Searching for Security: Women's Collective Information Security Strategies in the Pursuit of *Farang* Partners in Pattaya, Thailand

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I report on two months of ethnographic fieldwork in a women's centre in Pattaya, Thailand and interviews with 76 participants. Findings, as they relate to information security, show how (i) women in Pattaya, often working in the sex and massage industries, perceived relationships with *farang*[1] men as their best, and sometimes only, option to achieve security; (ii) the strategies used by the women to appeal to a *farang* involved presenting themselves online; (iii) the women navigated a series of online security risks, such as scams and abuse, which shaped their search for a *farang*; (iv) the women developed collective security through knowledge-sharing to protect themselves and each other in their search for a *farang* partner. I situate this work in emerging information security scholarship within marginalised contexts.

CCS Concepts: • **Security and privacy** → **Social aspects of security and privacy**; • **Human-centered computing** → *Empirical studies in HCI*.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Digital Security, Marginalised communities, Thailand, Ethnographic research, Collective security practices, Technology in Global South, Trust and risk in digital contexts, Security for Sex Workers in Thailand

1 INTRODUCTION

Pattaya, a Thai tourist hub, is widely known for its sex and hospitality industries [7, 30, 39]. Women from poorer regions like Isan often migrate there seeking better prospects [5, 28], frequently viewing relationships with Western men, or *farang*, as a way out of poverty [42, 51, 56, 59]. While such partnerships may bring financial stability, they expose women to scams, exploitation, and physical risks like abuse and trafficking. This study explores how women respond to these threats through collective knowledge and security practices.

Growing research in security and privacy addresses marginalised contexts [63], such as women's privacy strategies in South Asia [48], scapegoating in Lebanon [32], and household dynamics in Jordan [1]. However, Pattaya's sex and massage industry remains underexplored. This study extends privacy and security research in sex work, which is mostly Western-centric [3, 34, 46], with few exceptions [57].

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Pattaya (Jan–Mar 2024), following a scoping trip (May–Jun 2023) to Bangkok and Pattaya. This involved participant observation in women's centres and interviews with 60 Thai women and 16 staff and stakeholders. The research explored **how Thai women in Pattaya navigate a variety of security and privacy risks** in their daily lives, yielding five distinct contributions: i) Many women, migrants from poorer Thai regions, often over 40, some with histories of abuse, **sought the security of a *farang*** partners. ii) Their search strategies brought **specific security risks**: scams, trafficking, and the need to present themselves online in ways they

[1] "*Farang*" is the Thai word for White, Western foreigner

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believed appealed to Western men, while seeking and appropriating platforms they considered 'Western'. iii) They developed **knowledge-sharing practices grounded in collective security**, fostered in women's centre relationships and extended online. These included detecting scammers, identifying a 'good' *farang*, and using image-editing tools and Generative AI to improve online appeal. iv) **Computer and security education** at the centres addressed women's lived, situated security concerns, and was taught by educators with similar experiences. v) Findings have distinct **implications for technology design and security education**. For these women, security was not about securing a device, but about how technology could support their goals.

2 CONTEXT AND RELATED WORK

Pattaya is one of Thailand's top tourist destinations, with around 27 million visitors projected in 2024 [13, 30]. Its rapid, unplanned growth in the 1960s–70s, driven by the US military presence during the Vietnam War, helped fuel the city's sex industry [30, 39]. Migration to tourist hubs like Pattaya is often seen by rural and poorer Thai families as a route to increased income [28]. Many women in this study had moved to Pattaya to support their families through increased earning potential.

2.1 The (In)Securities of Sex Work

Many women in Pattaya take up sex or massage work, often the best-paying jobs for those with limited education. While this study did not centre on sex work, most participants had been or were involved in it. This often left them isolated and stigmatised, competing for clients and trying to appease bar owners and *mamasans*, who controlled working hours and behaviour [41]. Women underwent regular blood and urine tests, where positive STD results meant job loss. Accounts of abuse, threats, trafficking, and even murder were common.

