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Transitioning Thailand: Techno-professionalism and nation-building in the transgender entertainment industry

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Abstract

The workplace is a key site through which sex and gender are organizationally produced and unequal gender relations take place. Technologies, which are embedded with and impacting gendered power relations, are also integral to work and workplaces worldwide. As nation-states promote technologies and rebrand themselves, how do technologies catalyze new forms of gendered embodiment and work—and how might this contribute to a nation-state's development plans and rebranding efforts? How do the intersections between states, labor, and technologies also reify inequalities, both in and beyond workplace settings? Based on 14 months of fieldwork and interviews with 62 participants, this article analyzes how Thai transgender women's work in the entertainment industry simultaneously advances technological growth and national rebranding efforts. In 2016, the Thai state launched "Thailand 4.0," an economic plan centered on technological growth, alongside efforts to restore its reputation from a sex tourism destination. In this context, Thai transgender entertainers promote what I call *"techno-professionalism,"* or professionalism that is not only enhanced by technologies, but that also supports state development plans and rebranding efforts. The concept of techno-professionalism underscores how technologies

figure centrally into new iterations of state development and nation-branding promoted in global workplaces, adding to our understanding of the linkages between gender, labor, and national development. By highlighting how state development plans intersect with technologies and norms of professionalism, this article reveals how the economy and professions are made up of intimate social relations, including gendered technologies and gendered social roles.

1 | INTRODUCTION

At Calypso Cabaret in Bangkok, Thailand, the figure of Marilyn Monroe appears on stage, clad in a silver sequined dress, high heels, and a blonde wig. Two men donning black masks and business suits drape diamond bracelets and necklaces upon the eager Marilyn, as she marvels at the sparkling jewelry. The performer fervently lip-syncs "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend," and "Material Girl," embodying glamorous consumption and an iteration of classic American femininity. The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) has featured several of the country's transgender cabarets in promotional websites and international tours, describing the show's "stunning costumes, expensive sets and great sound systems"—as well as the "surpris[ing]" beauty of its transgender performers (TAT, 2020). As nation-states promote technologies (Ong, 2010), and rebrand themselves from "tarnished international reputations" (Bandelj & Wherry, 2011, p: 7), how do technologies catalyze new forms of gendered embodiment and labor—and how might this contribute to a nation-state's development plans and rebranding efforts? How do the intersections between states, labor, and technologies also reify inequalities, both in and beyond workplace settings?

The workplace is a key site through which sex and gender are organizationally produced and unequal gender relations take place (Connell, 2010, 2022; Mears, 2014). Technologies, which are embedded with and impacting gendered power relations (Wajcman, 2010, p: 149), are also integral to work and workplaces worldwide (Cross, 2012; David, 2015; Levy, 2023; Radhakrishnan, 2009; Ramamurthy, 2004; Robertson, 2010). For instance, workers such as bar hostesses in Vietnam may use "technologies of embodiment," including skin lightening cream and plastic surgeries, to strategically enact new formulations of gender, class, and race, as well as gain social and economic capital for themselves and the nation-state (Hoang, 2014, p: 517). Technologies of embodiment impact not just labor roles and gendered/racialized/classed embodiment, but also the nation-state's political and economic growth (see also Ong, 2010; Wong, 2011).

States, composed of often contradictory "structures, discourses, and practices" (Puri, 2014, p: 345), facilitate and depend on labor roles that are differentially assigned to cisgender and transgender people in a global order (David, 2015). The term "gendered labor" has pinpointed the global stratification of work based on gender (Moghadam, 1999, p: 379). In addition to performing certain forms of work, cisgender and transgender women are tied to processes of nation-building, as race and gender are assembled into state processes to become part of the national imaginary (Ochoa, 2014). Such "gendered nationalism" shows how nation-states have sought to rebrand themselves through various idealized feminine norms, which are produced in spaces such as national beauty pageants (Balogun, 2012).

More broadly, states have engaged in nation branding to build their image and assert their place on the world stage (Jordan, 2014, p: 284), with a nation's brand encompassing "a complex bundle of images, meanings,

associations and experiences in the minds of people" (Fan, 2010, p: 98). Nation branding is a form of nation-building, helping to increase economic growth, as well as augment national visibility and credibility (Aronczyk, 2013, p: 3). As nation-building is often multi-faceted and inconsistent, so too is nation branding. However, scarce research has analyzed not only how gendered labor figures into national rebranding efforts, but also how technologies—as part of state development plans—simultaneously converge with gendered labor and nation-branding.

This article trains our attention on the embodied and organizational intersections of gendered labor, technologies, and state development plans. Based on 14 months of fieldwork and interviews with 62 participants, it analyzes how Thai transgender women's work in the entertainment industry simultaneously represents Thai technological growth and national rebranding efforts. In 2016, the Thai state launched "Thailand 4.0," an economic plan centered on technological growth, alongside efforts to restore its reputation from a sex tourism destination. In this context, Thai transgender entertainers promote what I call "*techno-professionalism*," or professionalism that is not only enhanced by technologies, but that also supports state development plans geared toward technological growth and skilled labor. Techno-professionalism is constructed through technologies in workplaces, including technologies of embodiment, as well as ideals of professionalism that are distinguished from work cast as unskilled, illegitimate, or sexualized. Techno-professionalism involves boundary-making by gatekeepers (e.g., employers and state actors), providing benefits to some while excluding those who do not conform to its norms. In this case, Thai transgender women gain legitimacy and societal approval by using technologies of embodiment to adhere to dominant ideals of sex and gender—and performing visible work outside of the sex industry—thus earning rewards and social status from their techno-professionalism.

Techno-professionalism demonstrates how nation-states, technologies, and gendered labor are co-produced, adding to our understanding of how "the realities of human experience emerge as the joint achievements of scientific, technical, and social enterprise" (Jasanoff, 2004, p: 33). By highlighting how state development plans intersect with technologies and norms of professionalism, the article reveals how the economy is made up of intimate social relations (Zelizer, 2000), including gendered social roles and technologies of embodiment. It underscores how people adopt and promote technologies that figure centrally into new iterations of nation-branding promoted in global workplaces. The article thus adds to our understandings of the linkages between gender, labor, and national development, extending research on how cisgender and transgender women represent nations through both physical and symbolic labor (Balogun, 2012; David, 2015; Hoang, 2014; McClintock, 1997; Radhakrishnan, 2009; Vijayakumar, 2013, 2021). In this case, Thai transgender women's "purple-collar labor" (David, 2015) in the entertainment industry is enhanced by technologies of embodiment, figuring into state development and national rebranding goals. Technologies hold together individual bodies and the nation-state, altering gendered labor in workplaces as well as norms of professionalism.

The article begins with an overview of research on gendered labor, technologies, and nation-states. It then provides background about Thai development, nation-branding efforts, and gendered/sexualized labor, followed by the methods used. The findings reveal how techno-professionalism is structured by technologies, boundary-policed, and promoted by state actors to enhance economic growth and nation-branding efforts. After analyzing how societal stigma and structural discrimination constrain job opportunities and shared understandings of acceptable gendered embodiment, the article concludes with a discussion of broader implications.

2 | GENDERED TECHNOLOGIES, LABOR, AND TECHNO-PROFESSIONALISM

Technologies figure into workplaces, transforming (and sometimes replacing) the labor that people do, with technologies and social organization seen as "mutually constitutive," and "each evolv[ing] in relation to the other" (Howcroft & Taylor, 2022, p: 4). Social analysts read technologies as embedded with "political properties" (Howcroft & Taylor, 2022, p: 4), including gendered relations (Wajcman, 2010), and have analyzed how technologies impact gendered labor in global workplaces. Factory workers, for instance, gain practical skills and "technological intimacy" (Cross, 2012, p:

120) by using manufacturing technologies, while also acquiring normative "values, ethics, and ideologies of work" (Cross, 2012, p: 134).

