

Review: Sex Work Globalized

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Review of: *Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered: New Perspectives on Migration, Sex Work, and Human Rights* edited by Kamala Kempadoo, Boulder, CO & London, England: Paradigm Publishers, 2005, 248 pages, \$26.95 paper.

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IT'S NO COINCIDENCE that the Bush administration chose sex trafficking as a cause célèbre in the wake of September 11, or that the U.S.-led War on Trafficking looks and sounds a lot like the U.S.-led War on Terrorism.

As Kamala Kempadoo's recent edited collection of essays, *Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered: New Perspectives on Migration, Sex Work, and Human Rights*, demonstrates, dominant discourses of trafficking and prostitution invariably prove to be symptoms of wide-ranging and deep-seated anxiety about borders, economic resources, and the increasingly fragile identity of the nation-state — rather than the devout concern for the well-being of women and children they proclaim.

Indeed, as Kempadoo and her colleagues further demonstrate, such seemingly well-intentioned state anti-trafficking interventions as the recent legislation requiring both foreign and domestic HIV/AIDS prevention groups to sign Anti-Prostitution Loyalty Oaths before receiving federal funding ultimately erode and/or revoke human rights, rather than protect and provide them.

Such interventions, in their conflation of trafficking and prostitution, their obsession with sexual labor to the exclusion of other forms of labor, their privileging of women and children over men, their neocolonialist exoticization of trafficking,(1) and their shortsighted moments and methods of intervention — broadly, immobilization and deportation — effectively deny transnational migrants such basic human rights as freedom of movement, familial integrity, safety, food security and shelter, and a living wage,(2) among others.

Unlike the vast majority of writing on trafficking and prostitution,(3) Kempadoo's collection issues from authors who speak from years of experience working with transnational migrants subject to policy implementations distilled from moral/sex panic discourses of trafficking and prostitution. In her essay, "Reflections by an Anti-Trafficking Activist," Lin Chew, founding member of the Dutch Foundation Against Trafficking in Women (STV) and the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) and presently an Executive Committee member of Action for REACH OUT (Hong Kong), an NGO advocating the rights of sex workers, shares her conversion to an approach to trafficking and prostitution variously arrived at by the anti-trafficking activist authors of these essays:

"It...became clear to me, through many long hours of reflection and discussions with colleagues as well as women in prostitution, that the only way to break the stigma and marginalization of prostitutes was to accept the work they do as exactly that — a form of work, with its own

specificities of risks and benefits, but no more or less special than other forms of work. [...] The personal struggle for me was to overcome the mainstream moral hypocrisy into which I had been socialized, and to understand prostitution as one of the institutions within our contemporary patriarchal, socioeconomic system, next to, for example, marriage.” (66-67)

Intersecting Oppressions

Such an approach to prostitution clears a sorely-needed space not only within feminism, but also within the socialist movement, for an engagement with trafficking and prostitution as sites of multiple, intersecting oppressions, rather than as the paradigmatic sites of exclusively or even predominantly sexual subordination.

Part One of the collection, “Shifting Paradigms: Globalization, Labor Migration, and Human Rights,” seeks to topple the hegemonic discourse on trafficking and prostitution by taking a giant step backward from this paradigmatic, blinding figure of “the female victim” of trafficking and prostitution. She is, rather, one of many figures within a complex and continuously circulating network of global capital, undocumented migration, and forced labor who exercise agency even as they endure the various systemic violences of late capitalism.

To this end, authors of the essays in this section explore such probing questions as:

- 1) Why, when it has been clearly established that the vast majority of trafficking is not trafficking in and for the sex industry, but rather for such labor forces attached to formal sectors of the economy as sweatshop, construction, agriculture, domestic, and service, do anti-trafficking efforts predominantly mobilize around the former?
- 2) Why do state anti-trafficking interventions customarily regard trafficking as external to white collar work?
- 3) Why are victims of trafficking treated at best like illegal immigrants and criminals — i.e. subject to arrest, detention and deportation?
- 4) What does “rescue” mean to and for trafficked persons, as contrasted with what it means to their would be “rescuers”?
- 5) How does the widespread failure to ask and answer such questions perpetuate the “Push-down Pop-up” effect explicated by Phil Marshall and Susu Thatun in their essay, “Miles Away: The Trouble with Prevention in the Greater Mekong Sub- region,” whereby trafficking prevention efforts merely displace, rather than resolve, practices of exploitation?

