

Taboos That Kill: Stigma and Abortion in Thailand

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Conservative anti-abortion beliefs are commonplace in Thailand and planted into the minds of Thai women from a young age. The stigma around abortion throws up barriers to access for those who need it, and exacts a psychological toll on those who opt for it.

When you bring up the issue of “abortion” in Thailand, it often doesn’t take long before words like “sin”, “murder”, and “ghost baby” pop up.

This was the case for 35-year-old NGO worker Kuligarn Jintakanon when she decided to go through with the procedure after accidentally falling pregnant twelve years ago.

“I was shocked, I didn’t know what to do especially since I already had a one-year-old daughter that I was struggling to raise. My mom even had to quit her full-time job to help me take care of her,” she tells *New Naratif*.

“So I consulted my boyfriend and family until we all concluded that an abortion is the only logical solution.”

Kuligarn took a few days off work and made the nearly three-hour trip down to Bangkok from Rayong province, where she lived. When she got to The Asian Center for Population and Community Development Association (PDA), her sister and boyfriend were told to wait outside the main entrance.

From this point on, it was patients only.

“I was terrified the whole time and the environment in the waiting room didn’t help. All the other women there were also evidently stressed—some were crying,” she says.

But nothing could compare to her terror upon entering the operating room, Kuligarn recalls.

“The nurse was so, so mean, which made me even more scared. However, when I finally got on the chair with the leg holders, the doctor promptly came into the operation room and the procedure was done within just a few minutes. I didn’t even feel much pain.”

The procedure that Kuligarn had undergone was a vacuum aspiration, a process that takes approximately 15 minutes, where a vacuum is used to empty uterine contents through the cervix. It cost her a total of about THB5,000 (about US\$160), including transportation.

“That was really tough on me because money was really tight then,” she says.

The process itself took less than a day, but Kuligarn says her road to recovery took many, many years.

Abortion laws in Thailand

As stated in Sections 301-305 of the Penal Code, the performance of abortions in Thailand is generally prohibited—anyone caught breaking the law could be punished with up to three years in prison and/or a fine of up to THB6,000 (US\$185).

However, there are circumstances in which abortions are legally allowed, such as when the pregnancy poses a threat to the woman's health (whether it be physical or mental), or if the pregnancy is a result of sexual violence.

Regardless of the law, both safe and unsafe abortions are common among Thai communities of all socioeconomic backgrounds. According to a [2014 study](#) by the Thai Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, about 300,000 to 400,000 legal and illegal abortions are performed in Thailand each year.

It's a large number, but abortion still remains a huge taboo in the country, and society is ready to demonise any woman who undergoes it. No one knows this better than Supeecha Baotip, the founder of TamTang, an NGO that provides women information about safe abortions online and via telephone.

"They're scared out of their minds, but at the same time they're desperate"

"So many women that contact us to ask about options ask if they would be murderers, if they'd be able to have kids again after the procedure, or whether they'll be haunted by ghost babies," she says.

"They're scared out of their minds, but at the same time they're desperate. Some women tell me they don't care if they die, they just can't continue their pregnancy."

This distress comes from the fact that these beliefs—that women are as good as murderers when they opt for abortion—are ingrained in the minds of most Thai women because it's what they've been taught their entire lives, explains Supeecha.

"Abortion is murder"

Given that [approximately 94% of the kingdom's population](#) identify as Theravada Buddhists, much of the debate around the subject stems from religious traditions and social thought.

"Abortion is murder, which is a violation of the first Buddhist precept (the religion's most important system of morality comprises of five precepts) which states that thou shall not kill living things," says the revered Master Monk Chonpicha Polayano, who's been a monk in Dhammamongkol Temple in Bangkok since 1996, in an interview with *New Naratif*.

"Even if the laws change, completely legalising abortion, the sinner will still be punished for their actions... They will have to pay for their karma, no matter how many lifetimes, before they even have a chance at enlightenment," he explains. "This is the truth. It's not a discussion or a debate."

"My sister and mum used to tell me that they can see vengeful spirits crawling all over my body. Eventually I ended up believing I was haunted too"

After her procedure, Kuligarn described feelings of immense guilt, shame, and depression.

