodily presentation as a form of professional self-making, while Senawong (2019) showed how Lao women mobilize emotional labor as capital in precarious service economies. Biehl et al. (2007) similarly emphasized that subjectivity emerges through how individuals "work on life" within structural limitations. Studies beyond Southeast Asia, such as Karamouzian et al.'s (2016) research on Iranian sex workers, further illustrate how agency often takes the form of constrained, survival-oriented action rather than autonomous choice.

Taken together, these findings underscore that the subjectivities of Lao women sex workers are produced within border spaces characterized by legal, moral, and economic ambiguity. Migration in this context is not merely an economic strategy but a process that reconfigures familial roles, gendered responsibilities, and moral identities. As Yuval-Davis et al. (2019) argued, borders function as emotional, political, and discursive spaces where identities are actively negotiated. This study contributes to this literature by demonstrating how such negotiations are materially and affectively inscribed on the body through everyday practices of survival and care.

Borderland and embodiment: The exotic body as erotic commodity

Findings from this research show that the bodies of Lao women engaged in sex work along the Thai- Lao border function simultaneously as laboring bodies and commodified embodiments of ethnic difference. Within borderland sex economies, women's bodies are shaped to appear "desirable," "exotic," and morally "pure," particularly in the imaginaries of Thai and transnational male clients. Ethnic markers such as language, accent, skin tone, hair, and traditional Lao dress are transformed into marketable attributes, positioning Lao women as culturally distinct and sexually appealing. This process illustrates the commodification of the exotic, whereby ethnic otherness is translated into erotic value rather than remaining a fixed cultural identity.

Said's (1978) concept of Orientalism provided an important lens for understanding how Lao women are positioned as "exotic others" — simultaneously desirable and subordinate — within dominant sexual and cultural imaginaries. However, this study extends Orientalist analysis by demonstrating that such representations are not only imposed from above but are also actively engaged, negotiated, and strategically mobilized by women themselves. In the context of borderland economies, exoticism becomes a double-edged resource: it enhances marketability while simultaneously constraining women within racialized and gendered roles that are difficult to exit. Donnan and Wilson's (1999) conceptualization of borderlands as dynamic and contested spaces further highlights how bodies and identities must be continually reshaped amid legal, moral, and economic ambiguity.

Within frameworks of erotic labor (Kong, 2006) and embodied performance (Law, 2000), bodily appearance, voice, and interaction with clients emerge as central forms of labor. Performing femininity in drinking venues is not simply the provision of sexual services but the enactment of ethicized and gendered performances tailored to borderland economies. Consistent with Faudzi et al. (2024) analysis of sex worker regimes in Southeast Asia, such economies operate within overlapping legal, cultural, and moral frameworks that structure and regulate sex work. Within these regimes, market expectations are materially inscribed on women's bodies through disciplined appearance, affective labor, and chemical self-regulation. Maintaining health, hygiene, and aesthetic appeal thus becomes a form of cultural and erotic capital essential for economic survival. Comparative studies reinforce this interpretation.

Law (2000) and Lyttleton and Amarabibal (2002) demonstrated how Southeast Asian sex industries are shaped by economies of desire, while Tam et al. (2017) documented similar bodily modification practices among Vietnamese sex workers. Research by Hardon et al. (2013) and Yu (2013) further showed that hygiene routines and chemical practices are not solely about disease prevention but about producing socially valued forms of sexual respectability. Senawong (2019) and Singkul et al. (2019) confirmed that Lao women strategically manage their emotions and bodies under dual pressures: economic necessity and familial responsibility. While ethic exoticism becomes a marketable resource within borderland sex industries, it simultaneously constrains women within roles that are difficult to exit.

Rather than interpreting these practices as passive compliance, this study reframes them as embodied negotiations. Foucault's (1988) concept of "technologies of the self" –not as individualized self-fashioning alone, but as relational and morally grounded practices enacted within conditions of precarity, migration, and obligation. Drawing on Butler's (1990) concept of performativity, the findings further demonstrate that gendered identities are not merely reiterated but tactically mobilized through appearance, self-presentation, and bodily expression as intentional material performance of identity, through which women negotiate value, dignity, and survival.

