

## Book Reviews

DOI: 10.1355/sj29-1h

*The Perfect Business? Anti-Trafficking and the Sex Trade along the Mekong.* By Sverre Molland. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012. 277 pp.

Anthropologist Sverre Molland's provocative, well-written and in-depth monograph on the trafficking of women along the Thai-Lao border is a welcome contribution to the field of trafficking and development studies in Southeast Asia. The core argument of the book is that states and anti-trafficking organizations utilize market metaphors of supply and demand to frame an allegedly alluring and lucrative business, while the on-the-ground realities of cross-border migration and sexual commerce differ substantially from such a view.

Based on the author's doctoral dissertation, the book comprises eight chapters and is divided into three sections, examining the idealized discourse on trafficking, on-the-ground realities and ambiguities, and anti-trafficking interventions. This approach — articulating global discourses, reporting field realities and evaluating anti-trafficking programmes, is novel in the current scholarship on human trafficking in Southeast Asia. In contrast to work on prostitution, few solid empirical works have been produced on this topic as it relates to the region despite the massive social attention that trafficking has garnered in the past fifteen years. *The Perfect Business* is thus a major contribution to its field.

The book opens with the following statement: “[R]ather than being a ‘perfect business’ human trafficking is characterized by imperfections that are not easily grasped through policy guidelines and bureaucratic maneuvers” (p. 10). Anti-trafficking organizations have ignored the complexities that surround human trafficking, in

particular those relating to recruitment through informal channels and employment in the sex industry. Throughout the book, Molland deconstructs the “meta-language” (p. 221) that anti-trafficking organizations disseminate both globally and locally. While social reality is indeed “fluid”, “contradictory” and “ambivalent” (p. 19), the use of this language promotes an “atomized and decontextualized” (p. 11) view of migration and sex commerce. It makes intelligible poorly grounded knowledge in order to justify assistance projects as well as the very existence of the anti-trafficking industry. Provocatively, the author argues that “the goal of trafficking programs is not to find answers to the challenges of trafficking, but the reverse: they seek problems that fit their solutions, in the form of their own development programs” (p. 222). Both anti-traffickers and recruiters act in an economy of bad faith: the former ignore the complexities of on-the-ground reality in order to perpetuate programme activities, and the latter hide information from their clients to provide labour for the sex industry. It all makes for a stark reminder of Jean-Paul Sartre’s concept of “bad faith” and illustrates how anti-traffickers and recruiters externalize their own complicity in events by deceiving themselves.

Molland conducted most of his investigation in a border area between Thailand and Laos (Vientiane, Nong Kai). His data come from observations in several types of sex establishments, and from interviews with sex workers, recruiters and officials from local and international NGOs as well as multilateral development agencies such as the United Nations Inter-Agency Project on human trafficking in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (UNIAP). The study’s finding that Lao sex workers migrate to Thailand, where prices in the sex industry are lower than those found in Vientiane, challenges one of the core premises of the trafficking discourse that migrants are primarily guided by profit maximization. Molland argues that prices are indeed lower in Thailand, but the number of clients higher, thus increasing the overall profit. This argument — while convincing — raises an additional question that the author does not consider. Why, for example, do Thai sex workers not migrate to Vientiane

to maximize their profits? Beyond profits, the author also argues that Thailand evokes an ideal of modernity that acts as a pull factor for Lao migrants. In addition, working abroad is a strategy that allows Lao sex workers to control information regarding their deviant activity, and to reduce the risk of being recognized by friends and relatives.

The book presents many additional fascinating findings. Molland shows that the simplistic figures of victim and trafficker do not match with empirical reality. Lao recruiters do not always provide their recruits with comprehensive information about the activity that occurs in the establishments where they are placed. Anti-traffickers interpret this imperfect information through the lens of lies and deception, thus turning recruiters into traffickers and recruits into victims of trafficking. Molland argues that Lao migrants may not be recruited with the intent to sell sex, but are socialized to become sex workers while performing non-sexual labour such as selling drinks for a certain period of time. Where the trafficking discourse freezes social processes, Molland introduces the novel concept of socialization to locate agency and consent in a temporal process. The information that circulates within informal recruitment networks and migrant populations thus plays a central role in his analysis. Since reporting imperfections does not suffice, Molland explores the exchanges that take place among peers. A core argument of the book is that these exchanges are governed by the classic model of patron-client relations, a point to which I will return. These research perspectives are most welcome, as they locate the study of social relations in the anthropological fields of social networks and social structure, an avenue that current scholarship on trafficking in Southeast Asia has ignored.