In workplaces beyond global factories, "technologies of embodiment" (Hoang, 2014) can take many forms and shape labor in a multitude of ways—including for people in the U.S. who use Botox for economic and social capital (Berkowitz, 2017), those in Brazil who want to "work better" by having plastic surgery (Edmonds, 2010, p: 8), or for cisgender and transgender women in Venezuela, who access plastic surgery to appear in national beauty pageants and represent their country's beauty, modernity, and technological achievements on a global stage (Ochoa, 2014). Technologies of embodiment also intersect with race and place, as surgeries to create a double eyelid or augment the nose bridge are often less about appearing white or Western than about embodying cosmopolitanism, consumption, class, and regional esthetic norms (Holliday et al., 2017). Technologies therefore impact workplaces, gendered/racialized/classed embodiment, and labor—with great effects for the nation-state, which is itself a "network that is partly held together by circulating technologies of representation and communication" (Jasanoff, 2004, p: 26).

States play a key role in financing and advancing technological growth (Xu & Ye, 2021), which has become a core component of countries' wealth and prestige (Ong, 2010; Wong, 2011). Pinpointing the linkages between nation-states, technologies, and gendered labor, research has shown how women in the Information Technology (IT) industry in India have come to represent a changing national culture (Radhakrishnan, 2009), while transfeminine people in Filipino call centers have been nationally heroicized for their flexible labor (David, 2015). Additionally, health care workers providing care within Thailand's medical tourism industry perform "high-touch" interactive service work, helping the nation rebrand from its reputation for sex tourism (Sunanta, 2020). More broadly, gender is integral to the nation, as women become "symbolic bearers of the nation" who stand in for and reproduce nationalist ideologies, embodying various feminine ideals (McClintock, 1997, p: 92; see also Balogun, 2012). With gendered labor essential to the increasingly technologized global economy, scarce work has conceptualized the interplay between state development plans (especially those geared toward technological growth), national rebranding efforts, and technologically-enhanced gendered labor.

This article introduces *techno-professionalism* as a form of professionalism that incorporates technologies, and advances economic growth and nation-branding efforts. Professionalism involves the "institutionalization of a professional ethic," as professional activities are laden with social relationships and power (Roberts & Dietrich, 1999, p: 978). Organizations, and people who work within them, establish credibility through pragmatic and moral legitimacy, which respectively entail practical concerns (e.g., financial gains) and adhering to social norms (e.g., global standards of "legitimate" work) (Suchman, 1995). At the same time, social actors (e.g., workers, employers) police boundaries of professionalism to create a privileged domain in which some belong and others do not. Such "boundary work" (Latour, 1983) is crucial for techno-professionalism, which affords compliant workers jobs, social capital, and a place in the national imagination. Techno-professionalism is a form of "cultural wealth," as it enhances "the reputational attributes and cultural products of [a] nation" (Bandelj & Wherry, 2011, p: 7). As techno-professionalism grants individual workers social and economic benefits, it also allows nations to avoid being categorized as "unsanitary states" (Briggs & Mantini-Briggs, 2003, p: 229), ensuring the national body is read as clean, modern, skilled, and technologically-advanced.

Techno-professionalism extends to workers worldwide who interface with technologies and help the nation advance economically and politically. It can emerge for women in the IT industry in India who represent a "respectable femininity" amid technological and cultural shifts (Radhakrishnan, 2009); to nurses in the Philippines who are trained and exported through government policies (Masselink & Daniel Lee, 2013); to bar hostesses in Vietnam who use "technologies of embodiment," such as makeup or surgeries, to embody various forms of the nation, and facilitate foreign investment deals (Hoang, 2014). Techno-professionalism may also manifest for sex workers in India who work in HIV prevention organizations, as they interface with global health technologies—such as statistics, epidemiological data, HIV testing, and surveys—to promote global institutional responses to HIV, thereby supporting India's role as a global model for disease eradication (Vijayakumar, 2021; see also Oni-Orisan, 2016, p: 92). Such work in prevention organization settings not only reinforces caste, class, and "gendered respectability" (Vijayakumar, 2021, p: 8); the lens

of techno-professionalism also illuminates how specific global health technologies augment the work and the worker, co-constructing gendered professionalism, conditional forms of belonging for marginalized groups (e.g., sex workers), and the nation-state on a global stage.

Techno-professionalism underscores how gendered embodiment is not only constructed in workplaces and through the modern global economy more broadly (Connell, 2010, 2022; Mears, 2014, 2020; Mears & Connell, 2016), but is also interwoven with technologies, nation-states, and global norms/institutions. The concept pinpoints the "connections and circuits" linking people to state processes and institutions (Grewal & Kaplan, 2001, p: 672), as well as technological expansion, rebranding efforts, and globalized workplaces. Techno-professionalism underscores how interactions between workers and technologies are impacted by and impacting not just professional institutions and professionalism (Roberts & Dietrich, 1999), but also the nation-state (Hoang, 2014) and global processes/norms (Vijayakumar, 2021).

Techno-professionalism is contradictory in that it offers opportunities for social capital and economic gains for both the worker and the nation, but can be centered on narrow ideals (e.g., gendered and/or racialized norms of embodiment) and exclusionary boundaries. Techno-professionals achieve particular norms of embodiment and professionalism to gain personal, social, and financial rewards. While techno-professionalism offers agential resistance to discrimination and social/economic marginalization, it can also reinscribe hegemonic ideals of sex, gender, and professionalism on the body and on a global stage.

3 | STATE DEVELOPMENT, REBRANDING, AND GENDERED/SEXUALIZED LABOR IN THAILAND

Technologies such as surnames, maps, and surveys have long been used as instruments to generate pragmatic and moral legitimacy for the Thai nation, creating national boundaries and instilling Thai sovereignty (Winichakul, 1994). Thailand is a middle-income country that has relied on tourism for about a fifth of the economy and jobs in 2019 (Nguyen, 2022), as structural adjustment policies in the 1980s shifted Thailand's exports from agricultural to industrial, increasing foreign investments and expanding the tourism industry. From 2001 to 2006, the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) national party created policies that introduced a "flexible and skilled labor force" to create a "globally competitive capitalism" (Brown & Hewison, 2005, p: 354). Specifically, TRT sought to diversify markets and develop new niche industries, stressing "an innovative, knowledge-based and productive economy" to foster both foreign and domestic growth (Brown & Hewison, 2005, pp: 354, 359). As the initiatives reoriented Thailand to the global economy, they also instilled new values of economic development on Thai people, including "bourgeois consumption, economic performance and global personhood," which became "stamped onto Thai identity" (Reynolds, 2002, p: 14). Thailand's national identity has thus changed alongside global economic shifts.

In 2016, the Thai government launched a development plan called "Thailand 4.0," consisting of policies through 2025 to expand technologies and position the country as a global medical hub for various forms of health and medical services (Thai Board of Investment, 2016). The 4.0 plan has demarcated the new "smart Thailand" as comprised of "smart people," converting Thais into "first world citizens" by supporting their skill development (Thai Embassy, n.d.). In this "transformative shift," Thailand 4.0 aims to produce "competent human beings in the 21st Century" and transition from unskilled to high-skilled labor (Thai Embassy, n.d.).