"I went to the temple compulsively for years afterwards. I already felt terrible but the people around

me made it worse because they kept reminding me of my “sin,” she says.

“I initially didn’t believe in ‘ghost babies’, but my family did. My sister and mum used to tell me that they can see vengeful spirits crawling all over my body. Eventually I ended up believing I was haunted too.”

Stories of vengeful “ghost babies” coming to haunt women who have chosen to get abortions are commonly told to young girls by parents, teachers, and religious leaders in a bid to bind them to the “moral path”.

“Ghosts babies and vengeful spirits are real. Just because we don’t have the mind power to see them with our naked eye doesn’t mean they’re not there,” Master Monk Chonpicha tells *New Naratif* firmly.

A more contemporary rendition of this belief tells women they’ll experience “roadblocks” in their lives as punishment for the sins they’ve committed.

When Kuligarn finally summoned the courage to tell a coworker about her abortion, she was told, “Now you’re never going to be successful. Your life is going to be really hard from now on.”

“Anytime life gets hard, you will think back to your sin and know in your heart that this all your fault,” says Monk Chonpicha.

At the doctor’s mercy

Moralistic judgments and prejudice against abortion bleeds into the medical and academic world too, throwing up more barriers to abortion services in Thailand.

“Most gynaecologists refuse to perform abortions just because they don’t want to. It’s really up to each doctor’s discretion,” says Dr Nithiwat Saengruang, a Bangkok gynaecologist who regularly performs legal abortions.

“Sometimes I get a little angry for a patient who has been sent to me from another hospital in another province due to a doctor’s personal belief. They refused to perform the procedure even though she’s under 15 (making it legal to perform abortions) or has been raped and even has an official police report as proof,” he said.

But Dr Nithiwat also understands their point of view because he, too, was once anti-abortion. “Growing up in a Buddhist society, I saw abortion as a sin. I had this image in my head that women who opt for it are uneducated and that procedures were exclusively carried out in dark, sketchy apartments,” he says.

His stance did not waver all through medical school. “They didn’t teach me about abortions in medical school. I didn’t know there were safe methods of performing one,” he recalls. “I used to think: I’m a *doctor*, how could I do *that*?”

“It doesn’t matter who you are, this can happen to anyone”

This all changed one day after Dr Nithiwat started working, when one of his colleges, a nurse, was rushed into the emergency room in a puddle of her own blood. Panicked about her unplanned pregnancy, she’d taken a knock-off abortion pill in a desperate attempt to terminate it in secret.

“She was in a state of shock, couldn’t speak properly and was heavily bleeding from her vagina.

Nobody knew she was pregnant before then.” The medical team was unable to save her.

Dr Nithiwat recalls how shaken he’d felt witnessing a close colleague pass away in front of him for such a reason. “It made me reconsider my beliefs. This woman is in the industry that’s a sister to my own. I knew she wasn’t ignorant nor a bad woman,” he says.

“It finally dawned on me that this [choosing an abortion] was the best option for her. It doesn’t matter who you are, this can happen to anyone.”

The fight for choice

Due to both religious and social stigma, many women, like Dr Nithiwat’s colleague, are forced to turn to non-qualified providers, clinics, or knock-off medications instead.

In fact, according to a report by the Thailand’s Women’s Health and Reproductive Rights Foundation, [most abortions performed in Thailand are done “underground”](#). This results in a [40% complication rate](#) and a fatality rate of about 300 in every 100,000 abortions—a number that is over 300% higher than most developed countries.

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In recent years, there have been many attempts to change both the law and social mindsets. These efforts are often spearheaded by the Referral System for Safe Abortion (RSA)—a multidisciplinary group of pro-choice physicians, counselors, advocates, and nurses—that was established in 2014.

Kuligarn joined RSA three years ago, advocating for the legalisation of abortion. She’s also involved in RSA’s helpline, providing information to women with unplanned pregnancies over the phone.

“I want society to understand that abortion is family planning. It is not a crime and we are not evil for deciding to do it,” she says.

“And to any woman who is debating getting an abortion right now, I want to say that you’re not alone. I will always stand up for you and for this cause.”

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