

## **An Analysis of Thai Women's Roles and Involvement in Cross-Border International Drug Trafficking**

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### **Abstract**

There has already been a large amount of Western research done exploring women's pathways to prison, but this paper will focus solely on women from Southeast Asia, and more specifically, Thai women.

Lives of convicted women are usually characterised by childhood/adulthood victimisation, mental health issues, male influence/control, and economic marginalisation. In the past decade, the number of women prisoners in Southeast Asian countries has significantly increased while the majority of these women are incarcerated for drug-related offences.

The widespread illegal drug trade and harsh criminal punishment handed down for drug offenders in the region are the major cause for this rise in female imprisonment. Although there is an extensive range of Western research exploring women's pathways to offending, research in a Non-Western context, including studies on women imprisoned for drug trafficking, is sparse.

Using life history interviews with Thai women imprisoned in Cambodia for international cross border drug trafficking, this paper uses a narrative life history approach to explore the circumstances propelling them into prison. This paper is based on the study report on "Vulnerabilities, Victimisation, Romance and Indulgence: Thai Women's Pathways to Prison in Cambodia for International Cross Border Drug Trafficking" conducted by the Thailand Institute of Justice and Griffith University.

While the full report of this study outlines four distinct pathways leading women to prison, this paper highlights another set of information describing women's roles in the international cross border drug trafficking offence including their backgrounds, male influence and patterns of criminal activities.

**Keywords :** Women prisoners, Drug trafficking, Southeast Asia, Drug mules, Drug couriers

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## Introduction

In the context of Western society, there are several major criminological theories explaining the causes of criminality including control theories, strain theories, and learning theories. These theories were argued to be developed with little concern for gender. It is widely noted that women generally commit less crime than men, and when women commit crime their offence tends to be that of a non-violent nature. Given the gender gap in offending, female offenders have traditionally been referred to as an ancillary role in the study of crime. For several decades, criminological theory has underestimated the importance of gender in explanations of crime (McGloin and Dipietro, 2013: 294, De Coster, Heimer, and Cumley: 2013, 313).

During the past few decades, the illicit drug supply, trafficking, and consumption, has been one of the most persistent problems in the Southeast Asia Region. With punitive policy and harsh sentencing being implemented in response, many countries in the region now face the problem of increasing prisoner numbers and prison overcrowding. Women have been disproportionately impacted with the number, rate and proportion of those in the national prison population increasing. It has been estimated by the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs that women represent approximately 20% of the drug traffickers arrested world-wide, and since the war on drugs, prison populations in different parts of the world have experienced a steady growth in the number of women imprisoned for this type of offending (Unlu and Ekici, 2012: 298–299; Kensy, et., al., 2012: 3; Fleetwood, 2014: 8).

Although research on women's participation in international drug trafficking is scarce, previous research suggests that women are most often drug couriers who carry drugs across international borders for someone else (Kensy et al., 2012: 3; Fleetwood, 2014: 7). The role of women drug couriers tends to be characterized by a lack of control and varying degrees of exploitations (Fleetwood and Haas, 2011: 380; Stengel and Fleetwood, 2014: 2).

Prior to their involvement in drug trafficking, women drug couriers frequently have a low level of education. Also, they are often economically marginalized and primarily responsible for familial economic provisioning. Economic insecurity and the confines of women gendered social realities as familial caretakers compels them into trafficking drugs in order to earn money. Other common vulnerabilities include extensive histories of victimization, associated trauma, and general life chaos (Sudbury, 2005; Bailey, 2013, Fleetwood, 2014).

In Thailand, 'wars' on drugs were announced by respective Thai governments in 2005 and 2008. In 2005, the focus was on ex-prisoners and drug suspects with outstanding warrants. In November 2008, a 'war' was declared against the methamphetamine trade. Both shifts in criminal justice policy contributed to the high incarceration of drug offenders and significant growth in prison population in the country during the past decade (Jeffries and Chuenurah, 2016).

With the major influence of the government's wars on drugs, the number of women prisoners increased significantly from 24,494 in 2007 to 39,396 in 2017;

a 60% increase. Official statistics shows that 83% of women prisoners in Thailand are incarcerated for drug related offences compared to 72% of their male counterparts (Department of Corrections of Thailand, 2017). Despite increasing numbers in the prison population, women tend to be incarcerated for low-level drug offences and their 'drug dealing' tends to involve only small amounts of narcotics. The number of female drug traffickers accounts for less than 2 percent of the total number of women prisoners incarcerated for drug offence in Thailand.