As sex work is illegal in Thailand, workers remain excluded from the formal economy and receive little protection. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed these insecurities when Pattaya's tourism abruptly stopped [21], leaving many without income or government support [4]. Moving online offered a way to continue earning while reducing physical risks. Similar to Western contexts [3, 34], online sex work enabled direct negotiation, removed intermediaries, reduced meeting costs, and offered privacy and anonymity, helping to avoid shame and social exclusion [62].

HCI and security research has increasingly examined sex workers' use of digital platforms. Some focus on the shift to online work during COVID-19 in the Global North [19], or how workers use digital tools to find clients, vet them, and improve safety and earnings [3, 6, 49, 50]. More recent work explores digital security practices. Studies show sex workers using shared networks, anonymised accounts, and separate devices to protect themselves [3, 34, 47, 63]. Rights-based organisations also play a role in supporting safer practices [57, 58]. In [34], European sex workers were found to be adept at managing security, though many tools failed to meet their needs. However, this body of research mostly reflects Global North contexts, where sex work may be legal, less stigmatised, and workers are more digitally literate [22, 46]. This study adds to the growing body of work on the Global South. For instance, [46] documented how Bangladeshi brothel workers used collective strategies to navigate security despite low digital literacy.

2.2 Marginalisation and Security

Participants were marginalised through economic hardship, abuse, and the social stigma attached to their work. This shaped their digital reliance and heightened security concerns. Existing research highlights the link between social and digital aspects of security. For example, South Asian women employed strategies to shield their privacy from family members [48]. In Lebanon, marginalised groups like refugees and LGBTQIA+ people were scapegoated by the state,

leading to collective digital security practices [32, 33]. In Hong Kong, Anti-ELAB protesters relied on shared security practices [2], and among the homeless, financial instability shaped their privacy habits [53]. These examples show how social marginalisation intersects with digital insecurity. Often, support networks fill in for systemic failures. For example, migrant domestic workers relied on informal protections [54], while refugees and queer individuals turned to trusted networks when facing social, financial, or language barriers [8, 16, 26, 29, 52].

This work is also informed by research on digital security in abusive contexts. Survivors of intimate partner violence, for example, adapted privacy strategies across stages of abuse [14, 15, 31, 61], showing how everyday insecurity drives innovation in digital safety practices.

2.3 Security in the Mundane

Everyday security refers to how people experience and enact security in daily life [9, 38], involving routine "micro practices" within social and institutional contexts [25]. I follow [38] in viewing everyday security across spatial (non-political spaces), temporal (routines), and affective (felt insecurities) dimensions. Drawing on sociological concepts like ontological security, or the need for predictability and reliability in life [10, 18, 36, 40, 44], I understand how routines can foster security. This approach shifts focus from state-centric security to how marginalised individuals build and disrupt security through informal means [12, 23].

3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This study was informed by a one-month scoping trip in May – June 2023 to Bangkok and Pattaya to ensure contextual sensitivity. Later fieldwork was conducted between January – March 2024. During the scoping trip and fieldwork, I engaged with communities and visited women's centres supporting low-income women and children, including Christian missionary, rehabilitation, and education-focused organisations. These centres became key sites for building trust and engaging with women, staff, volunteers, and donors.

The centre where interviews and observations took place, henceforth known as *the centre*, has a mission to support women and discourage involvement in sex work. Its main activity is weekday language classes (English, German, French), taught by Western volunteers. Other offerings include massage/salon training, basic digital skills, and weekly 'town halls' with dance, announcements, and talks (e.g. mental health, climate change), often attended by donors. One-on-one sessions also address legal and social topics. Observations occurred during three types of events at the centre: classes, break times, and town halls. I informally interacted with participants during classes, observed social dynamics at lunch (especially between women and staff/volunteers), and attended town halls to witness interactions with external guests. Field notes were taken throughout. In addition to observant practices, a total of 76 participants took part: 60 Thai women and 16 stakeholders (e.g. staff, missionaries). Participants were over 18, identified as women, and attended the centre. Recruitment occurred informally through conversations and peer referrals. Interviews were held individually or in groups depending on preference and ranged between 22 and 105 minutes. Interviews were conducted privately at the centre, using a semi-structured guide co-developed with staff. They were held in Thai or English, with a translator present for Thai sessions. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed, and anonymised.

