

It is inaccurate to say that slavery no longer exists in Thailand.

According to history, slavery in Thailand has been in existence since the Jenla Period (1847) when slaves were traded legally. This form of slavery was abolished in 1905 by King Rama V. But for human rights lawyer Siriwan Vongkietpaisan, slavery is still alive and well in modern-day Thailand.

"Slavery still exists in almost every corner of Bangkok ... where households and factories still see the inhumane treatment of maids and factory workers who are living and working in slave-like conditions with no legal protection," she said.

Slavery back in the ancient times evokes images of chains and shackles and flogging, while modern slavery comes in the form of inhumane treatment and hidden cruelty, where the rights of workers and domestic maids are taken away from them.

Article 312 in the Criminal Code defines enslaving as putting an individual into a slave-like condition for trading and commercial purposes.

The 14-year-old housemaid who Siriwan sets to help out and win her lawsuit is a classic example. She was kept in the house and was not allowed to go outside or contact family and friends back home. The girl worked seven days a week, from 4am to midnight, and received just two meals a day - old, hard rice from the refrigerator with leftover dishes or chilli paste. Her salary was 2,000 baht a month, but she never received any money.

"Interestingly, ancient slavery laws did not give masters unlimited rights to do whatever they pleased. The old laws also contained a penalty clause for employers and masters who overly and brutally mistreated their slaves. The slavery law used during the reign of King Rama I - some 200 years ago - required that all masters had to instruct their slaves before handing out punishment," she related.

"The master must treat their slaves with empathy. The workload must be reasonable, not according to the master's unbound demands. A penalty must be executed moderately to discourage killing or harm. It is a crime if a slave dies from any physical penalty issued by a master and he/she will be penalised for excessive and irrational actions according to this slavery law," she added.

In the modern world, slavery became even more complex. "I have observed unbelievable cruelty and torture being done in the slave labour cases over the years. It is as if employers do not think that their employees are human. Employers impose absolute rights over the bodies of their workers. These enslaved labourers do not have the right to make any decisions, travel or do anything they like," she said.

Many defendants are not sadistic or psychopaths as some people would imagine. "You must expect these employers as having deranged personalities ... some of them are sane and rational. They just do not understand how it is wrong to penalise their employees excessively. They simply believe they can do whatever they want with them. And they are surprised that there are anti-slavery laws to make things right."

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