Previous studies of Thai female drug offenders suggest that women are involved in the criminal justice system as a result of guilt by association; arrested as a result of police 'sting' operations primarily targeted at men with whom they are having a romantic relationship (Havanon, et., al., 2012). While there has been some research on the backgrounds and profiles of women incarcerated for drug offending in Thailand, little is known about Thai women convicted and imprisoned for narcotic offences outside the country.

From 2012 to 2014, information from the Office of the Narcotics Control Board of Thailand showed that there were 190 Thai women arrested for drug-related offences abroad. The vast majority of these women were imprisoned in Brazil (n=35), Japan (n=30), Malaysia (n=16) and Cambodia (n=13). The most common illicit drugs related to their offences were crystal methamphetamine ('Ice'), cocaine, and heroin respectively.

In October 2016, there were 17 Thai women incarcerated in Cambodian prisons for drug offending.

To understand the reasons leading to their imprisonment, the Thailand Institute of Justice (TIJ) in collaboration with the Griffith Criminology Institute (GCI) conducted research on "Thai Women's Pathways to Prison in Cambodia for Drug Trafficking". In-depth interviews and a narrative method were used to construct life maps for ten Thai women convicted of and imprisoned for, drug trafficking in Cambodia. Results reveal four distinct pathways to prison: 1) the criminogenic pathway, 2) the romantic susceptibility pathway, 3) the domestic violence pathway, 4) the self-indulgent pathway (Jeffries and Chuenurah, 2019).

While the full report of this study provides details of different journeys leading Thai women to imprisonment, this paper describes another set of information from the study regarding the common pattern of their crimes and women's roles and experiences in drug trafficking.

## **Methodology**

At the time of this study there were a total of 17 Thai foreign national women incarcerated in Cambodia. Due to limited time and resources it was not possible to interview all 17 women; therefore, life history interviews were conducted with ten of the Thai women incarcerated in Cambodian prisons. Narrative analysis was then used to understand women's life experience before entering prison.

This study utilized open-ended questions covering several topics as follows:

1. Childhood familial relationships, friendships, victimisation and other experiences

2. Adulthood familial relationships, friendships, victimisation and other experiences
3. Education, employment, economic circumstances and provisioning
4. Histories of prior offending
5. Histories of physical and mental health including substance abuse
6. Circumstances surrounding their offending
7. Interactions with and experiences of the criminal justice system

All the women interviewed were informed about the research by the prison staff and asked if they would like to participate. At the beginning of each interview participants were informed about the aim of the study, confidentiality, anonymity and voluntary nature of participation before verbal consent was obtained.

### **Participants' profiles**

All women interviewed were convicted of trafficking either 'Ice' (methamphetamine) or Cocaine. Drug weights varied from 700 grams to 13 kilograms and their sentenced prison terms ranged from 25 years to life imprisonment. According to the Cambodian Law on Control of Drug (2012), a person who traffics more than 80 grams of heroin or cocaine can face imprisonment from 20 years to life imprisonment, and a fine of 40,000,000 to 100,000,000 Riels (approximately 9,900 – 24,700 US dollars). Extra penalties can also be added if the offence is proved to be carried out by a criminal group.

\* All ten women interviewed were aged between 24 and 47 years. Of the ten women interviewed:

- Nine experienced an unstable childhood (such as financial problems, parental separation, parental alcohol addictions, family violence including abuse and neglect).
- Eight have children.
- Nine had no problems with illicit drug use although three said they tried drugs.
- All experienced one of these problems in intimate partnerships: domestic violence, spousal drug abuse, infidelity, failure to provide for family.
- None had prior criminal convictions.

(\*This is an unnecessary repetition of the bulleted notes above)

Overall, the general profiles of these women are characterised by a wide range of vulnerabilities. These include individual (mental health), relational (parental abuse and domestic violence), social vulnerabilities (low levels of education and subsequent limited employment opportunities) and problematic criminal justice system practices.