In conjunction with the 4.0 development plans, Thai state agencies have sought to rewrite the country's reputation as a destination for sex work, which was institutionalized during the Vietnam War, when approximately 50,000 foreign military personnel visited Thailand for "rest and recreation" (Manderson, 1995). While sex work had previously existed in Thailand, the Vietnam War sparked the development of the foreign-oriented sex market, as venues expanded beyond brothels to include massage parlors, dance halls, and other environments (Manderson, 1995; van Esterik, 2000). During this time, sex workers—as both "the objects and agents of public health," were tested for communicable diseases and recruited for contraception testing (Wilson, 2010, p: 128).

The state's surveillance and regulation of female sex workers catalyzed public health technologies and the tourism industry, serving as a foundation for "globalized biotech" and medical tourism in Thailand (Wilson, 2010, p: 128, 130). However, sex workers' roles enabling Thailand's biotech/medical tourism industries through their intimate engagements with public health technologies did not afford them greater inclusion or belonging in the nation (Wilson, 2010, p: 136–7).

In 1998, the TAT launched a campaign called "Amazing Thailand" to market culture, the environment, and shopping opportunities—and to pivot the reputation of the country away from a destination for sex tourism. In more recent decades, the TAT has also rebranded the often-sexualized image of massage parlors to emphasize skilled workers and cultural traditions (Nuttavuthisit, 2007, p: 28). Under military leader Prayuth Chan-ocha, the government attempted to rebrand Pattaya from a sex tourism district by naming it "Happy Zone," to "promote Thailand's quality tourism" and "stamp out prostitution in the area," according to the chief of Pattaya city police, who was quoted in a Reuters report (Tostevin, 2017). Correspondingly, Thai transgender women, especially sex workers in these areas, experience greater criminalization and frequent arrests (Suriyasarn, 2016), and Thai transgender women have faced dehumanization, indignity, and embarrassment during their police encounters (Farber, 2023).

A state is not a "unitary or homogenous entity," as different "fractions" of Thai capital (Glassman, 2004, p: 20) can at once encompass LGBT tourism, while legal frameworks still uphold a gender binary. In 2013, the TAT began promoting a campaign called "Go Thai. Be Free." targeted toward LGBT travelers and signaling the importance of the "purple *baht*," or the currency-promoting LGBT tourism industry in Thailand (Jackson, 2011, p: 22). The Thai transgender entertainment industry, consisting of cabarets and nationally-broadcast beauty pageants, is a dominant site through which norms of racialized, gendered embodiment are produced, and one in which various technologies of embodiment (e.g., surgeries, Botox fillers, and hormones) are often used by performers to achieve such ideals. Transgender cabarets are also "commodified by government and private agencies for tourists to demonstrate the 'amazing' character of Thainess, an exotic place with an institutionalized third gender" (Käng, 2014, pp: 424-25). Although Thai entertainment venues were temporarily shut down during COVID-19, they have reopened as the TAT has consistently promoted them through various tourism campaigns.

At the same time, the Thai state does not formally recognize transgender people's gender identities on legal identification cards, nor is the 2015 Thailand Gender Equality Act—which prohibits discrimination against "persons whose expression differs from the sex by birth" (Winter et al., 2018, p: 21)—fully enforced. Thai transgender women have gained public visibility in media and everyday life (Pravattiyagul, 2018, p: 21). Yet despite this visibility and LGBT tourism initiatives, Thai transgender people have been barred from various professions and workplaces (Pravattiyagul, 2018, p: 32). With the state a complex site of paradoxical processes, attitudes, and procedures, nation-building is correspondingly composed of multiple aims and (sometimes unintended) consequences.

Thai transgender women's public recognition based on beauty has led to a "claimed feminine status" (Jackson, 2011, p: 36), which has corresponded with Thai transgender women often being relegated to stereotypical work in beauty and entertainment, as well as working as mediums, fortune tellers, and "ritual specialists" (Jackson, 2022), and such spirit mediumship roles have been furthered by capitalism and new media (Jackson, 2022, p: 75). Beauty contests for Thai cisgender and transgender women have historically been part of a "nation-building strategy" that has sought to "reconstruct a Thai identity and culture based on new-found feminine beauty" (Wuen, 2005, p: 34; see also Van Esterik, 2000). Cisgender women's beauty has been used strategically in TAT tourism brochures, which have "treat[ed] Thai women as part of the esthetic resources of the country" (van Esterik, 2000, p: 159).

This article spotlights the transgender entertainment industry as a social institution that promotes the "operation and reproduction of the imagined community in actual human relations" (Winichakul, 1994, p: 15). Thai transgender women in the entertainment industry interface with technologies of embodiment, performing techno-professionalism amid broader discrimination, stigma, and stereotypes. They gain economic and social rewards from their techno-professionalism, which also affords the nation-state new economic and political growth.

4 | METHODS

The article is based on in-depth interviews with 62 participants conducted from 2016 to 2018 and 2020–2021, and 14 months of fieldwork in Thailand, conducted in 2016 and 2017–2018. The fieldwork took place in the Bangkok metropolitan area, Nonthaburi, Phuket, and Pattaya, where many Thai transgender women live and work. The interviews included 36 Thai transgender women, six health care professionals, six officials from the Ministry of Public Health, four civil society members, three owners involved in the transgender entertainment industry (one of whom is also a transgender woman), two medical tourism stakeholders, two private hospital CEOs, one official from TAT, one medical tourist, and one representative from a United Nations-related agency. During my fieldwork, I attended several cabaret shows and spent time with performers and cabaret owners backstage. I also participated in three regional LGBT+ rights meetings taking place in Bangkok, where issues about health care and social rights were discussed by stakeholders, community members, and activists.

I use pseudonymous nicknames rather than full first names to stay consistent with Thai cultural norms. The following Table 1 provides demographic information about each Thai transgender participant:

I gained basic proficiency in Thai and was assisted by Thai translators in 33 interviews with Thai-speaking transgender women. Translators held deep understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality in Thailand, and also transcribed the interviews conducted in Thai. Thai transgender women were recruited through a health clinic and snowball sampling, as participants referred me to other potential interviewees to diversify the sample. Thai transgender women were compensated 1000 *baht* (US$33) for each interview in accordance with the norms of the clinic. All interviews were recorded for accuracy and edited slightly for grammar and coherence, and coded for themes in NVivo. The codes related to discrimination, gender and beauty ideals, general health care settings and encounters, health care services and biomedical technologies (e.g., hormones and surgeries), legal rights, family acceptance, and the media. I triangulated interview data with analysis of primary materials, including TAT websites, press releases, and government policies.

The article draws on methodologies and ethics of feminist standpoint theory, which grounds people's experiences as having distinct authority (Smith, 2005). Both feminist standpoint theorists and global theorists assert researchers acknowledge the diversities that exist throughout the world rather than seeking or creating a "unified doctrine" of knowledge (Connell, 2006, p: 262). To avoid referring to participants as an identity category deemed offensive, I refer to participants altogether as Thai transgender women, while also recognizing this is an imperfect category to use across cultural settings (Aizura, 2018). Some participants identified as "*sao praphet song*," which translates to "second kind of woman," and felt that this label was "polite and warm." Others were offended by this term, as they believed it denoted they were second-class citizens. The word "*kathoey*" has appeared in ancient Buddhist texts to refer to transfeminine people, and some participants also found this word offensive. Some participants identified as "*phu-ying kham-phet*," which translates to "woman who has crossed gender." When quoting participants who self-identified, I refer to them using the terminology they used for themselves. As there is a great range of experiences and identifications, the findings cannot be generalized across time, place, gender identity/expression, nor occupational setting.

