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Book Review: Empowering Migrant Women: Why Agency and Rights are not Enough

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Empowering Migrant Women: Why Agency and Rights are not Enough.

Leah Briones. 2009. Surrey, UK: Ashgate. 231 pp. (Includes Appendices, Bibliography, and Index). \$99.95 (Hardcover).

Reviewed by Connie Oxford¹

The structure-agency dilemma that has puzzled theoreticians of social life is as intrinsic to intellectual pursuits as the chicken and egg question is to anyone who has ever tried to trace the origins of a living thing. In *Empowering Migrant Women: Why Agency and Rights are not Enough*, Leah Briones makes both a theoretical and an empirical contribution to academic debates about structure and agency through a case study of Filipina overseas domestic workers (which she refers to as FODWs) in Paris and Hong Kong.

Briones' theoretical contribution is born from her marriage of Anthony Giddens' structuration theory with Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach. Briones draws heavily from Giddens' contribution that understands human action in the context of structural opportunities and constraints while expanding his ideas by "shifting the analytical focus from looking at agency within a structural context to that of agency within its own agentic context" (10). Doing so, she argues, creates an understanding of people as "subjects" who are more "capable." (10). This move makes way for Nussbaum's capabilities approach that sees development " . . . in terms of quality of life and what people are able to do and be, rather than a measure of how many resources people have or are given by the state" (14). Together, the work of Giddens and Nussbaum allow Briones to advance a "holistic approach to agency" (4) and term what she calls the capable agency approach (CAA). She sums the CAA as follows:

The main hypothesis is that agency requires capability to successfully mediate victimization; agency in itself is insufficient. In practical terms, this means that while protecting rights doesn't guarantee livelihoods, protecting livelihoods creates the opportunity or capability for securing rights" (4).

Briones' CAA provides a springboard from which she delves into a range of literatures that address structure and agency such as migration studies, feminist theory, ethnography, global studies, and labor studies, all of which should benefit in turn from Briones' work.

In particular, Briones highlights the ways in which the structure-agency debate has played out in feminist migration studies. Migrant women have become fodder for fierce debates about women's agency. The lives of trafficking victims/survivors, mail order brides, refugees and asylum seekers, and as showcased in this book – domestic workers, are central to feminist scholarship that tends to be bifurcated in its approach to migrant women. These women emerge as either victims of horrific global and economic structural circumstances or free-standing agents who transcend social structures and demand rights as mobile subjects. Herein lies the force of Briones' contribution: rights-based discourses are limited for those whose livelihoods are inextricably linked to access

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to resources. Consequently, agency must be paired with capabilities as both a theoretical tool and as a practical approach for migrant women to realize empowerment. While *Empowering Migrant Women* provides a detailed survey of the nuances of the structure-agency dilemma, it resurfaces throughout the text in ways that make it redundant at times.

Briones' methodology entailed interviews with twenty-four FODWs in Paris and Hong Kong and participant observations with them in their communities as well as contact with local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that facilitated entrée into FODW migrant networks. The ethnographic approach in this book underscores Briones' argument about agency, rights, capabilities, and livelihood. For example, Felise, a FODW in Paris gave the following account of slavery:

I would say that I have been enslaved because I am no longer in my own country.

. . . I am in another country. I have no choice but to follow their own rules and regulations, so in this sense you are slaves here . . . Because of course when you want something very badly – like getting your papers . . . you can't do anything about this. So you just have to painfully wait, not months, but ten years (123).

Unlike feminist migration scholars who equate migrant women with slaves either because of the work itself that they do (e.g. sex work or domestic work, particularly for those who are trafficked) or because of the conditions under which the work is performed (i.e. little or no pay with virtually no benefits), Felise's notion of slavery is tied to the nation-state, one with all-encompassing power that regulates migrants' legal status. Moreover, Felise's narrative of slavery is more closely situated to those of migrants who articulate longing for their homeland rather than economic structures that organize work and how it is performed. This is one of many examples throughout the book where FODWs' understanding of empowerment is not just about rights per se, such as freedom from the working conditions of slavery, but about how a capabilities approach includes a broader range of access to resources, such as legal status in a country, that is necessary for migrants' livelihood. The second half of the text is strong in its ethnographic approach. However, that the interview data comes later in the book coupled with the superfluous reviews of the structure-agency literature undermines the contribution that the FODW case has to offer.

The book is organized into four parts. "Part I: Victims or Victors? Filipina Domestic Workers in Paris and Hong Kong" includes two chapters that survey the theoretical literature on structure and agency and foreground the need for a development-based approach to agency and capabilities. "Part II: Agency and Filipina Overseas Domestic Work" continues with the literature from the first section in one chapter and specifically addresses the feminist argument about migrant women as victims in another. "Part III: Agency, Capability, and Filipina Overseas Domestic Workers" situates FODW women's narratives across three chapters that emphasize how the case study of Filipina migrant women contribute to studies of agency and capabilities. "Part IV: Conclusion" ends with a chapter that makes the case for "[u]sing development as the main framework of a transnational approach . . ." (174) to protect FODWs, which could certainly be

generalized to most migrant women. Briones concludes with her central point: “. . . protecting FODW human rights doesn’t guarantee livelihoods, but protecting their access to resources for a livelihood creates the opportunity or capability for securing rights” (178).

Empowering Migrant Women would be a wonderful addition to courses in gender and women’s studies, migration studies, labor studies, global studies, and development studies.