### **Key Findings – Women's roles and involvement in drug trafficking**

While each woman's background was unique and their life situations prior to imprisonment varied, the circumstances leading each of them down a pathway to prison was strikingly similar. In this analysis, we used women's narratives to map a journey to cross-border international drug trafficking. The stories told by the majority of women comprised four stages as follows:

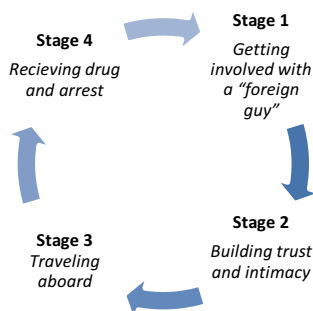


Figure: Women's involvement in drug trafficking

### ***Stage 1 – Getting involved with a “foreign guy”***

One key feature that most women had in common was their romantic association with a foreign man identified by the women as a “black African guy”. This was the beginning of their journey to the criminal justice system.

The initial conversation between the women and these foreign men took place either online or in person. With an increased access to technology and widespread use of internet, online platforms and social media such as Facebook and Camfrog were often used by these foreign men to approach the Thai women. One woman explained how she got to know this foreign man:

*“When I was 20 years old I met this Nigerian guy that was interested in me, he said he worked at a logistic business. I met this guy on an on-line dating website. I started using the on-line dating when I had to work in the factory in Bangkok. We started chatting on-line and I met him many times in Bangkok, twice or three times each week”.*

The reasons that the women started to use online dating were mainly loneliness, boredom or trying to fit in when they move

into or out of the big city. Some women went online because of their low self-esteem, as explained by one woman, *“I am chubby, when you live in Bangkok you can't even find clothes in your size, no one wants to talk to a fat woman. The on-line dating makes me feel comfortable because I have people to talk to”*. Searching for the sense of belonging and self-worth made these women vulnerable.

Some women who worked in tourist areas such as Pattaya city or an entertainment/red light district in Bangkok were also personally approached by these foreign men. Others were introduced to foreign men through their mutual friends.

### ***Stage 2 – Building trust and intimacy***

To build trust and manipulate the women into believing that a genuine romantic relationship was being formed, these foreign men would provide both emotional and financial support to the women and their families. The women explained that these men would romance them; giving gifts, money, compliments and generally behaving as if they were genuinely falling in love with them. One woman described the romantic tactics used as follows:

*“He helped me with my expenses, he took me out shopping, he paid for my food. We were together for three months before we move in together. I felt like he actually cared about me, he took good care of me when I got ill”.*

Many of the women had multiple vulnerabilities. They came from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, had histories of prior abuse and relationship failures. They



wanted love and the opportunity to make a better life for themselves and their families. Their new foreign boyfriends gave them a promise of a better future. One woman described that “[the foreign man] treated me well compared to my two ex-husbands. They never cared and never asked about my family. This man was different from every man I met”. These women’s vulnerabilities made it easy for the men to build trust and emotional attachment over a short period of time.

For some women these romantic relationships with foreign men were characterised by domestic violence. One woman explained how she lived in fear of her foreign husband who was able to exert control over her through threats, intimidation, violence and manipulation. She explained:

*“He caused me to do this and that, I wanted to get out of the relationship but I didn’t know what to do, he threatened to kick me out of the house and take all my things, he hit me sometimes but only when I disappointed him, I was in an abusive relationship, and you know, men can be abusive in many different ways, but this one he was abusive, he does bad things to my heart and sometime my body. He would say I am a useless person, sometime he says get out, or sometime he threatens to leave me, or let me walk on the street, or not giving me my money... I was scared of him but at the same time I hated him and I feel angry”*

The period of time that these foreign men used to build a relationship with the women ranged from a few months to two years. Some of the women married these men

freely and had children with them. Others were forced into marriage through threats and intimidation.

### **Stage 3 – Travelling abroad**

Eventually the women were invited, told or forced (in the case where relationships were domestically violent) into taking an international trip. For those women not in a violent relationship the reasons given for these international trips included taking a holiday or for business. Examples comprised:

- *“He needed me to get something from his sister to sell in Bangkok. He couldn’t come because he is busy”*
- *“He told me he wanted me to carry some diamonds”*
- *“He wanted me to relax and have time off from work and study. During that time I was actually stressed with studying”*

The women had no choice in the destination country which was invariably decided by the foreign men. The destination countries mentioned by the women were Brazil, India and African countries. Most of the women had never travelled outside of Thailand before and knew very little about the country that they were traveling to. One woman stated that:

*“he [the foreign man] put me in the car, got me a new sim card, gave me a ticket to Brazil and 1,000 US. I knew that they play football in Brazil but I didn’t know where it was”.*

The women described (often in hindsight) what appeared to be organized

networks for trafficking drugs. All the necessary arrangements (passports, visa, flights and accommodation) were made for them and they were provided with spending money. Those women who thought that they were travelling for business purposes or suspected that what they were being asked to do was illegal were also offered a payment once they returned to Bangkok.