The research was approved by Institutional Review Boards in both the United States and Thailand.

5 | FINDINGS

In what follows, I first analyze how Thai transgender women use technologies of embodiment to perform in the entertainment industry, which circulates norms of gendered and racialized technologically-enhanced embodiment in and beyond the workplace. I then analyze how TAT discourses and initiatives capture tourist attention and foreign currency by marketing techno-professionalism in the entertainment industry, promoting the nation's technological growth, skilled labor, and detachment from sex work. I show how Thai transgender women's techno-professionalism helps the nation rebrand itself as a sanitized (i.e., desexualized) technology hub, while allowing Thai transgender

T A B L E 1 Participant chart.

Pseudonym	Age	Self-identification	Education level	Income (*baht*/month)	Occupation	Location of birth
Ahn	20	Indifferent, okay with all labels	University student	16,000	Student	Bangkok
Apple	22	A woman except some parts of body	Bachelor's	Looking for work	Looking for work	Bangkok
Bee	22	Transgender	University student	14,000	Food vendor at Siam center	Sakon Nakorn
Bow	28	Transgender	Bachelor's	15,000	Office job	Ubon Ratchatani
Dao	24	Did not report	High school	7000	Cabaret performer	Bangkok
Denny	31	*Sao praphet song*	*Matthayom* 3 (grade 9)	12,000	Dancer, cabaret performer	Chai Nard
Egg	25	Transgender	High school	Did not report	Cabaret performer	Chaiyapoom
Emmy	42	Woman	*Matthayom* 3 (grade 9)	16,000	Restaurant server	Lamphun
Evy	44	Woman	Bachelor's	Did not report	Telecommunications	Bangkok
Fern	32	Prefers being called by name	Bachelor's	17,500	LGBT health foundation	Loei
Gan	23	Girl from the heart	*Matthayom* 3 (grade 9)	15,000	Production for television program	Bangkok
Goldie	26	Prefers being called by name	Bachelor's	30–40,000	Freelance tour guide in Pattaya	Korat
Jaya	27	Prefers being called by name	Master's	17,500	LGBT health organization	Chiang Mai
Jin	23	Trans or *sao praphet song*	Bachelor's	25,000	Beauty consultant at clinic; modeling, makeup, hairdressing	Sakon Nakhon
June	38	Transgender	Master's	Did not report	Transgender health activist, researcher	Did not report
Kitti	21	Prefers being called by name	University student	Not working	Student	Chantaburi
Kwang	24	*Sao praphet song*	Bachelor's	20,000	Freelancing, mobile phone salesperson, selling clothes	Surin province
Lek	19	*Sao praphet song*	University student	Not working	Student	Bangkok
Malee	39	Trans woman or *phu-ying kham-phet*	High school	20,000	Research center at transgender health clinic	Bangkok
May	25	*Kathoey*	*Matthayom* 6 (upper secondary)	9000	Motorbike dealer	Samut Prakan
Minnie	30	Transgender	Master's	35,000	Family business	Chiang Mai
Mo	35	*Kathoey*	Did not report	Did not report	Cabaret performer	Korat
Nana	N/A	Did not report	Did not report	Did not report	Creator of beauty pageant	Did not report

T A B L E 1   (Continued)

Pseudonym	Age	Self-identification	Education level	Income (*baht/month*)	Occupation	Location of birth
Naw	32	*Sao praphet song*	Lower vocational certificate	7000	Cabaret performer	Bangkok
Nok	24	*Phu-ying kham-phet*	Bachelor's	16,000	Transgender health clinic staff	Saraburi
Oom	26	*Sao praphet song*	Lower vocational certificate	7000	Cabaret performer	Nakhon Sawan
Pim	19	*Sao praphet song*	University student	Part-time (350 *baht*/day)	Student	Phrae Province
Pinky	21	*Sao praphet song,* woman	University student	Unpaid	Internship	Bangkok
Puu	24	*Sao praphet song*	High school	9000	Housekeeping inspection company	Bangkok
Rose	N/A	Did not report	Did not report	Did not report	Cabaret costume designer	Did not report
Sammy	29	Did not report	Bachelors	Inconsistent	Restaurant owner	Songkhla
Sana	30	Trans or *sao praphet song*	Did not report	Did not report	Cabaret performer	Korat
Som	26	Prefers being called by name	Bachelor's	15–30,000	Part-time at LGBT health organization	Korat
Song	29	Gender diversity community (LGBT)	Bachelor's	30,000	LGBT health organization, cashier, loans people money and collects interest	Roi Et
Sunny	22	*Sao praphet song*	University student, freelancer	Variable part-time (1000 *baht*/job)	Student	Bangkok
Wan	31	Indifferent to labels	High vocational certificate	30,000	LGBT health organization	Ram Plang
Yaz	24	*Sao praphet song*	Middle school	7000	Cabaret performer	Chiang Rai

women to gain economic and social mobility. Lastly, I analyze how techno-professionalism emerges within the broader context of workplace discrimination and societal stigma, demonstrating how insidious social hierarchies create pathways and boundaries for techno-professionalism.

5.1 | Constructing techno-professionalism

Thai transgender women's techno-professionalism in the cabaret is made by technologies of embodiment, as seemingly personal decisions to access surgeries are shaped by gendered labor demands. With Bangkok providing access to gendered consumer products (Jackson, 2009), Thai cisgender and transgender people incorporate a variety of tools—including clothing, hormones, eyelashes, eyebrow pencils, or a scalpel—to embody their ideals of sex, gender, and beauty. Yet economic pressures and industries also guide people's choices to access technologies of embodiment (Edmonds, 2010; Hoang, 2014). Technologically-enhanced beauty is a key component of working in the entertainment

industry, as techno-professionalism is constructed through performers' use of technologies of embodiment, which become central to their work and success in the entertainment industry.

Transgender cabarets and pageants are often sponsored by private Bangkok clinics, which offer performers and contestants free and reduced services such as breast augmentation. According to Nattapong, an owner of a renowned cabaret that employs around 200 people, most performers began working without any surgeries. However, he shared: "A beauty clinic sponsors some of our performers to become beautiful and access plastic surgery free of charge or [at a reduced price]. They usually select one or two of our girls to receive this reward at their beauty clinic in order to be promoted as a sponsor of [the cabaret]." Beauty clinics may benefit by branding themselves with performers, while surgical technologies are a foundation that undergird the show itself. Rose, a cabaret costume designer at the same prominent venue, said:

> We got sponsored by some beauty clinics for our performers to access surgeries. They also provided us gift vouchers. In the past, [the cabaret] organized a number of beauty pageants and other beauty events, which have always been sponsored by several beauty clinics, both in Pattaya and Bangkok. You know? Some of the clinics even sponsored us with free services. They allowed us to select one [performer] to receive their free service. Our task was to select candidates for them. Then, the clinic would select the best out of the best from those selected candidates.

Such free and reduced surgeries make it possible for performers to embody ideals of beautiful women, and become successful entertainers. Nana, a beauty pageant creator/judge who is also a transgender woman, said that her pageant has received sponsorships from beauty clinics offering free breast augmentations for some contestants, as well as makeup and skin cream sponsors. The sponsorships between clinic venues and the entertainment industry demonstrates how technologies of embodiment enhance the work of performers, serving as the basis of techno-professionalism.