3.1 Ethics

Ethics approval was obtained from my institutional committee. Participation was voluntary and informed by materials in Thai and English. Translators confirmed comprehension before interviews. The study was introduced at a centre-wide

meeting and through weekly updates and classroom visits. Identifiable data was not collected, and all materials were anonymised and stored securely. Sensitive topics (e.g. violence, trauma) were avoided to minimise distress. Participants were reminded they could pause or withdraw at any point. Free counselling was available post-interview, though not requested. The dataset is not publicly available due to confidentiality concerns. Instead, I include selected pseudonymised quotes. Further, researcher positionality shaped all aspects of the project. I identify as a Western woman, who has prior regional experience working with marginalised groups, but do not share participants' lived realities. I also took care to resist deficit framings, emphasising women's agency and resilience [37, 60].

3.2 Data Analysis

I followed an inductive, reflexive approach grounded in ethnographic methods [20]. I digitised and coded data in Excel, with early codes refined as new patterns emerged. Themes like *Collective Security* were broken into sub-themes (e.g. online knowledge sharing). Only I have access to the raw data.

3.3 Limitations

Translation may have introduced minor interpretation issues. Further, data collection at a single site limits generalisability, though this depth is appropriate for ethnography. Some participants may have also withheld information due to the sensitivity of the topic. Researcher positionality also shaped interpretation, though reflexivity remained central.

4 FINDINGS

I present findings in line with the themes constructed through the analysis, focusing on how the women sought *farang* partners. *Farang* marriages have become more common in recent decades due to long-distance travel, mobile phones, internet dating, and money transfers. These developments enable *farang* men to frequently visit Thailand while allowing Thai women to connect with interested *farang* men [35, 56]. The men are typically from Western countries [56, 59], while the women are usually from Isan, Thailand's Northeastern region that is considered the poorest area in the country [35, 59]. Marrying a Thai woman provides men with domestic and caring support [42, 56], while marrying a *farang* man is seen as a route out of poverty and towards improved social mobility and quality of life for Thai women [42, 56, 59].

To explain why these women saw *farang* relationships as a path to security, I first discuss the everyday insecurities they faced in Pattaya, followed by their perceived benefits of *farang* relationships. I then describe how they sought *farang* men online and how they developed collective strategies to protect themselves from related risks.

4.1 The Insecurities of Working in Pattaya

Many women came to Pattaya out of financial need, as sex and massage work offered higher pay than agriculture or domestic labour. However, working in Pattaya, known as "sin city," often brought shame. To avoid *losing face*[2], many concealed their work from family, fearing reputational damage. Some, upon their families finding out they worked in Pattaya, were cut off from loved ones despite supporting them financially, leaving women feeling used or reduced to income sources.

[2] *Saving face* and *losing face* are concepts in Thai and other Asian cultures that encompass being aware of one's own and others' reputations. *Saving face* includes acting in a way that preserves dignity and honour and is vital for maintaining various types of relationships, including business, family, and casual encounters. Contrarily, *losing face* refers to when an individual ruins or damages their reputation or credibility, often leading to embarrassment, shame, or social exclusion.