Some women expressed concerns about travelling overseas. They were worried about their limited language proficiency and hesitated to travel at first. However, all eventually agreed to the free-trip. For some it was the excitement of travel that motivated them to go, others were financially motivated and one woman was forced to go by her domestically violent husband. Travelling aboard with little or no experience placed the women in a particularly vulnerable position. They were now fully dependent on these foreign men to guide and support them.

For those women who received spending money the amount provided varied from 500 to 1,000 USD. Once they arrived in the destination country this money usually allowed them cover living expenses for approximately one week. With limited budget, these women often struggled to survive and wanted to return to Thailand. These situations placed pressures on them and led them to the next stage.

#### ***Stage 4 – Receiving drug and arrest***

After a period of time in the destination country the women would be contacted by a stranger who claimed to be a friend or relative of the foreign man. The role of this stranger was to deliver luggage or pack something in the women's luggage and

convince them to bring it back to Thailand with them.

Some women were pressured, intimidated or forced into taking the luggage out of the destination country. Many were tricked into doing so by their foreign boyfriends/husbands who they now loved and trusted. Few knowingly or willingly transported the drugs out of the destination country.

Commonly the luggage would be given to the women on the last day of their trip or immediately prior to them departing for the airport. With time pressure and local transportation being arranged by another person some women found themselves rushing to the airport and almost missing their flight. This pressure tactic meant that the women did not have enough time to examine their luggage. One woman stated that:

*“In Brazil, another guy came and saw me, asked to meet me at a restaurant, he told me to wait for 30 minutes, he took my suitcase with him, then he came back in a car and took me to the airport. He switched my suitcase with a newer one, but I did not check it, I did not have time. I had to check in. He told me that he put samples in the bag and accessories for the business.”*

In the cases where the women did have a chance to inspect the luggage, it usually appeared to be empty. One woman explained that her foreign husband (who she was not suspicious of) had given her a new bag to travel with, she said:

*“it [the luggage] looked empty when I filled it with my clothes, still had price tag on it, but the drugs were under the lining, they [the police] needed a knife to find it, it took effort to get at it.”*

The women always travelled out of the destination countries on airline tickets purchased by someone else. Instead of taking the most direct route back to Bangkok, the return tickets always consisted of several transits. For instance, some women went through Barcelona and Singapore before being arrested in Cambodia (Thailand was the next destination on their itinerary). The international airport in Siem Reap and Phnom Penh is where most of the women were arrested and charged with cross border drug trafficking.

These women were being used as drug mules to transport illicit drugs from one country and deliver it in Cambodia. Of the ten women interviewed, there was one woman traveling from Bangkok directly to Cambodia using ground transportation in order to receive a “package”. Some of these women admitted to knowingly transporting drugs but the majority report travelling with no knowledge of the drugs in their luggage.

At the time of arrest most of the women were terrified when the drug was found in their possession. The women struggled to explain their situations to the local authorities due to language barriers, and they were devastated for being used and/or betrayed by their loved one. In addition, it was found that many of the women reported experiencing difficulties during the criminal justice system including unjust and misguided police practices alongside a lack of competent legal representation in court. At the level of

policing, half the women were unaware of what was taking place or what documents they were endorsing.

### ***Understanding the risk***

In this study the demographic characteristics and profiles of women differed. The ten women interviewed were employed in a variety of occupations ranging from a shop keeper, waitress, cashier, restaurant owner, and one was a university student. Their ages ranged from 24 to 47 years. Therefore, their life experience and levels of understanding about the world of the illegal drug trade varied.

However, there were a number of common factors that contributed to these women being arrested and imprisoned for drug trafficking. Most of the women were the primary caretakers of their families, but many struggled to meet their family’s financial needs. Many had experienced multiple disappointments in intimate relationships and therefore had low self-esteem. In most cases, the women were asked to travel overseas by a foreign man whom they trusted, and in many instances loved romantically. It is highly possible that these foreign men targeted women who were looking for companionship, love, and financial security, via internet dating sites, or in person.

