

# Women's Work: A Photo Essay

by Charlotte Clar

## Introduction

Through my internship at the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) I learned how human trafficking, migration, and labour intersects with gender. I became especially interested in the division of gendered labour which I found to be more apparent in rural areas of South and South East Asia than I am used to seeing in Canada. The neighbourhood I was living in in Bangkok was extremely local but I found many women in the area working in professions I would deem in the public sphere. I wanted to ask them about their experiences with the labour they do every day and subtly find out if when they are working in this public sphere, how much labour at home they are expected to do as well. The conversations I had with the women were extremely eye opening and challenged my preconceptions of a clear division I had created in my mind about gendered labour. Due to my lack of Thai, I could not have had these conversations without my incredible friend, coworker, and now translator, Or. She deserves a huge thank you for selflessly assisting me translate the women's responses to my questions.

I have organized the women's responses around a photo essay and hope you enjoy the summary of our conversations and learn more about women's labour.

You can read the questions I asked below and see how they came together in the women's responses.

## Interview Questions:

1. What does a typical day look like for you from when you wake up to when you go to sleep?
2. What do you enjoy most about your day?
3. How long have you been working this job?
4. Do you think the wage you earn from this job is equal to that of what a man would get paid?
5. Do you feel the work you do everyday is valued? By friends, family, customers, society?
6. At what age did you start helping around the house as a child?
7. At what age did you get your first paid job?
8. Do you feel that you do a large amount of unpaid work? Is this willingly or by expectation?

## **P’Ning Yaowaluck**

*Head Chef and Restaurant Owner*



Depending on the day, P’Ning wakes up between 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning, sometimes as early as 3:00am to receive a meat delivery. She has a simple coffee for breakfast and has everything ready in the kitchen by 7:30am. From then until around 3:00pm she cooks customers’ orders and is in constant motion until around 3:00pm when she can sit down and have her own lunch. The last order is at 7:00pm which is when she closes the restaurant and begins washing the day’s pots and pans. This task usually takes an hour. In the evening P’Ning rests and eats her own dinner before preparing more food and materials needed for the next day’s work. For the most part she cooks all the food by herself, with several family members coming to help when needed. Otherwise they help with everything else, taking orders from customers, packing up the food, serving customers at the restaurant, and delivering to customers in the neighbourhood.

P’Ning told me she learned to cook by herself. Watching her prepare the food is like watching a machine in motion that doesn’t stop. She is constantly stirring, adding ingredients, and moving around her outdoor kitchen. She can make anything her customers request off menu and only rarely looks up recipes online. She has been running this restaurant for around 30 years and says

she is never bored in the kitchen and finds cooking very fun. When her customers love her food it makes her very happy.

At home she does help with housework, but there are others in the household to share the labour. Additionally, for example, laundry is outsourced.

As one of 7 children, P’Ning began helping her mother at 13 years old with all tasks around the house, everything from dishes to cooking, which is how she gained a foundation of skills that would help her open her restaurant. Later, at 21 years old, she helped her aunt with a food cart stand they had near a local university selling drinks and Thai snacks.

Although I would place her around retirement age, she has no wish to slow down and instead is happy to keep going in fear of becoming useless. She doesn’t feel she overworks and is willing and happy to do the job. For now she closes the restaurant on Sundays, but in the future if she feels that she needs more of a break she might close on Saturdays too. Really, she says, if she feels the need to rest, she does.

## P'Jeh Ngeck

*Convenience Store Owner*



P'Jeh begins her day at 5:00am with a shower and a cup of coffee to open her store at 6:00am. Around 8:00am she'll either cook herself some breakfast or order from somewhere close by. Throughout the day she serves her customers who stop briefly to pick up a drink or snack. Sometimes folks around the neighbourhood stop by for a longer chat, sitting on the benches just outside the shop. She doesn't eat a big meal for lunch and instead chooses to continue snacking as people come in and out. She does, however, have an early dinner around 3:30-4:00pm and works for a few more hours servicing the after school and work crowd until she closes her shop around 8:00pm. After work she relaxes by scrolling on her phone or watching TV, a movie, YouTube until the episode/film/video ends, usually around 10:00pm.

P'Jeh explains that her mother has always owned a convenience type store and remembers helping her since grade 7 when her mother started selling at the market and she stayed at the shop. It was around this time that she began to help with the housework by doing laundry, cooking, and the dishes. She has never received a salary from her job, instead continued to live at

home where she helped her family and stayed in that role. Around 20 years ago she moved the store to its present location which is attached to the front of her house. She feels she is still able to do everything by herself and is happy to do so. She says her family is happy for her.

P’Jeh’s favourite part of her day is talking to her customers, she says it makes her happy because they are her friends. She has always enjoyed selling things and thinks she would be very bored if she was not busy.

## **P'Suphab Nimitravanich**

*Building Owner, Property Manager, Hotel Manager, and Landlady*



P'Suphab owns three buildings in the neighbourhood which keep her very busy every day. She wakes up between 7:00-8:00am and begins her day with a prayer in her Buddha room at home. She has breakfast and organizes her personal items and documents before coming to the office. Her daily tasks could include checking the buildings, sending emails, looking after bookings, and directing her employees. Sometimes she eats lunch at the office. Other days she has it at home or at a restaurant. Other tasks that take up time are going to the bank, other general office work, visiting with friends, taking care of customer needs, and answering questions. When she gets home in the evening she likes to relax by calling friends and watching TV before praying once more and going to bed.