Most cabaret performers and beauty pageant contestants interviewed had used technologies of embodiment, including hormones, Botox fillers, and surgeries. All unanimously agreed that surgeries were important for their livelihoods. In a focus group with four performers at a cabaret in Bangkok, a resounding chorus of performers fervently agreed that their careers were enhanced because they had surgeries ("*Chai*"—"yes"—they exclaimed, all in unison). Pinky, who identifies as a woman and *sao praphet song*, said she had her nose augmented to build a more prominent bridge, specifically to succeed in a beauty pageant. "I have to use my nose for work," Pinky said. Linking her nose to her work performance in the entertainment industry, Pinky emphasized that surgical decision-making was tied to her role on the beauty pageant stage. A more defined nose comes to feel mandatory for success and pragmatic legitimacy at work.

Double eyelid surgery is often described as a means to achieve norms of cosmopolitan beauty (Holliday et al., 2017). Dao, however, also defined it as a practical decision to support her work and achieve pragmatic legitimacy as a performer in the cabaret:

> We do surgeries on our face and body because we are performers. People see my face first. In addition, it helps me [put on] make up easier. If I have only single eyelids, it will be much harder when we stick on the artificial eyelashes. So surgeries are very important for being a performer.

Linking surgeries to her work as a performer, Dao's use of makeup and false eyelashes were visibly enhanced by double eyelid surgery. Her appearance and performance in the cabaret necessitated her use of technologies of embodiment. Creating double eyelids through surgeries was not just an esthetic choice, but also a necessity of her work that facilitated pragmatic legitimacy to earn a living.

While Nana is now a beauty pageant creator and judge, she previously experienced how facial surgeries allowed her to gain entry to work in the cabaret. She recalled:

> Personally, I dislike surgery. But in the past, I wanted to work at Calypso [Cabaret] but I failed all seven times that I applied. Then I started to wonder why they didn't accept me. Then I decided to do surgery

on my face. After that I went to apply again. That day there were a total of thirteen applicants, and only I got accepted. So [surgery] is important for my life.

Nana's job prospects in the cabaret, she shared, hinged on access to facial surgeries, as employers are involved in boundary-policing the embodied ideals of techno-professionalism. Nana's experience demonstrates that performers do not access these surgeries simply to please their own esthetic sensibilities—rather, they feel pressure to conform to this beauty ideal to find employment. Now as a beauty pageant judge, Nana said she likes to cheer for the "dark horse," and those contestants "with ability," versus those who might be expected to win based on beauty alone. Perhaps Nana's own experience with multiple cabaret rejections softened the boundaries of techno-professionalism she now enforces for beauty pageant contestants.

To succeed in the cabaret, several performers said that breasts were the most important bodily feature, particularly since they could not be hidden. According to Naw, who identifies as *sao praphet song*: "It helps when we are wearing costumes. It can make me more beautiful—like a woman—when wearing a show costume. It also can complete my confidence." Breasts added to Naw's personal confidence and practically enhanced her appearance in costumes, signaling the ways in which technologies of embodiment can establish pragmatic legitimacy. Oom, who identifies as *sao praphet song*, agreed that breasts made the biggest difference for performers, and said: "If you have breasts, it can be a symbol of sex that you are a woman. For genitals, we can use an outfit to conceal it. But for the show costume, the top part is revealed a lot. So, I have a feeling that [having] breasts is the most important." Breast enhancements function to create an outward appearance of femininity, enhancing performers' confidence and appearance on stage.

As technologically-enhanced embodiment undergirds the pragmatic legitimacy and labor of Thai transgender performers, such esthetic ideals also circulate in and beyond entertainment workplaces. While many do not become performers themselves, several Thai transgender women cited the entertainment industry as a source of their embodied goals. Gan, who identifies as a girl from the heart and works in the television industry, said that transgender model and business owner Poy Treechada was her ideal of a beautiful woman, as Gan defined beauty and femininity in direct relation to surgeries. Poy famously underwent gender-affirming surgeries and won national and international transgender beauty pageants in 2004, and currently maintains an Instagram following of 2.7 million. She also founded Bio Pharma Tech, a company that produces vitamins and dietary supplements. Gan affirmed that to be a beautiful woman: "You have to have many plastic surgeries, both face and body. I got a chin surgery 5 years ago. I didn't have a [prominent] chin." Gan emphasized that plastic surgeries are necessary to achieve norms of sex, gender, and beauty. By defining her chin, she was able to produce a look more aligned with her notion of a beautiful woman, citing pageant winner and social media influencer Poy Treechada as her ideal.

Some participants spoke to their desires not just to look like entertainers, but also to become a cabaret performer or enter a beauty pageant, as working in the entertainment industry was hailed as the occupational goal for several participants. May, who identifies as *kathoey* and works as a clerk in a motorcycle dealership, said: "I think jobs [in the entertainment industry] in Pattaya are the most sought after... It's very hard to get into it. You have to be very beautiful." In order to work in the most "sought after" industries of beauty or cabarets, May emphasized that beauty is key, while speaking to the boundary-policing that takes place as it is "very hard to get into" entertainment jobs. Sunny, a *sao praphet song*, said she recognizes that many Thai transgender women have failed in their goals of becoming entertainers because they do not meet the standards of beauty. She said: "Becoming a cabaret actress is the supreme goal for most transgender women, but most of them failed to follow this path because of their appearance." Another participant also stated she would need to modify her diet and lose weight to become employed in the entertainment industry. Such comments underscore the idea that gatekeepers in the entertainment industry carve out privileged spaces for transgender women based on physical beauty and appearance.

Yet, others asserted that skill is more important for performers than beauty, and that surgeries help with acceptance and self-esteem more broadly. Nattapong emphasized that if a performer is not deemed beautiful during an audition, that "can be fixed later" through surgeries. Thus, the boundaries of techno-professionalism can be created after performers are hired, as employers may facilitate surgeries for performers through existing partnerships with clinics.

Rose also emphasized that surgery is "not only for the performance but also for [cabaret performers'] self-satisfaction and needs." This comment underscores how Thai beauty practices for cisgender and transgender people can be about self-acceptance—as well as appearing *riap-roi* (neat and well-groomed)—while helping improve one's social status (Kang, 2021, p: 4).

Just as many cisgender women and men in Thailand do, most Thai transgender women define physical beauty through technologically-enhanced traits such as a V-shaped face, a defined nose, big eyes, and double eyelids. This "pan-Asian esthetic ideal" (Hoang, 2014, p: 517) is, many interviewees noted, the dominant look in the entertainment industry because of South Korean esthetic influences; one Thai cabaret was sponsored by "Gangnam Clinic" in Bangkok, whose tagline is "Original from Korea." The moral legitimacy of achieving these pan-Asian beauty standards is embedded in the entertainment industry, with such embodied ideals also transcending the workplace itself.

Many Thai transgender entertainers strategically access surgeries to perform their work, forming the basis of their techno-professionalism, which employers help craft and maintain through partnerships with clinics. Technologically-enhanced norms of gendered/racialized embodiment circulate in and beyond the entertainment industry, revealing how "organizational demands shape and promote conventional gender expectations" (Geist et al., 2017, p: 6), as gender and gendered relations are made in organizations such as workplaces (Connell, 2010, 2022; David, 2015; Mears, 2011; Schilt & Connell, 2007).

I now discuss how the nation-state advances its economic aims and rebranding efforts by marketing Thai transgender women's techno-professionalism in the entertainment industry.

5.2 | Techno-professionalism and the sanitized nation-state

In conjunction with the state's aims of producing "smart citizens" and skilled labor through Thailand 4.0, Thai transgender women's techno-professionalism symbolizes the nation-state's technological advancements and gender diversity, helping rebrand and sanitize the nation from its reputation for sex tourism. Through various initiatives and discourses, the TAT advertises Thai transgender women's techno-professionalism in the entertainment industry, explicitly delinking performers from sex work while emphasizing their skills and the technological aspects of the show. Techno-professionalism affords the nation both pragmatic legitimacy by increasing tourism, as well as moral legitimacy as it recovers its reputation.