The unveiling of the ways in which states manipulate the trafficking discourse for their own benefit is equally fascinating. In 2006, rumours spread that human traffickers made false promises of U.S. visas to Hmong refugees from Laos, thus triggering their sudden movement to Thailand. The government of Laos publicly alleged this in order to externalize the ongoing and unresolved problem

of Hmong refugees, regarded as a rebellious ethnic group many of whose members had been at the service of the U.S. military during the Second Indochina War. Presenting Hmong refugees as trafficked victims allowed both the Thai and Lao governments to defend the proposed solution — repatriation without the involvement of international organizations — and to blame a mysterious international trafficking network threatening national security. This clever manoeuvre allowed both countries to evade their political responsibility with regard to an embarrassing political issue. The role of the state in this account makes intelligible similar incidents such as the arrest of North Korean refugees on their way to Thailand, also described by Molland, or the case of fifteen Vietnamese surrogate mothers who were allegedly trafficked into Thailand, forced to sign surrogacy agreements, impregnated or even raped, and imprisoned in order to produce babies for Taiwanese clients (Lainez 2011). Following a media frenzy in the region, both the Thai and Vietnamese governments hailed their arrest-cum-rescue as another victory in the fight against trafficking. Here also, the strategy allowed Thailand to divert attention from its opaque commercial surrogacy industry. One wonders how many other similar cases have occurred, and how they have affected the alleged victims.

While the book is a major contribution to trafficking studies in Southeast Asia, it does not escape from minor criticisms. One relates to its ethnographic limitations, for which Molland attempts to compensate by referring to the rich literature on prostitution and the family in Northeast Thailand. Like other researchers in the past, Molland studied lowland Lao through the lens of the Thai Isan. These two socially and culturally close ethnic groups belong to the Tai-Kadai linguistic family. However, many Laotian sex workers from Molland's sample are Khmu (p. 80), an ethnic group from the Mon-Khmer family whose social organization differs in many respects from that of the Isan and Lao. In addition, Molland uses the Buddhist concept of *bunghun* to explain the economy of remittances between ethnic Lao and Khmu sex workers and their families. Examining the Khmu through the lens of the Isan/Lao becomes a problem, as the Khmu do

not follow Theravada Buddhism. In addition, the author could have described family economics empirically. Indeed, the reproduction of a moral discourse on filial obligations is not sufficient to establish a causal link between cultural and ideal norms and care practices, as the moral narrative may be used to justify remittances to a particular audience or to neutralize sexual deviance (prostitution) and its illicit profits. How do Khmu people conceive family obligations? How do Khmu sex workers speak about remittances to their parents? To their peers? To researchers and NGOs? Could not the use of this narrative be evidence of bad faith?

A second criticism concerns the patron-client framework, whose definition is debated among social scientists. Molland defines the relationship by providing certain criteria quoted in Anglophone anthropology: mutual obligations, display of parental-like care from the patron to his client and of filial loyalty of the client towards his patron, family appellations, face-to-face interactions, power inequality and exchanges located in a “continuum between personal bonds joining equals and purely coercive bonds” (p. 82, citing Scott and Kerkvliet 1977). Are these criteria specific to patron-client relations? Could they not apply to certain family relations? French anthropologist Alain Testart (2007) proposes a definition based on stricter criteria, among them the gift/counter-gift economy which bans financial retribution. Molland mentions that Lao recruiters get a commission from employers (p. 96), thus giving a market colour to the exchanges. A fine-grained ethnography of the exchanges and of the supporting structures would have allowed Molland to describe empirically the relations in question and thus perhaps to create a new sociological model, whether inspired by the patron-client framework or not.

The analytical choice of confronting on-the-ground social realities with ideological discourses and local interventions makes the general conclusion of *The Perfect Business* somewhat disappointing. Even though Molland ultimately invites us to consider that both worlds — that of informal networks of recruitment and the sex industry, and that of global and local anti-trafficking organizations — operate

independently, the latter still depends for its existence on the existence of the former. The reader learns that anti-trafficking organizations lie about or ignore the concrete realities of trafficking, traffickers and victims — in other words, social construction does not match with social reality. Ethnography serves as a liberating device that reveals the falsity of the social construct with regard to social reality. Throughout the book, on-the-ground realities and socially constructed objects are analytically opposed, when in fact trafficking discourse and programing are built upon and vary in time in relation to a dynamic phenomenon. Concurrently, anti-trafficking interventions change migration flows and channels, the display of exploitative practices, and so on.

Despite these minor criticisms, this pioneering work exhaustively analyses the disjuncture between the construction of trafficking constructed by global and local organizations and the on-the-ground practices referred to as “trafficking”. It thus consolidates the fragmented field of trafficking studies in Southeast Asia and introduces some novel and promising research ideas. Future studies of human trafficking should take into consideration these major contributions of Molland’s book.

## REFERENCES

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