Under Foucault's (1988) framework, self-regulation can be seen as both a response to oppressive discourse and a site for creative identity construction. However, when situated within the political economy of service capitalism (Hochschild, 1983), emotional labor also emerges as a market mechanism that routinizes bodily and affective performances for profit. In this context, women's performances are not entirely freely chosen but are learned and normalized forms of "appropriate display", necessary for income retention, raising critical questions about the limits of agency within commodified service economies. Agency here is neither illusory nor absolute, but negotiated within intersecting regimes of gender, ethnicity, and capitalism.

Thus, this study suggests that the bodies of Lao women in the borderland sex work are simultaneously sites of regulation and negotiation. While these bodies are produced and consumed as "commodities", women also mobilize these same commodified traits to negotiate economic security, familial responsibility, and social identity. This mirrors Yu's (2013) findings that Chinese sex workers' hygiene routines are not only for disease prevention measures but also for maintaining socially valued identities. Similar to Hardon et al.'s (2013) analysis of chemical sexualities among young women in Indonesia, Lao women's investments in health, appearance, and emotional discipline thus constitute forms of erotic capital – affective and economic resources through which new embodied subjectivities are produced in borderland contexts. In this sense, the body is continuously reconstructed through material,

chemical, and market processes, becoming a negotiated site of identity within the structures of the sex industry.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that borderland sex work positions the bodies of Lao migrant workers not only as laboring bodies but also as commodified embodiments of ethnic difference within the borderland economy. Rather than being understood merely as objects shaped by state power, capital, or moral discourse, this study shows that these bodies function as active sites of negotiation, meaning-making, and complex subjectivities. Women's bodies become arenas of ethical struggle, control, and aspiration, shaped through everyday practices of managing appearance, health, and emotions.

By foregrounding bodily practices as forms of self-work, this study extends existing applications of biopower by showing how power in borderland contexts is not only imposed but also strategically engaged and reworked. Theoretical frameworks such as technologies of the self, critical interpretive medical anthropology, and performativity help illuminate how these bodily practices are not merely reactions to dominant structures but rather constitute processes of identity production within a border zone marked by legal, ethnic, and moral ambiguity. In this sense, the findings contribute to anthropological debates by demonstrating that borderland sex work produces distinctive embodied subjectivities that cannot be reduced to narratives of victimhood or health risk.

Moreover, the study underscores that the border is not merely a geopolitical divide but a lived space of power, vulnerability, and existential negotiation, shaped by broader conditions of globalization and structural inequality. The experiences of Lao women reveal how borders are enacted through bodies, emotions, and moral responsibilities, rather than existing solely as territorial or legal boundaries.

Based on these findings, health policymaking in the Thai-Lao border region must move beyond biomedical paradigms and population-control frameworks that reproduce state power through surveillance and the reduction of the body to an object of administrative regulation. For Lao women engaged in sex work, health is not simply the absence of disease but an embodied space of social, emotional, and economic negotiation, closely linked to their partial citizenship and precarious legal status under Thai law.

Accordingly, health governance in borderland contexts should shift from a predominantly controlling orientation toward more relational and supportive approaches that recognize the body as a "body with identity" rather than solely an epidemiological subject. Similarly, government health providers and NGOs operating in these areas must remain attentive to their role as intermediaries of power by creating spaces for listening, participation, and reflexive engagement. Without such reflexivity, interventions risk reproducing hierarchies that position women as permanent recipients of aid rather than as actors capable of articulating their own needs and priorities. By centering bodily practices as sites of agency, negotiation, and meaning-making, this study argues that health and social interventions in borderland sex work must move beyond disease-prevention frameworks and recognize sex workers' bodies as sites of identity, agency, and negotiation in the borderland context.