While the previous section discussed how techno-professionalism is constructed as performers use technologies of embodiment and employers' boundary-police, it is also made through the show's technological innovations more broadly. For example, on the TAT's (2023c) list of "Four reasons every LGBT+ traveller should visit a Thai cabaret," the text reads that "visitors are often not prepared for the actual magnitude of modern-day cabarets: some shows feature 4D effects, pyrotechnics, artificial rain and the kind of stunts usually reserved for Hollywood!" Underscoring the "modern-day" shows' effects, technologies figure centrally into the TAT's branding of cabarets, which reflect the technological innovations of Thailand 4.0. The shows are also compared to Hollywood, signaling how their moral legitimacy is constructed in relation to the international standards of other world-class entertainment destinations.

Thai transgender cabarets are featured on several TAT websites, including TAT News (2016), which markets the "world-class performers" and "world-class extravagant productions and stunning exclusively-created costumes." Another TAT News (2019) press release featured Miss Tiffany cabaret as winning a 2019 Thai Tourism Award for the "fun and entertainment" subsegment, while Alcazar Cabaret was also featured as an "outstanding tourism attraction" in the TAT's 2016 Thailand Tourism Festival (TAT News, 2015). Transgender cabaret shows have been incorporated into Pride events in Thailand, as well as Canada. The TAT also advertises that: "The show has been promoting transgender culture to global visitors long before LGBT+ became accepted and tolerated in North America" (Thailand Insider, 2018), underscoring how the cabaret innovatively exhibits Thailand's LGBT diversity in a global queer circuit. The TAT's "Go Thai. Be Free." webpage (2023a) also lists transgender women's work in cabarets, restaurants, and hotels, and as "ladyboy captains" on a boat tour of the Similan Islands, as part of the country's LGBT-friendly appeal.

In addition, the TAT's marketing materials strategically position the cabaret shows in contrast to "sleazy" venues of the past, policing the boundaries of moral legitimacy. For instance, on the TAT's "Go Thai. Be Free." (2023b) campaign website describing Pattaya, which is home to one of the country's most well-known red-light districts, the text reads:

> The region has suffered from a somewhat sleazy reputation in the past, but things are changing—though you're still guaranteed a good dose of gay-ol' fun here! For instance, why not check out a humorous cabaret drag show at Castro Bar that will have you and your BFF crying with laughter?

Thai transgender women workers alleviate the region's "suffering" from a negative reputation, as they become symbolic brands of how "things are changing." Rebranding is thus accomplished through the transgender cabarets, which, according to the TAT text, promote humor rather than "sleazy" services. Further, the company website for the Calypso Cabaret Show stated that the show "is suitable to open-minded audiences of all ages and nationalities," implying not only the liberal attitude of audience members, but that the show is also family-friendly. Calypso Cabaret's website further describes the performers' "highly valued class, style and taste," emphasizing how performers are "rigorously trained and educated" (Calypso Cabaret, 2018). Both the state and employers are involved in boundary work by explicating the changing era of the all-ages, highly-skilled transgender entertainment industry.

The TAT also incorporates transgender cabaret shows in both domestic and international events, signifying their global reach and importance to nation-building and branding. According to several transgender cabaret performers, the TAT sponsors their performances in countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, India, Vietnam, Malaysia, South Korea, Singapore, and Australia. Performers' travel is arranged by the Royal Thai Embassy. Sana, a cabaret performer who has traveled across borders to perform in TAT-sponsored initiatives, underscored some of the benefits of techno-professionalism in this context. According to Sana, who identifies as trans and *sao praphet song*, traveling with the TAT made immigration processes smoother. She said: "Anytime we [performers] traveled with the Thai Tourism Authority, we faced less problems [than when we traveled by ourselves]. I think we traveled under some kind of diplomatic immunity, to some extent." Sana speaks to how participating in state-sponsored initiatives can afford techno-professionals rights and privileges they might not otherwise have. In this case, she travels with greater ease, since cross-border travel can otherwise be particularly cumbersome for transgender people, who are not allowed to change the gender markers on their legal identification cards (Farber, 2023).

Participants such as Minnie, who identifies as transgender, explicated the contradictory relationship between Thai transgender women, legal rights and recognition, and tourism and nation-branding initiatives, stating: "As you can see, transgender [people] are represented like a mascot, to draw in visitors. 'Come, come to this town, this is a paradise of such and such.' But... we aren't [legally] protected by anything." Minnie contrasts the contradictory elements of the nation-state, as the political-legal apparatuses do not grant transgender people recognition, despite tourism and branding campaigns using them "like a mascot" for various nation-building purposes. Yet Thai transgender women only represent a "paradise," as I discuss the lack of legal protections in the following section.

While some Thai transgender women are involved in formal nation-branding campaigns sponsored by the TAT, others might participate in techno-professionalism and nation-building more informally or diffusely. For instance, Bee, a beauty pageant winner, was hired as a food vendor with a private company in an upscale shopping complex in Bangkok. Bee had used various technologies of embodiment, including rhinoplasty, chin augmentation, and eyelid surgery. When asked about her work experiences, she said she was hired "to represent the elegant images of both Siam Paragon and Siam Center [shopping complexes], in order to attract the influx of international tourists yearly and represent Thailand's gender diversity." While Bee had once dreamed of becoming an airline stewardess, she did not believe Thai or international airline companies would hire her because she is transgender. Amid these perceived barriers to achieving her desired occupation, Bee participated in techno-professionalism and informal nation-branding as a food vendor: technologies of embodiment allowed her to represent the elegance of the Bangkok shopping mall, as she also stood in for the gender diversity of the nation while interfacing with tourists.

For some interviewees, the entertainment industry has promoted a positive image of Thai transgender women because it highlights their skills as workers, as their techno-professionalism helps them counter societal stigma, in

addition to rebranding the nation. Ahn said: "When we become Miss Tiffany [pageant winner], everyone will be more accepting. Everyone is going to praise us and that is what we really want. We also want people to acknowledge our skill and capabilities. That can also change the mindsets of people who dislike us." Ahn specified how publicizing their skills and capabilities helps redefine transgender people's reputation, allowing for greater social acceptance and praise. Pageant winners who adhere to techno-professionalism gain moral legitimacy as valued citizens.

Specifically, some thought that hard work was seen as more valuable if it took place outside of the sex industry. For instance, Oom said that social acceptance and rights have been granted to those who can prove they are not "dirty *kathoey*." Oom's comments highlight how it is not only workers, employers, and state actors that enforce boundaries of techno-professionalism, but also community members themselves. With risk and hygienic threats linked to different groups across lines of race and nation (White, 2023) as well as gender and sexuality (Vijayakumar, 2021), Oom reflects the importance of not being read as "dirty," with techno-professionalism in the entertainment industry seen as an avenue to accomplish this sanitization and avoid stigma.

That Thai transgender women gain social acceptance and economic mobility through non-sexualized work and techno-professionalism reverberated in informal conversations and interviews with medical professionals, often unprompted. For example, Dr. Arun, a Bangkok surgeon who has been performing gender-affirming surgeries for several decades, said that Thai transgender women are more accepted now because they are more educated and get jobs outside of sex work. He said:

> The real thing about the transgender [people] in Thailand is, 30 years ago, because society thinks they are weird, they were not well educated so they didn't get a good job and most jobs [they had were] working in sex services, so prostitutes…. So I think it's much better for them. Yes, many still work in the sex fields, but I think it's their choice. You cannot say that some transgender [people] can't find a job. It's your choice.