Reputational risks further denied them emotional and social safety nets. For example, women were often marketed online by bar owners or *mamasans* without their full consent. Weekly photos of the women appeared on Facebook and TikTok, typically in sexualised poses. V4[3] remarked: *"Most don't know how the photos are used [...] It's the 'land of smiles' but you don't see a lot of smiles."* Bar owners also controlled how women dressed and were portrayed. Many participants feared being identified by abusive ex-partners or judged by family if these images were to be found. S1, a technology teacher at the centre, noted: *"One woman saw how public the images were [...] She became worried and wanted to delete it, but I told them they couldn't."* Public exposure could also make it harder to exit the industry or apply for visas and jobs in the future.

Women also faced constant physical risks, including STDs, violence, and job loss due to the illegality of sex work. Some shifted to massage work for safety, offering services like *happy endings* based on financial need. Yet, both settings were competitive and toxic. Living on-site in bars or parlours left women without privacy and exposed to conflict. Tourists' assumptions that all women were sex workers also led to harassment in public spaces.

4.2 Perceived Benefits of a *Farang* Partner

Compared to unstable and insecure work, *farang* partners were seen as sources of financial and emotional security. P24, from Udon Thani, shared: *"I was tired. Then I saw our neighbour, she has a foreign husband and her life looked better."* These relationships often involved financial support from the *farang* for both the woman and her family. While transactional, women did not equate them with sex work. P28 said: *"I wish I could support myself, but support from a foreigner can change your life."* Because of the financial security perceived from these relationships, some women also viewed dating or marrying a *farang* man as a way to access education or migrate abroad. P17 noted: *"My boyfriend helps me financially [...] If we go back to Norway, I won't have to start from zero."* Others sought emotional support, such as P12, who explained: *"Foreign men don't care if you have kids [...] they generally support you."* Women also adapted their roles to align with perceived foreign preferences, seeing these relationships as offering more respect, reduced physical risks, and restored self-worth.

4.2.1 Finding a Farang *Partner Online.* Finding a suitable *farang* man involved assessing whether a potential partner was financially able and willing to support both the woman and her family. Willingness to pay for a visit abroad, for instance, was seen as a signal of genuine investment. Women also discussed *farangs'* professions and incomes to decide whether to pursue certain relationships. For example, P8 emphasised her appreciation for her *farang* husband who helped her support her mother. Although some women described relationships with *farang* men as also rooted in care and emotional support, for many their economic goals were central. However, finding a *farang* man that would provide financial support and a positive relationship was challenging for many women.

Consequentially, women turned to digital tools to help them attract *farang* men, particularly Facebook and Facebook Messenger. They connected via Pattaya-specific dating and nightlife groups. Facebook became a platform for initiating contact and presenting themselves to potential partners. However, online engagement carried risks. Many women interacted with sex tourists, facing dangers similar to those in physical sex work. Despite this, they saw online platforms as comparatively safer and more private ways to pursue their goals.

While bar marketing was beyond their control, women used Facebook to construct more self-directed profiles. They sent photos of themselves learning English or spending time with Westerners to *farang* men. I also noted that women frequently asked to take photos with foreign teachers at the centre to share with online contacts. These actions were

[3]Participants are classified as follows: Thai women at the centre ("P"), centre staff ("S"), volunteers ("V"), and external stakeholders ("E")

meant to convey cultural knowledge and readiness for Western relationships. For example, women's Facebook pages were curated to highlight assets like language skills and adaptability. E2, a North American expat, shared that women were learning AI tools to whiten their skin or add Western features to their photos. They believed this made them more appealing and less associated with poverty.

4.3 Collective Protection from *Farangs*

While the search for a *farang* partner was individual, women relied heavily on collective practices for security. Lacking traditional familial or support networks, women turned to peer knowledge-sharing through online groups and the centre. For instance, P5, a 28-year-old from Isan, explained: *"Some [women] have experience getting foreigners to date and visas to go abroad, so we will [talk] about that. We can share about these things [at the centre]."* For P5 and others, security was found in learning from women with prior experiences. For example, she had married a German *farang* she met online and planned to move abroad with him. The centre was a place where she learned increased information on living abroad and also advice on what to do if the relationship went wrong, such as if abuse occurred. Both successful and failed *farang* relationships fed into a collective knowledge base that the women trusted.