Acknowledgments

The author gratefully acknowledges the Lao migrant women who participated in this study and shared their lived experiences with honesty and courage. Deep appreciation is extended to the local NGOs and community facilitators along the Thai-Lao border who provided guidance and logistical support during fieldwork. Any errors or interpretations presented in this article remain the sole responsibility of the author.

References

- Angeles, L. C., & Sunanta, S. (2009). Demanding daughter duty: Gender, community, village transformation, and transnational marriages in northeast Thailand. *Critical Asian Studies*, 41(4), 549–574. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672710903328021>
- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Biehl, J., Good, B., & Kleinman, A. (2007). *Subjectivity: Ethnographic investigations*. University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520939639-003>
- Birger, L., Benyamini, Y., Goor, Y., Sahar, Z., & Peled, E. (2024). Reproductive healthcare utilization for women in the sex trade: A qualitative study. *Israel Journal of Health Policy Research*, 13(1), Article 27. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13584-024-00627-7>
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of "sex"*. Routledge.
- Carter, L. (2020, October 11). *Changing the narrative of migrant sex workers*. Modern Southeast Asia, Yale Council on Southeast Asia Studies. <https://seasia.yale.edu/news/changing-narrative-migrant-sex-workers>
- Castles, S., & Miller, M. J. (2009). *The age of migration: International population movements in the modern world* (4th ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cepeda, A., & Nowotny, K. M. (2014). A border context of violence: Mexican female sex workers on the U.S.-Mexico border. *Violence Against Women*, 20(12), 1506–1531. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801214557955>
- Connell, R. W. (1987). *Gender and power: Society, the person and sexual politics*. Stanford University Press.
- Connell, R. W. (2002). *Gender*. Polity.
- Donnan, H., & Wilson, T. M. (Eds.) (1999). *Borders: Frontiers of identity, nation and state* (pp. 131–146). Berg.
- Faudzi, A. S. M., Ahmad, Y., & Ayob, N. A. (2024). Prostitution in Southeast Asia: A multifaceted examination of legal, social, and cultural dimensions. *International Journal of Studies on Children, Women, Elderly and Disabled*, 20, 80–96. https://ijcwed.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/IJCWED20_019.pdf
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality: Vol. 1. An introduction* (R. Hurley, Trans.). Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1988). Technologies of the self. In L. H. Martin, H. Gutman, & P. H. Hutton (Eds.), *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault* (pp. 16–49). University of Massachusetts Press.
- Hardon, A., Idrus, N. I., & Hymans, T. D. (2013). Chemical sexualities: The use of pharmaceutical and cosmetic products by youth in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. *Reproductive Health Matters*, 21(41), 214–224. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0968-8080\(13\)41709-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0968-8080(13)41709-3)
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feelings*. University of California Press.
- Karamouzian, M., Foroozanfar, Z., Ahmadi, A., Haghdoost, A. A., Vogel, J., & Zolala, F. (2016). How sex work becomes an option: Experiences of female sex workers in Kerman, Iran. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 18(1), 58–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2015.1059487>

