

Book Reviews

The Traffic in Women: Human Realities of the International Sex Trade.
By Siriporn Skrobanek, Nattaya Boonpakdi, and Christina Janthakeero.
London and New York: Zed Books, 1997. 124 pp.

Despite the increasing awareness of the exploitation of female sexual labour in the Asian and international sex trade (largely generated by newspaper exposés), adequate knowledge of the character and extent of trafficking is not readily accessible in book form. This little book offers some valuable insights into the local and global dimensions of this phenomenon, with substantive reference to Thai women. As the book points out, the sexual exploitation of women through force and deception is only one aspect of a much larger problem of human rights abuse, which encompasses illegal labour migration and child labour. Moreover, it is a complex process, extending from networks of power, patronage, and exploitation in rural villages, to work-places, drug and crime rings in the metropolises of the developed nations of Asia and the West. For feminist development researchers, the trafficking of women exposes structural class and gender inequalities in Thai society and between the so-called “North” and “South”.

The book comprises ten short chapters (the conclusion is the tenth chapter) with an Appendix recording a “Draft of Standard Minimum Rules for the Victims of Trafficking in Persons”. Siriporn Skrobanek, the principal author — the others appear to have been research assistants — has written a number of reports on the issue of the trafficking of Thai women, although her background and credentials are never formally detailed. The human rights and gender issues are forthrightly and emotionally asserted in the Preface, where she states: “our women need not always be victims, but can take hold of their own lives, and create a better future for themselves and their community” (p. viii).

The book proper begins with three case autobiographies of Thai women, outlining their experiences of overseas work, their socio-economic backgrounds, motivations, and sufferings. The second chapter offers an all-too-brief outline of "Migration and Trafficking", with a section on the development of the international sex industry and the beginning of Thai women's migration for sex work in the 1980s (although Thai women were already working in Europe from the late 1970s). Then follows an outline of the origins of the research project that generated the data used in the book: a joint project between the Foundation for Women (Thailand) and the Women's Autonomy Centre of Leiden University, with funding from the Netherlands Foreign Ministry. The project, conducted in two ten-month phases spread over three years, was designed to produce both detailed research results as well as practical measures and policy recommendations (to be delivered to whom, we are not told). One of the project's distinctive objectives was to encourage greater participation by village women in putting a stop to trafficking. The later chapters of the book expose some of the simplistic assumptions inherent in this latter objective: namely, that sex workers' horizons are bounded by "village" interests; and that there is a consensus among families that migration for sex work, facilitated by brokers and agents, is a bad thing.

The research methodology (as outlined in Chapter 2) focused in its first phase on interviewing women, with Pattaya and Bangkok chosen as sites to represent the urban centres where women typically migrate within Thailand (fifty-four women), and four rural villages in northern and northeastern Thailand (seventy-seven women) known as sources of locally and internationally trafficked women. All of the interview candidates were chosen with advice from various women's welfare organizations. The second phase concentrated on facilitating women's participation at the village level in problem-solving.

Chapter 3 is devoted to migration, where the author aims to contextualize human migration and its recent dimensions in the global context, with a stress on female migration for work, which is a relatively recent phenomenon. Its roots, as we know, are based on rural poverty. Unfortunately, there is insufficient attention given to defining traffick-

ing in the context of migration despite a statement that “trafficking is a distortion of the normal process of migration” (p. 18) and various quotations from United Nations resolutions (which emphasize compulsion as the essence of trafficking). This vagueness allows the author to write on cases of prostitution which do not involve trafficking as such, with the cumulative result being an argument that confuses rather than illuminates key issues.

Chapter 5 outlines features of trafficking of women in Thailand, noting two main forms of movement: from village to city and thence overseas (two-step migration); and directly from villages to overseas destinations (one-step migration). Trafficking of young women to city destinations for purposes of prostitution (essentially debt-bondage) seems to have commenced in the late 1960s, with the most highly organized form prevalent in northern Thailand. Simultaneously, and particularly among northeastern women, there was a trend towards voluntary migration for prostitution to Bangkok and the U.S. military bases of the northeast. As is common in most Thai prostitution studies, the foreign-oriented sex trade is overestimated as a factor promoting prostitution in general, although it did help spread the images of exotic Asian women which proved so appealing to Western sex markets. Interestingly, little mention is made of the changes in Japanese tourist tastes away from sex markets in Taiwan and Korea towards Thailand in the 1970s. International migration for sex work was pioneered by experienced sex workers of Patpong and Pattaya. Sex work was also engaged in by Thai women employed as domestic workers in the Middle East and Singapore seeking extra income. The writer notes that the number of brokers in villages rose from the late 1970s, with families receiving money in advance from brokers representing Thai and overseas sex operations, and women being bonded to work until the debts were paid off. The author outlines the increasing costs of brokers' fees and the debts that individual women and families incurred, particularly from the late 1980s as immigration authorities in Europe and Japan clamped down on illegal immigrants. The insidious feature of such practices (mediated by *Nai Na*, or brokers) is that they are similar to the system used for voluntary work migration, whether sex work in European bars or la-

bouring work in the Middle East and ASEAN countries. The same system of brokerage is employed, with villagers' ignorance of passport procedures, visa requirements, and work contacts in receiving countries allowing for exorbitant profit-making among brokers and employers alike.

