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Book Review: Sex Trafficking: The Global Market in Women and Children

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Sex trafficking: The global market in women and children. Kathryn Farr. 2005. New York: Worth Publishers. pp.262, ISBN:0-7167-5548-3, US \$24.95 (Paperback).

Reviewed by: Moshoula Capous Desyllas, MSW¹

Sex trafficking has gained considerable media attention over the past few years. The purpose of this book, as stated by the author, is to “spread the word about the trafficking industry- its sources, operations and structures” (preface). The lens from which sex trafficking is perceived and understood in this book fits a radical feminist perspective; the notion that women’s oppression is due to worldwide patriarchy. Farr states that her lens of viewing the sources of sex trafficking is “economic and patriarchal” (preface). She describes sex trafficking as a structured form of violence, and throughout this book presents its sources, operations and configurations. The book’s main focus is to look at the process and the industry of sex trafficking from a radical feminist perspective.

I position myself within this book review as an ally of the non-dominant perspective of sex trafficking, not evidenced in the media and in national trafficking policy. Trafficking is a phenomenon that seems unable to escape its historical association with prostitution and migration control. My understanding of trafficking is “not as the enslavement of women, but as the trade and exploitation of labor under conditions of coercion and force” (Kempadoo, 2005, viii). This perspective addresses trafficking as transnational migration of labor with a focus on the unsafe working conditions of migrants and their rights as humans. This feminist lens is different from that of this book, in that more weight is given to the voices of women from developing countries as opposed to the influence of Western media regarding the phenomenon of sex trafficking. It is crucial to note that Farr acknowledges the view of sex trafficking in the context of transnational migration of labor into the sex industry (or migrant sex work) that can involve abuses, but her perspective represents the abolitionist stance towards the issue of sex trafficking. This perspective maintains that any type of prostitution is slavery and thus, considered violence against women. While this perspective takes an abolitionist stance toward prostitution, from this lens, many of the complexities of trafficking into the sex industry are placed aside and assumptions are made about women of developing countries who are cast as victims of violence that need to be saved. Casting women as victims of sex trafficking while turning to the state to protect these women and prosecute ‘evil’ criminal organizations, can be dangerous. This stance often results in harming, rather than helping, migrant women who find themselves in violent and abusive labor conditions. When reading this book, it is important to consider alternative frameworks for understanding trafficking into the sex industry, while appreciating Farr’s thorough research that has been analyzed and presented through her particular lens.

The topic of sex trafficking is well-researched and very organized in this book. The phenomenon of sex trafficking is structured into sections that describe the process of sex trafficking as well as other forms of violence against women. In chapter one, Farr notes the “increasingly high volume and wide scope of sex trafficking industry” referring to the movement of people from “sending countries” to “receiving countries” (12). Farr

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claims that the fastest growing sending region—the former USSR—serves as a context for the supply side of trafficking. While the magnitude of sex trafficking has received media attention, recent reports and studies have questioned the numbers reported by the U.S. Department of State and others who provide such statistics but do not explain how these statistics were collected. The fact that the sex industry is a hidden economy illuminates the reality that statistics on the number of individuals who are trafficked into the sex industry are very difficult to gather. Statistics are usually incomplete and inaccurate, given the underground nature of trafficking, the illegality of the sex industry, and the invisibility of most migrant work (such as domestic work, sweat shops and agriculture). Statistics provided by governments and NGOs are unreliable due to the difficulty in reaching agreement as to what constitutes trafficking, as well as difficulties in documenting illegal migrants. Statistics are extrapolated, estimated and distorted; as Agustin (2003) points out that there cannot be exact knowledge of how many migrants have entered a country illegally. In addition, of those migrants who have entered illegally, it is difficult to know how these individuals felt about the amount of control they had or didn't have over their travel and employment. Others have pointed out that statistics are not precise because developing countries lack data on trafficking (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002). Thus, although statistics about the issue of sex trafficking are provided, these estimates, including the ones in this book, are biased since the perspectives, definitions, and debates about trafficking have a major influence on the data that is collected, reported and made available to the public.

In her second chapter, Farr looks at profits in the sex industry, and in particular at the concept of the debt bondage system. She describes the living and working conditions of women who are in a situation of debt bondage through the stories and narratives of these women. In her awareness of alternative perspectives, Farr does bring up the fact that conditions vary, and that some women go to other countries voluntarily to work in the sex industry. Yet, Farr states that “the overwhelming majority [of the women], however, live under the debt bondage system and endure its deprivations and cruelties” (p. 45). This is a serious assumption to make, when the trafficking industry is so hidden and underground that accurate statistics about the magnitude of the problem are not available, and thus accurate generalizations of the working and living conditions of most migrants cannot be made.