- Kong, T. S. K. (2006). What it feels like for a whore: The body politic of women performing erotic labor in Hong Kong. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 13(5), 409–434. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0432.2006.00315.x>
- Kukulu, K. (2006). Vaginal douching practices and beliefs in Turkey. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 8(4), 329–341. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691050600802443>
- Law, L. (2000). *Sex work in Southeast Asia: The place of desire in the time of AIDS*. Routledge.
- Lorber, J., & Martin, P. Y. (2011). The socially constructed body: Insights from feminist theory. In P. Y. Martin & K. A. Myers (Eds.), *Feminist foundations: Toward transforming sociology* (pp. 191–204). SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781506335483.n11>
- Lyttleton, C., & Amarapibal, A. (2002). Sister cities and easy passage: HIV, mobility and economies of desire in a Thai/Lao border zone. *Social Science & Medicine*, 54(4), 505–518. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536\(01\)00046-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536(01)00046-6)
- Ma, H., & Loke, A. Y. (2019). A qualitative study into female sex workers' experience of stigma in the health care setting in Hong Kong. *International Journal for Equity in Health*, 18(1), Article 175. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-019-1084-1>
- Mills, M. B. (1997). Contesting the margins of modernity: Women, migration, and consumption in Thailand. *American Ethnologist*, 24(1), 37–61. <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1997.24.1.37>
- Phrasisombath, K., Thomsen, S., Hagberg, J., Sychareun, V., & Faxelid, E. (2011). Knowledge about sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and attitudes toward female sex workers with STI symptoms among health care providers in Laos. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Public Health*, 24(6), 940–952. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1010539511416223>
- Phongpaichit, P. (2012). *Sex industry and migration in Southeast Asia*. Silkworm Books.
- Political Science Association of Kasetsart University. (2015, May 13). *Rāṅgān kānwichai chabap sombūn khroṅkān wichai rūang “Kān khā prawēnī ying chāk prathet nai thāp anuphak phuṃi phak lum māṇān Khōng nai Prathet Thai”* [Modern slavery: Inside the business of sex trade of GMS women entering into Thailand]. Thailand Institute of Justice. <https://knowledge.tijthailand.org/uploads/publication/file/20190513/th-abdjlprsuw24.pdf>
- Pylypa, J. (1998). Power and bodily practice: Applying the work of Foucault to an anthropology of the body. *Arizona Anthropologist*, 13, 21–36. <http://hdl.handle.net/10150/110194>
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.
- Sanders, T. (2005). *Sex work: A risky business*. Willan Publishing.
- Sassen, S. (1998). *Globalization and its discontent: Essays on the new mobility of people and money*. New Press.
- Scheper-Hughes, N., & Lock, M. M. (1987). The mindful body: A prolegomenon to future work in medical anthropology. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 1(1), 6–41. <https://doi.org/10.1525/maq.1987.1.1.02a00020>
- Senawong, M. (2019). Producing affective performance and capital: Lao migrant women in the sex industry along the Thai-Lao border. *Journal of Mekong Societies*, 15(1), 62–89. <https://so03.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/mekongjournal/article/view/186349/130939>
- Singkhun, N., Boonmongkon, P., & Guadamuz, T. E. (2019). Emotional labor and emotion management: Power and negotiation among female Laotian migrant sex workers in drinking venues. *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review*, 19(3), 108–118. <https://doi.org/10.59588/2350-8329.1243>
- Tam, H. T. X., Boonmongkon, P., Wang, X., & Guadamuz, T. E. (2017). Skin beauty as erotic capital and production of “luckiness”: A look at menopausal women using hormone therapy replacement in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review*, 17(2), 185–195. <https://doi.org/10.59588/2350-8329.1105>
- Thaotawin, E. (2006). Phet phānīt khām phromdān: Prasopkān khōṅg ying Lāo nai thurakit bōrikān thāṅg phet nai phromdān Thai-Lāo [Cross-border commercial sex: Lao women's experiences in sex work on the Thai-Lao border]. *Journal of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University*, 18(1–2), 169–202. <https://so04.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/jss/article/view/174666>
- Xayamoungkhoun, S., & Harkins, B. (2023). *Precarious pathways: Migration patterns and service needs of Lao migrant workers*. Bangkok: International Labour Organization Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific. https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@asia/@ro-bangkok/@sro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_891143.pdf
- Yu, Y. J. (2013). Subjectivity, hygiene, and STI prevention: A normalization paradox in the cleanliness practices of female sex workers in post-socialist China. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 27(3), 348–367. <https://doi.org/10.1111/maq.12050>

Yuval-Davis, N., Wemyss, G., & Cassidy, K. (2019). *Bordering*. Polity Press.

Zheng, T. (2009). *Red lights: The lives of sex workers in postsocialist China*. University of Minnesota Press.