Women experience various situations in the places of their work: the problem with defining trafficking as a breach of human rights is in determining when compulsion and deception are employed in bringing women into sex work. It is clear from the evidence assembled that some women were victims of deception and never expected work as prostitutes, while others did. Members of both groups experienced exploitation and extortion in the countries to which they were sent. As the author notes, there is a high level of collusion between families, women, and brokers, with large numbers of villagers expressing an unwillingness to condemn the practice. While some families lost touch with their daughters and never reaped the financial benefits expected, there were enough who did benefit to provide a positive reception for brokers to continue their work in the villages. Notably, many agents are former overseas sex workers. An important finding is that two-step migration has given way increasingly to one-step migration, with women travelling overseas being younger and less experienced than the early migrant sex workers.

Chapter 6 is devoted to "Routes and Networks", containing some superfluous information on the voluntary movement of women to Bangkok and other Thai urban centres for work in bars, massage parlours, and brothels, both tourist and Thai-oriented. A variety of working conditions and incomes is outlined. The most illuminating section considers the types of agents and brokers involved in trafficking, with four types predominating: locally resident agents (often respected community members with influential social connections); agents working for clubs and bar owners in Thai urban centres; agents who send women abroad (many of them former sex workers); and agents with connections in particular countries, some of these being licensed labour-exporting companies.

Chapter 9 ("From Research to Action") is the most interesting and

original part of the book. It recounts the work of the project teams in three villages on consciousness-raising and mobilization of local women against trafficking. The project team organized information sessions and promoted networks among village women (former sex workers, parents, and young women) to exchange information about problems and dangers encountered in overseas work. The project's experience in one Nong Khai village seemed to vindicate the researcher's commitment to participatory action research, with young women and their parents (mothers are usually referred to; male villagers' attitudes are not detailed) condemning overseas sex work. However, the report also discusses problems in getting the project's key messages across, particularly when parents have benefited financially from daughters' overseas sex work. In such cases the project and its local supporters faced opposition. As well, attempts to promote alternative income-generating groups (such as weaving) met with failure, both because of lack of financial support (credit) from provincial authorities and the fact that the income was insufficient for people's needs. Writing honestly about these realities which militate against the idealism of the project's objectives, the author nevertheless persists in the view that the village is the appropriate context for women to pursue their livelihoods. The writer's view that parents of sex workers indulge in conspicuous consumption to deflect local social disapprobation against their daughters' prostitution is naïve, given the findings of numerous studies which show that status competition (in its current commodified form) is an intrinsic part of village life and drives, rather than results from prostitution. Skrobonek's reports of some village meetings suggest that young women and parents were keen to gain practical information about problems in overseas work so as to avoid specific problems, rather than discount sex work as an option as such. Village daughters have engaged in various kinds of sex work within different markets, with correspondingly different experiences. We find few of these discussed or explained adequately — the information that some sex workers are supported by, and marry, foreign men is conveniently truncated.

Unfortunately, the author's discussion of the action phase of the research does not lay out a schema for evaluating the results of the project

— she admits that much depended on the internal dynamics of women's groups and the personalities and personal histories involved. The project clearly relied on intensive counselling of women individually and in groups. There are no suggestions as to how such work could be continued beyond the funding life of the project. The chapter concludes by affirming the importance of women's groups and agencies in facilitating networking. Curiously, a key distinction which should have been introduced at the beginning of the book — the distinction between trafficking and prostitution — is raised, so that prostitution "forced by coercion and violence" is to be condemned, not voluntary prostitution. But where does this leave the status of voluntary international migration for sex work? The main targets for legal coercion are recruiters, brokers, agents, and employers. Few would argue against this, yet the social dynamics underlying the movement of women into sex work are complex and there are also cultural foundations to exploitation which begin with the rural family. The value of this book is to highlight these complexities, but some of the final policy recommendations are rather naïve in the light of the realities of rural poverty outlined in the book (for example, alternative income-earning strategies at the village level). The book is far too short for an adequate discussion of its most interesting themes: we need to learn more about the practicalities of the research and the possibilities for expanding and improving this work. Presumably this is what the action research process is all about.

Marc ASKEW

Marc Askew is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Asian and International Studies, Victoria University of Technology, Australia.