Drawing boundaries of acceptance for transgender people who are educated and have a "good job," Dr. Arun characterized Thai society as more egalitarian than in the past, framing sex workers as choosing their work despite other "good" options. His juxtaposition of transgender sex workers versus those who find "good job[s]" emphasizes the existence of a still underlying disapproval of sex workers, who choose their work outcomes outside of what is believed to be good or acceptable. His boundary-policing individualizes the choice to aspire to techno-professionalism or not. Yet as discussed in the next section, finding employment and workplace acceptance is not always a "choice," but is instead constrained by an unequal employment market, discrimination, and stigma/stereotypes.

Techno-professionalism rewards and sanitizes the worker and the nation, allowing both to gain practical and moral legitimacy on a global stage. As capitalist transformations have "become entangled with the experiences of workers" (Tsing, 2009, p: 151), Thai transgender entertainers display technologies of embodiment and the norms of skilled professionalism instilled in Thailand 4.0. The state advertises techno-professionalism in the entertainment industry through TAT campaigns and discourses, which emphasize the show's high-quality (vs. "sleazy") reputation and technological advancements. Through their techno-professionalism in the entertainment industry, Thai transgender women gain pragmatic legitimacy by earning a living, and moral legitimacy as they are distinguished from sex workers. Thai transgender women also participate in techno-professionalism in informal settings and through activities not directly sponsored by state agencies. Thai transgender women represent and catalyze a shifting national culture centered on desexualized/skilled labor and technological growth.

I now discuss how a harmful context of employment discrimination and gendered inequalities undergird techno-professionalism.

5.3 | Techno-professionalism and resisting employment discrimination

Workplace discrimination, societal stigmas, and limited economic opportunities have led many Thai transgender women to turn to entertainment as their most viable source of income, with techno-professionalism constructed

in this unequal context. As Thai transgender women experience workplace inequalities and discrimination more broadly, there are incentives for them to use technologies of embodiment that bring them into alignment with social expectations of femininity, and the norms of techno-professionalism. However, even achieving these norms does not always guarantee Thai transgender women will be hired or treated fairly, demonstrating the limits of techno-professionalism in the context of unequal legal rights and a lack of state recognition.

The workplace is a site in which gender is managed, evaluated, and disciplined. Jaya, who works at an LGBT nongovernmental organization, mentioned that there are limited job options for Thai transgender women who do not pass as women or as beautiful:

> As a transgender [person], if you can change yourself to look like a woman totally, society will admire you… And there are only few spaces for us to show our capabilities - for example, the beauty pageant…. Due to little space for success, I thought that I needed to become more beautiful in order to gain success.

Jaya spoke to the inherent demand for "becom[ing] more beautiful" due to employment constraints, implying certain steps or technologies of embodiment are necessary to "look like a woman totally." Participants spoke to how social acceptance more broadly is also dependent on one's beauty, which is a gateway to both economic success and social belonging. Nana also emphasized that despite greater social acceptance for transgender women than in the past, norms of beauty still limit job opportunities, as she said: "Even though there are more options, those come with the condition of appearance. Someone that isn't beautiful will still have limited options." Nana and Jaya both speak to a "glass ceiling" on Thai transgender women's employment (Thongnoi, 2015), a trend that has been documented in reports by the World Bank (2018), Asia Pacific Transgender Network (Winter et al., 2018), and the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2014).

Even for those transgender women who do pass as beautiful women, they may still experience discriminatory barriers to work outside of the entertainment industry. Several interviewees spoke to how they were denied work due to employers' uniform policies. For instance, Bee, a former pageant winner, described:

> I went to [a job] for the pre-screening interview, but my application was eventually denied according to my gender. I was told by the recruiter that it is unclear for transgender people… whether they are man or woman and what kind of uniform they should be given.

Minnie also experienced a similar trend regarding uniforms when she was not hired by a luxury fashion brand in 2019. Minnie recalled: "During my latest job interview at [a luxury fashion brand] for a store-front sales position, I aced everything, breezed through three interviews, until the next video interview when they wanted to see me in-person, although online. I dressed up all glam, all professional and recorded a video for them. They loved me so much, but the only problem is that there's a regulation that I need to work in multiple uniforms. Although they offer changing rooms for men and women, they don't offer gender-neutral changing rooms, and that will become a problem if I were to be hired." Here, Minnie highlights how she dressed up "all glam" and "all professional" for her interviews, embodying norms of elegance and professionalism. As a result of discriminatory hiring practices based on uniforms, Minnie shared that her experience being rejected for a job due to her gender "broke [her] heart."

And Jin, who identifies as trans and *sao praphet song*, had won the swimsuit portion of a renowned beauty pageant. Yet she also experienced what she called "human rights issues" in the workplace before she was crowned. When she applied to work at a cargo company, she said:

> [Employers] think that *sao praphet song* are the cause of adulteries within the workplace. I was told that *sao praphet song* are very talkative, thus they may cause quarrels between other female employees or whatsoever. They don't hire *sao praphet song*… They didn't want to hire me because they were

afraid I would cause problems at work. They didn't even let me prove that I could work. They chose to not hire me from the beginning.

Jin specified that stereotypes about transgender women as seducing heterosexual men pervade the workplace, and she was not given a chance to work because of these stigmas. Even though Jin embodied dominant norms of beauty—which earned her a prominent pageant title—her appearance did not afford her workplace equity in the midst of pervasive stereotypical beliefs.

Despite the pressured nature of technologically-enhanced beauty in and outside of the entertainment industry, some Thai transgender women were savvy about the possibilities to benefit from their techno-professionalism. Oom acknowledged that breast augmentation was important for her success on stage, but took a more pragmatic approach to the embodied demands of techno-professionalism. She stated: "I want to succeed in my life—get a house, car, and savings. Because we are transgender, we won't have children to take care of us when we are getting old... I will do everything to escape poverty. I don't want my life to be difficult in the future." Techno-professionalism in the cabaret proved a viable option for Oom to secure a comfortable and financially-sound future, particularly as she speculated about aging without children to take care of her (see also Lampe et al., 2023).

Techno-professionalism also provides a sense of liberation and personal fulfillment for some performers by allowing them to showcase their confidence and appearance. Sana, who accessed genital surgery, rhinoplasty, and breast augmentation as a cabaret performer, said:

> When I was young, my appearance was non-normative and strange compared to other friends of mine, which caused me to be bullied sometimes... Now, I stand tall in the middle of [the cabaret] stage surrounded by a round of applause from audiences... Though it was difficult sometimes, this is who I was meant to be, and this is me.

Sana emphasized she was once bullied because her appearance was once "non-normative and strange," but she later found support in audiences and became proud of who she is. Not only do Thai transgender women find economic gains through the cabaret, but their techno-professionalism affords them greater social acceptance—as they exhibit resilience amid challenges to be who they are "meant to be."

Many Thai transgender women said that using technologies of embodiment was helpful to achieve sex/gender normativity, work in the entertainment industry, gain confidence, and be treated fairly. Social acceptance and occupational outcomes are stratified based on sex, gender, beauty, and appearance. Experiences being rejected from jobs, told to dress like a man, refused entry to women's restrooms at work, and as the target of ridicule may explain why Thai transgender women are "opting out of mainstream jobs" (ILO, 2014, p: xiv). For many Thai transgender women, passing as "real" and "beautiful" women and participating in the formal economy through techno-professionalism has become a means of resistance against discrimination and stigma. While this strategy of respectability has drawbacks as a means toward liberation (Spade, 2015), it nonetheless allows individual Thai transgender women to survive or even thrive in their circumstances with a sense of dignity and economic possibility.