4.3.1 Identifying Scammers. One key area of knowledge-sharing involved identifying scams. Many participants had encountered fake *farang* accounts, often involving requests for money under false pretences, such as visa fees or taxes on fictitious gifts. Though aware of scams through shared stories, women still engaged online, viewing it as safer than physical meetings. Over time, they developed an understanding of scam patterns. P9, a 46-year-old from Isan, shared: *"There are many different types of scammers [...] [Some] will say 'I've flown to see you, I've reached the airport already.' But then, once he arrives, he will [...] say he is being evicted and that I should send money [...] but he's just trying to get money out of us."* Other women reported scam accounts that were fronts for human trafficking, where a scam *farang* would ask to meet a woman at a specific location for a date or under the pretence of facilitating visa or travel arrangements.

In response, women circulated scam narratives to educate one another. P47, from Isan, managed a Facebook and TikTok page to share stories and warn others. She promoted this page at the centre and posted scammer photos to protect women: *"[The women] wouldn't know [about common scams] and they would transfer the money [to the scammers]. [...] So they take a photo and post it in the group [describing the scam] so that everyone knows they [the men] are scammers."* Similarly, women also joined groups on Line[4] and Facebook to share scam experiences and learn how to avoid them. These digital communities not only provided practical advice but fostered solidarity. For example, P12 had her identity stolen by a scammer *farang* she met online, who threatened to kill her children if she were to report the scam to the police. P12 found support through an online group that allowed her, amongst other women, to feel less alone in her vulnerability and led to increased agency through knowledge-sharing and reinforced protective practices.

4.3.2 Teaching at The Centre. The centre offered 10-day computer and two-day mobile phone classes covering basic tools such as Word, Excel, and messaging apps. While intended to help women leave sex work, fieldwork revealed these classes served a broader function: enhancing women's ability to navigate online spaces and mitigate relational risks. S1, the computer teacher, had herself been in a *farang* marriage. After discovering her German husband had faked their marriage documents, she was forced to return to Thailand. This experience shaped her teaching: *"I've not seen a good relationship. Having a [Thai] woman is like owning a computer. Tomorrow, you [the farang] need an updated version. So*

[4]Line (https://line.me/) is a popular messaging application in Asia.

you go buy a new one." As a result, her classes emphasised digital protection, such as how to block contacts or detect scams—rather than technical skills alone.

Further, V1, a volunteer, was instructed to teach the women how to use ChatGPT. Despite their limited digital literacy, the women eagerly asked ChatGPT questions relevant to their goals, such as *"how to get married quickly?"* or visa-related topics. V1 worried the women might struggle to critically assess AI-generated answers but acknowledged their eagerness to use any tool that might help.

Language classes also supported women in communicating with *farangs*. Instructors taught conflict-management phrases like: *"I do not like the tone you are using. Can you speak nicer, please?"* to help women assert themselves. Additionally, a legal workshop hosted over 40 lawyers who offered one-to-one consultations on the legal implications of marrying a *farang*, covering topics like visa requirements, family law, and pensions.

5 DISCUSSION

This section connects the findings to broader understandings of security and technology, foregrounding the collective and situated practices through which women in this study navigated insecurity in Pattaya. I focus on how social relationships, shared experiences, and digital tools shaped strategies for achieving security in everyday life.

5.1 Collective Security in the Everyday

Women in Pattaya faced intersecting financial, emotional, and physical insecurities shaped by socioeconomic constraints and gendered expectations. Many saw relationships with *farang* partners as a path to stability [55, 56], though these often introduced new vulnerabilities, including coercion, pressure to conform to Western ideals, and exploitation [36, 44]. These challenges were compounded by family betrayal, peer bullying, and rejection when financial support was withheld.