Part Two grapples with “The ‘Problem’ of Prostitution,” and in so doing endeavors to answer the first question listed above. The authors of these essays begin to unravel the tangled skein of problems presented by the inherent paradox of federal anti-prostitution legislation undercutting “women’s rights to sexual self-determination and autonomy,” and international aid policies — such as the aforementioned requisite Anti-Prostitution Loyalty Oaths— which purport to accord and/or restore such rights. (150)

Head of the Center for the Study of Sexualities at the National Central University of Taiwan, Josephine Ho, in her essay, “From Anti-Trafficking to Social ,” charts the way in which this paradox has, in Taiwan, permitted “the cause of ‘anti-trafficking’” to champion both “a continued effort to defeat women’s transgressive search for economic betterment outside the confines of marriage

relationships,” and fostered a burgeoning “anti-sex industry” resonant with Emma Goldman’s 1910 white slave traffic “parasites who stalk about the world as inspectors, investigators, detectives, and so forth.” (98)

As Melissa Ditmore further elaborates in her essay, “Trafficking in Lives,” this structural paradox relies upon heavily gendered and mutually exclusive notions of victimhood and agency, wherein women are victims of trafficking, men are agents of trafficking, and “the real pivotal issue; namely the question of migration” as a question of survival, rather than a “paternalistic interpretation of ‘what is best for women,’” does not get asked. (117)

Consequently, the health and human rights of the many women and men who do not fit a very narrow definition of “the young girl abducted from home and forced into prostitution” suffer neglect and abuse.

Focus on Migration

The third and final set of essays, “Reports from the Field: Participation, Research, and Action,” offer suggestions for improvement in trafficking research and policymaking methodology. In this section, Jagori, a New Delhi women’s center with years of experience in work on trafficking, migration, and sex worker rights, seeks to remedy the scarcity and unreliability of data in these areas by taking seriously UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women Radhika Coomaraswamy’s observation upon conclusion of her mission to Bangladesh, Nepal, and India: “Traffickers fish in the stream of migration.” (160)

More specifically, Jagori methodologically fronts migration, rather than trafficking, in its efforts to develop a “vulnerabilities and rights framework” capable of rendering visible not only victims of sex trafficking, but also the neoliberal economic policies endemic to 21st century globalization that funnel people into the stream of migration to begin with. (172)

Such a framework, by shifting the focus in trafficking discourse away from issues of morality and onto issues of migration, also renders visible as vehicles of exploitation such institutions as marriage — customarily considered beyond moral reproach and therefore passing under trafficking radar. Such complex nuances can be best attended to, as Jan Boontinand argues in her essay, “Feminist Participatory Action in the Mekong Region,” by local organizations working in country with a highly contextualized working definition of “trafficking” developed in cooperation with precisely those populations whose lived experience this definition purports to describe — rather than external reviewers operating under the auspices of an imported and/or transplanted definition of the term.

Such cooperation — predicated not only upon an understanding of trafficking as a complex process, rather than a singular event, but also upon the “participation of trafficked persons...at all stages of counter-trafficking interventions” has begun to successfully supplant what Aftab Ahmed laments in his essay as “first generation” thinking on trafficking. (207)

Indeed, *Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered* promises to guide readers carefully beyond this “first generation” thinking on trafficking so widely disseminated by the mass media, U.S. foreign policy wonks, and abolitionist feminists, and so very dangerous in its lies of omission of the lives and voices of people for whom (as Natasha Ahmad discovered in her 2000-2001 study of trafficked Bangladeshi women in India) “earning a decent living, albeit in a foreign country, was the prime objective.” (222)

Only when many more readers, and preferably readers who also happen to be policymakers, understand trafficking as one among many powerful undercurrents in the stream of transnational migration, will the means by which anti-trafficking initiatives endeavor to achieve their professed

goals truly champion women's — and men's— rights as human rights.

Notes

1. A phenomenon more fully elucidated in a short essay by Kempadoo, "Globalizing Sex Workers' Rights," in the 2002 collection of essays, *The Socialist Feminist Project: A Contemporary Reader in Theory and Politics*, Ed. Nancy Holmstrom.
2. Arguably, however, the fight for a living wage is a waystation in the bigger struggle to topple "wage labor" as kingpin of capitalism, rather than an end in and of itself.
3. Perhaps most notably, Kathleen Barry's influential *Female Sexual Slavery* (1984).

P.S.

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