6 | CONCLUSION

As nation-states worldwide advance technologies and rebrand themselves on a global stage, techno-professionalism involves technologically-enhanced gendered labor that contributes to economic goals and nation-branding efforts. Capitalist markets have provided space for new transgender identities to "form around the commodification of modern norms of feminine beauty" (Jackson, 2009, p: 360), and techno-professionalism demonstrates how workers embody technologically-enhanced, gendered norms of embodiment, supporting economic goals and a nation's "cultural wealth" (Bandelj & Wherry, 2011). Workers, state actors, employers, and community members police the boundaries

of techno-professionalism, gatekeeping the work that people do in accordance with hierarchical norms of sex, gender, and legitimacy. As global shifts in technological growth coalesce in local workplaces, techno-professionalism materializes in new forms of gendered labor and embodiment, allowing nation-states to advance economically and rebrand themselves. Nation-branding is thus cultivated through technologically-enhanced gendered labor, as state development incorporates and transforms embodied ideals and workplaces.

With its formal sponsorships by clinics, the Thai transgender entertainment industry circulates technologically-enhanced norms of embodiment within and beyond the venues. Gendered relations and embodied ideals are made in the workplace, while "ideas of attractiveness are organizationally produced and situated in place" (Mears, 2011, p: 11), in settings such as cabarets and beauty pageants. State agencies, such as the TAT, incorporate transgender entertainment in discourses, initiatives, and strategies to facilitate a dominant image of technological growth and respectable (e.g., not "sleazy") labor—advancing the nation-state's economic goals and nation-branding efforts under Thailand 4.0.

Thai transgender women gain professional rewards and social status by using technologies of embodiment and performing work that is explicitly detached from sex work, helping propel Thailand 4.0 and the nation's recovery from the "blot" of sex tourism (Centeno et al., 2011, p: 40). Akin to the incorporation and valuation of transfeminine people in Filipino call centers (David, 2015) and entertainment venues (Peterson, 2011), Thai transgender women gain moral legitimacy and approval for their techno-professionalism that is discursively framed as detached from the sex industry. They represent a distinctly professionalized sphere of labor, becoming "sanitary citizens" (Briggs & Mantini-Briggs, 2003, p: 10), who delink themselves from sex work and disavow a "dirty" reputation.

What is insidious about techno-professionalism in this case is how it naturalizes narrow gendered possibilities, and puts the responsibility for achieving this rigid standard of beauty squarely on the shoulders of Thai transgender women themselves, many of whom struggle to get by. Discourses of respectability—in terms of sex/gender conformity and adherence to norms of desexualized professionalism—demonstrate how techno-professionalism facilitates Thai transgender women's "incorporation into the market and state" (David, 2015, pp: 401–2), while continuing to marginalize those who cannot or will not do the embodied reconstructions and behavioral adaptations that the state depends on. Participants such as Dr. Arun emphasized Thai transgender women's choice and responsibility to become educated and find a job, reflecting the entrepreneurial neoliberal values of capitalism, and the ways in which queer and gender non-normative people are involved in the politics of homonationalism, which upholds values and institutions related to heteronormativity, domesticity, and consumption (Duggan, 2012).

Such inequalities resonate with the contradictions of LGBT diversity campaigns in places such as Beirut (Moussawi, 2018) and Mexico (Cantú, 2002). For instance, the discourses of "gay-friendly Beirut" have been complicated for marginalized queer people from Beirut, particularly those who are working-class or gender non-normative (Moussawi, 2018, pp: 176, 182). Government discourses of LGBT acceptance and incorporation are often based on consumerism and otherizing those who do not conform with dominant ideals of race, class, nationality, and gender (Moussawi, 2018).

Many respondents stated that they have faced discrimination in employment settings and/or experienced difficulties finding jobs. Several were told by employers to cut their hair and dress like a man, with some stating that certain workplaces - such offices, factories, and restaurants - do not hire transgender people because of stereotypes that transgender people are loud, will cause adultery by seducing heterosexual men, are not capable, or will fight with others.

For all the wealth they bring into Thailand, Thai transgender women are rarely wealthy themselves, yet they are expected to find the money for technologies of embodiment, such as surgical procedures. The "winner take all" (Mears, 2011, p: 4) entertainment industry facilitates the illusion of wealth and LGBT acceptance through transgender celebrities, while masking the minimal earnings of many performers, and the employment discrimination experienced by transgender people more broadly. With both the "constraining and creative possibilities" (Connell, 2022, p: 23) of transgender people's incorporation into workplaces and organizations, Thai transgender women can also find empowerment, as technologies of embodiment offer a way to access work, confidence, and social acceptance.

Working in the cabaret or appearing in a beauty pageant—and embodying techno-professionalism—can be a means of resisting discriminatory stereotypes. Techno-professionalism underscores how people can "challenge and renegotiate" (Wajcman, 2000, p: 451) the meanings of technologies in workplaces, while adapting to and resisting economic and social demands. These findings also underscore how "bodily enhancements are not optional practices" in Thailand, as they can often afford individuals better employment options, economic outcomes, and social standing (Kang, 2021, p: 2).

While the TAT promotes Thai transgender women in promotional campaigns and events that reach beyond national borders, the largely heteronormative government sectors and legal systems do not recognize them (e.g., transgender people cannot change the gender markers on their legal identification cards). Many Thai transgender women spoke about how the lack of legal recognition makes their lives "more arduous," according to a participant. One participant reflected that she might not have anyone to take care of her when she is old, as she remarked that nursing homes are divided into men and women; this demonstrates the need for more institutional inclusion and research on transgender people and aging worldwide (Lampe et al., 2023). During the COVID-19 quarantine in 2021, several respondents experienced income loss and emotional difficulties without social activities, and future research can explore how COVID-19 has impacted techno-professionalism and everyday life for Thai transgender women and others worldwide. Future research can also focus on the consequences for transgender women who fail to be accepted to the entertainment industry. Additionally, scholarship can attend to how political shifts will impact social rights for marginalized groups, including LGBT people.

While this article has focused on Thai transgender women's techno-professionalism in cabarets and beauty pageants, research can seek to untangle cisgender *and* transgender people's engagement with technologies and nation-branding in various occupational settings, including but not limited to entertainment, sex work, health care, IT, and other domains. Important questions remain about how technologically-enhanced labor emerges in global workplaces amid structural constraints, criminalization, and marginalization—and how different forms of techno-professionalism have various effects on social inclusion, national and global economies, and nation-branding efforts. Scholarship can also analyze how non-human entities (e.g., robots and artificial intelligence) perform and contribute to techno-professionalism across settings.

This article sheds light on fundamental sociological concerns about how the state extracts value from gendered labor, and how people become seen and legitimized by achieving certain standards of professionalism, gendered embodiment, and technologically-enhanced ideals. Techno-professionalism reveals the co-production of states, technologies, and gendered labor, as new technologies and iterations of skilled labor converge with state development plans and nation-branding efforts. Global workplaces continually transform under state technological plans, impacting gendered labor outcomes as states gain new forms of legitimacy through technological growth and innovations. Future research can continue to examine how gendered labor and embodiment shift in this ever-changing context—and how other forms of techno-professionalism emerge in global workplaces, contributing to new levels of economic and political growth, and possibly new inequalities.

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