Women's pursuit of financial stability through relationships with *farang* men offered a route out of poverty and work in Pattaya but also exposed them to scams and risks of trafficking or death. In response, women developed collective security practices using technologies available to them, including communities to help identify scammers, editing images to appeal to Western ideals, and using generative AI for relationship and visa information. For these women, technology was a tool to attain financial and ontological security in support of their long-goals.

The centre supported these strategies, prioritising physical and financial security over digital data management. Technology education focused on navigating online relationships, recognising manipulation, and self-protection. Lessons, led by women with lived experience of abuse, migration, and exploitation, highlighted a grounded approach to the realities of life with a *farang* partner. This gendered, community-driven approach enabled women to shift from victimhood to agency. Integrating technology into daily life, they created knowledge systems tailored to their lived insecurity [11, 24, 27]. These findings challenge universalist security models by highlighting locally grounded strategies shaped by gendered and economic realities [17, 24, 45], aligning with feminist and critical security scholarship [9, 27].

5.2 Situated Security in Pattaya

Building on calls to study security in non-WEIRD contexts [22], this study shows how women developed contextual understandings of digital security. Perceptions were shaped not by platform security but by whether tools helped women achieve goals like attracting a reliable *farang* partner or avoiding abuse. Women engaged in digital self-presentation practices to align with perceived Western ideals, editing photos to lighten skin or appear more 'Western.' They also marketed themselves in their Tinder and Facebook profiles and used tools like ChatGPT based on whether they offered

actionable advice about relationships. Their perception of *farang* relationships and methods of finding such relationships was a survival strategy shaped by economic needs and imaginaries about the West. Thus, technology use was driven not by privacy or anonymity, but by perceived utility in securing better futures.

Therefore, findings show digital security must be understood as socially situated and context-dependent. Platforms like Facebook and Tinder were environments through which women negotiated their goals, not neutral tools. Security practices cannot be separated from these platforms' symbolic and practical links to the West. Therefore, I extend prior work cautioning against treating non-WEIRD contexts as equivalent [22]. While findings reflect one centre in Pattaya, they show everyday digital practices are shaped by local meanings, relational needs, and geopolitics.

5.3 Implications and Future Work

5.3.1 Security Through Appropriated Technology. Women's security concerns were rooted in social and economic realities but manifested through technological risks, including online scams, coercive digital marketing, and manipulation. Participants adapted technologies to serve their needs, such as sharing scammer profiles in online groups, validating or critiquing potential *farang* partners, editing photos to match Western ideals, and using AI tools for visas, romance, and expectations. These appropriations show technology use driven by outcomes, not security protocols. Despite potential risks, women used these platforms for their benefits and participants preferred risky online interactions over face-to-face encounters where physical coercion was more likely.

5.3.2 Access Benefit vs Access Control. The centre emphasised access to benefit over control. Drawing on Ribot and Peluso [43], education focused on tangible gains like finding a supportive *farang* partner, not on data protection or passwords. This contrasted with Western volunteers hesitant to teach tools like ChatGPT due to misinformation concerns. Without relevant lived experience, they took risk-averse, access-controlling stances. Centre staff, many with migration, abuse, or scam experience, focused on equipping women to navigate technologies realistically to achieve goals. Therefore, by centring women's realities, digital literacy was taught not as an abstract skill but as navigating power dynamics. Technology became a route to economic and relational security, reflecting grounded, community-led approaches. Women adapted tools and created shared practices to build security in insecure contexts, such as Pattaya. Their strategies challenge universalist security models, pointing to relational, situated understandings of security.

6 CONCLUSION

This study shows collective, everyday security among women in Pattaya is deeply tied to technology, transnational relationships, and local economics. Insecurity was addressed not just individually but through shared practices rooted in trust, gender, and experience. By exploring security in this context, I contribute to calls for situated approaches to digital security. For many in insecure contexts, security is not a fixed technical framework but a dynamic, relational process driven by pursuit of benefit rather than fear of risk.

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