While some women might have had slightly more awareness than the others of the potential risk of being duped into drug trafficking, some were completely unaware of what was going on until they were arrested at the Cambodian border. One woman, a university student, refers to her foreign boyfriend’s personality as “harmless” as she was oblivious to any potential risk and



believed in the authenticity of the love and care he provided her. On the other hand, a woman working at an entertainment district with more experience dating foreign men explained that she had heard about the possible danger posed by foreign criminals and thought that she could differentiate the bad guys from the good ones.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that all of the women were drug mules because they were carrying drugs across international borders for somebody else. None were career criminals, had knowledge of the international drug trade, or relationships with established criminal organizations. Prior to their arrest, their only contact with the international drug trade was via a, usually foreign, male intermediary (frequently a romantic partner) who supplied them with the drugs (either with or without their consent) and instructions on what they needed to do. Their offending was characterized by a lack of control (some were unaware that they were carrying drugs) and involved varying degrees of exploitation. Moreover, some of these women could be considered victims of human trafficking because they were moved from one nation to another under circumstances of force, threat, coercion and/or deception.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

Many people may believe that women imprisoned for drug offending are deviant; they are addicts, greedy and/or simply 'bad'. Of the ten women interviewed, none had lived a criminal lifestyle prior to their imprisonment and the majority had never seen, let alone tried, an illicit drug in their life time. This study demonstrated that a range of women, with different ages, backgrounds

and circumstances, can become involved in unlawful importation of narcotics as drug mules.

Women are increasingly being used as drug mules because they tend to generate only mild suspicion from authorities. Using dating sites and other legitimate ways of initiating romantic relationships these foreign men target and exploit vulnerable women through complex scams, frequently romantic in nature. For these men, the risk of detection is low, but for the women the risk of apprehension is high. It is therefore important that the backgrounds, profiles and circumstances leading to women's imprisonment for drug importation is considered when developing crime prevention strategies and sentencing policy.

Through the following set of recommendations, the researchers of this study urge the government of Thailand to initiate policies and practices to: 1) reduce the risk of Thai women being imprisoned for these types of crimes, 2) protect their legal rights if arrested, and 3) provide support to maintain adequate living conditions if imprisoned.

#### ***1) Crime prevention and awareness raising***

Prior to their imprisonment, vulnerabilities of women couriers are often characterized by low levels of education, limited employment opportunities, lack of "street smart" and desire for a different lifestyle. These issues are very complex and closely related to the feminization of poverty. Thus, any long-term prevention strategies should take into account the implications of gender inequalities in society at large and gendered effects of drug policy.

As for immediate prevention strategies, relevant agencies should increase efforts in circulating information and raising awareness about situations leading Thai women to be arrested abroad for drug trafficking. Knowledge is power, and with improved public understanding, families, communities and the women themselves are more likely to recognize the risks they may face.

- Awareness raising programme aimed at preventing women and girls from being used as couriers for trafficking in drugs should be implemented. Easily understandable materials such as fact sheets, victims' narratives or short documentary films should be made available through both online and traditional platforms.
- Appropriate reporting mechanism should be enhanced to encourage victims or potential victims of these scams to come forward, seek help and report suspected illegal drug activities to authorities.
- With support from the Immigration Bureau and an airport authority, last minute interventions could be made by distributing warning leaflets or displaying posters at international airports. High-risk women should be targeted i.e. those who are travelling alone to known destination countries, those going aboard for the first time and/or those travelling with foreign men of particular nationalities.

## ***2) Legal assistance and support at the point of arrest***

Most women arrested outside Thailand share the common problem of negotiating foreign systems of criminal justice which

they do not understand because they cannot speak the local language. Women may be questioned without interpreters and sign legal documents which they do not understand. To ensure the protection of their legal rights and access to fair and effective criminal justice, legal assistance and interpretation support should be provided for women from the point of arrest and throughout the court process.

- The Office of the Narcotics Control Board of Thailand, the Royal Thai Police and Royal Thai Embassy and Counselor can play a crucial role by cooperating with the immigration and police authorities of certain countries where most Thai women are arrested in order to ensure prompt support and assistance at the point of arrest. This includes the provision of professional interpreters, legal advice, legal representation and means to communicate with their family.

## ***3) Future research***

To further understand the circumstances of Thai female drug importation, the different tactics used by criminal groups, and risk factors, future research should explore:

- The situations of Thai women imprisoned for drug importation in a boarder context, particularly in countries where the majority of Thai women are arrested.
- The nature of drug importation offences committed by Thai women in Thailand (in order to understand the similarities and differences between the national and international contexts).

- Perceptions of and challenges faced by government agencies such as law enforcement officials, the Royal Thai embassy, and immigration authorities in preventing and combating women's involvement in the illegal international drug trade.

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