The buildings P'Suphab owns were built between 20 and 30 years ago when she and her husband decided to start developing the neighbourhood on land they owned. She looks after everything and feels that a man doing her job wouldn't do it any different. She thinks that enjoying working with your colleagues is extremely important because they become like your family.

Her favourite part of her job is interacting with her customers by answering their questions and asking them questions, fulfilling requests, and recommending places to go or activities to do in Bangkok.

P'Suphab also told me that she did housework as a child, but now has no time so she has maids to look after her dog, do the housekeeping, cooking, and washing.

## Chanaradee Tupjaiharn (Jane)

*Cafe Owner, English Tutor, and Tarot Card Reader*



Not just a cafe owner, Jane has several interests that she has found ways to make a profit from. After she wakes up she comes down to open the shop, turn on the coffee machine, check the stock of the ice and milk and order more if needed, then opens the door. While she waits for customers to come in or order online, she keeps busy by updating their social media accounts, doing the accounting, buying anything the shop needs, and thinking of ways to improve. When customers come in she enjoys chatting with them since they enjoy that kind of interaction and she doesn't want to be a generic coffee shop. Her lunch is never at the same time each day as it depends on how busy the shop is, but dinner usually happens around 6:00-7:00pm after she has given it a good clean and closes the doors. In the evening she does her side jobs, English tutoring and tarot card reading.

In high school Jane studied abroad in Texas, USA. When she returned to Thailand for university she began teaching English so she wouldn't lose all the fluency she has gained, and has kept going for six years now. She teaches students between 4-6 hours a week, for 2 hour sessions at a



time. She uses a textbook, online resources, and television as her teaching materials which don't need much prep. She has found that teaching has indeed helped improve her grammar, reading, and speaking skills.

Other evenings Jane does tarot readings. There is real sincerity and belief in this medium in Thai culture and so she finds it a good way to make extra money. After taking a class to study the skill she has created an Instagram page to meet clients and then can schedule calls or in-person sessions at the coffee shop. Each session usually lasts around one hour and she also sometimes gets hired to work events.

When she does have free time in the evening Jane enjoys watching TV, movies, and YouTube. She also likes to wake up early, around 6:00am, to read novels.

Jane and her boyfriend have owned the coffee shop for nearly two years. She finds value in the work for herself and her customers, but admits her family would prefer her to have another profession that would make her more money. Although she has three jobs and no fixed income, she enjoys working for herself, manages her money carefully, and likes that all her jobs are her passions.

As a child her family had a domestic worker to help with the housework and taking care of her. However, during the financial crash her mother stopped working and stayed home so Jane helped out much more.

Jane was 18 when she got her first job teaching English, but before that enjoyed selling candy, treats, and toys to her friends at school. Overall Jane feels that she and her boyfriend share the domestic work equally. If one of them is busy or tired, the other will usually help more. She feels that she gets paid equally to men because she fights for that right and thinks that if bosses want good results they should pay their employees the same no matter your gender.

## **Orathai (Or) Meesin**

*Administrative Assistant*



Or wakes up around 7:00am to get ready for the day and heads out the door at 7:45am to get to the office at 8:00am when her job starts. She has a light breakfast when she gets to the office, either just some milk or a small serving of pork. She does a lot of admin work in the office that largely involves dealing with a lot of documents for the international employees' work permits. She eats lunch with her coworkers around noon. Some afternoons she does an English lesson for an hour with a coworker to help her improve her conversational skills. At 5:00pm she goes home. Sometimes she cooks for herself, other days she buys something on the way. She practices her English for around 30 minutes to one hour every evening and also enjoys video calling her family, especially her baby cousin. Before bed she will have a quick call with her boyfriend and then goes to sleep around 10:00pm.

As Or has only been in her position for three months she enjoys learning all the new tasks and talking with her coworkers. She feels that her wage is equal to that of a man because she is in an admin job, a traditionally female dominated profession. Or says this is because admin jobs are

very detail oriented and more common for women to do because you have to take care of people and women are good at that sort of thing, although men are able.

Or feels that her work is valued by the people around her, although not so much her family who would prefer her to be a teacher. She says that government teachers get good health benefits and make more money. Originally, Or started to train to become a teacher but changed her mind because of the salary. Her first job was part-time working with her parents, but didn't get paid. When she was around 9-11 years old her aunt opened a restaurant where she went to work for her getting 50 baht (\$2.00) every once in a while. When she was 12 she went to work at the local 7-11 another aunt managed until she left for university. Her monthly salary was between 7 000-9000 baht (\$285- \$370) per month. Many young people come to Bangkok for more opportunities and for a higher salary. Or says she has several aunts who work in the city.

As she is the oldest of four children, she says she's had to help her mother for as long as she can remember, since maybe around 5 years old, taking care of her siblings and other chores around the house.

Or says that many young people in specialized tracks go to university. Some choose the more famous ones, others the less expensive ones that are in smaller cities. Lots of people also go to job training schools to get a job right away. Or chose to go to university because of her mother who was very poor growing up, didn't go to school, and learned to read and write on her own. It was her mother who wanted more for her children and encourages them all to go to university. Or says that employers in Bangkok are looking for people with a Bachelor's degree, but ultimately decided to go to university for herself.