Farr dedicates the following two chapters to the part of the trafficking industry made up of criminal networks. Farr details the various possible roles of traffickers “that can be played by individuals, small cliques or organized mafias” (62). The complexity of a trafficker's role is explained, in which some individuals (those who are labeled as “traffickers”) can also be in a “legitimate position of trust” (e.g., police officer or an immigration official) or in a “legitimate entrepreneurial position” (e.g., a travel agent or a banker) (57). However, what is not addressed is the role of family members who might help the individual leave the country. As Agustin (2003) notes, the “image of passive victims abused by foreign gangs also erases the participation of family members and boy and girlfriends in these formal arrangements,” who, according to this current trafficking framework, would be considered traffickers (4). Farr further details the process of trafficking, with descriptions of the actions of traffickers under the following sections: “recruitment and transport”; “enforcement and extortion”; and “corrupt guardians.” In a more recent article, Agustin (2005) notes the automatic, “hypothetical” link between

trafficking and large-scale criminal organizations “dedicated to enslaving migrants” (101). In an effort to ‘save’ every migrant, the experiences of individuals are generalized without consideration that the work of ‘organized criminal networks’ may be the combined effort of family, friends, agents, entrepreneurs and small-time delinquents, who make up these ‘traffickers’ (Agustin, 2001: 3). The issue of dramatizing the organized crime link then becomes more fodder for sensationalized stories, which may not be as accurate.

The trafficking phenomenon is explored through an overview of organized criminal networks: their traditional attributes, new characteristics of organized crime groups as sex traffickers, the magnitude of their power and profitability, the existing criminal networks involved in sex trafficking, and the newly formed mafia groups active in sex trafficking. While Farr focuses on criminal networks as sources of sex trafficking, conversely Agustin (2005) utilizes a migration framework to research the phenomenon of sex trafficking. Agustin (2005) draws attention to the issue that even though governments support certain policies based on the assumption that organized crime is behind trafficking, the UN Crime Commission’s own report found limited evidence of such activity (CICP, 2003).

In chapter five Farr describes sex trafficking flows and patterns, along with the conditions within the global economy that contribute to the lack of job opportunities for women who live in underdeveloped countries. This chapter is very well-researched, and Farr explains women’s poverty and poor working conditions in developing countries, while successfully tying in the effects of globalization to provide possible reasons for the transnational migration and movement of people. Three areas she highlights with regard to the global economy and the displacement of people from developing nations are market privatization, market liberalization, and the spread of production through foreign investment. Farr provides an excellent account of the role of development policies (e.g., loans, debts, austerity and structural adjustment programs) in the facilitation of trafficking. This chapter can provide a strong foundation for students and scholars to use in understanding other global social issues. Farr also provides a regional analysis of levels of human, economic and gender development and their relationship to trafficking, and how they drive sex trafficking flows.

Other forms of violence against women are explored in the following chapters, in which Farr connects military prostitution to the sex industry. The history of rape and sexual enslavement during times of war is presented, which Farr correlates with a male demand for the sex trade. She points out the normalization of violence against women during wartime. Farr asserts that cross-cultural patriarchal beliefs contribute to the domination of women and the control of female sexuality through rape and sexual enslavement. The military socialization of men is explored, and Farr provides narratives of wartime rape and enslavement. Further attention is given to organized military prostitution and the military’s role in World War I, The Korean War, and The Vietnam War, with a focus on the effects in Southeast and East Asian countries. The role of religion across cultures and its contribution to violence against women is also discussed, and Farr includes a section on congregational prostitution, which she explains is the “building of a sex industry wherever large numbers of men congregate to work or accomplish particular tasks” (13). The role of racism on trafficking is briefly mentioned, as Farr discusses racist images of sexualized women from developing nations. The

importance of this section warrants an entire chapter dedicated to the racist images and stereotypes of the sex trafficked women of developing nations. Doezema (1998) describes how the 19th century sex slave was depicted as “a white woman, victim of the animal lusts of the dark races” and in the 21st century, the racism changed its focus to exaggerate the new sex slaves as “passive, un-emancipated women from the developing world” (44). In the 1800s Chinese women and other women of color were viewed as overly sexual, deviant and promiscuous, as were Mexican women at the turn of the century. It was at this time that migration was also on the rise, and the government therefore felt the need to create a moral fear and panic over ‘the other.’ This social construction of sex slaves and third world women has many implications that have informed the current discourse and resulting policy decisions.

The final chapter of this book begins by briefly touching upon the fact that some feminists and activist groups acknowledge prostitution as a viable work option and legitimate job choice, and not necessarily a human rights abuse. However, Farr does not elaborate on this very important debate within the trafficking discourse. She also brings up other important issues that call for further consideration, related to cultural relativism versus universal human rights, within the context of the definitions of trafficking. Farr presents the immediate need to educate the public about sex trafficking as well as the need for long-term changes to alter underlying global structures and inequalities. Additional concerns in the area of sex trafficking are addressed in this chapter, which include supporting and helping the victims of trafficking by providing legal assistance, social services, and rescues. Farr does acknowledge that “rescues” are heavily critiqued by sex worker’s rights groups as being more like “raids” that create a displacement of sex workers who may not want to be “rescued” or “saved.” However, religious organizations, such as the International Justice Mission (IJM) who are funded by anti-trafficking grants from the U.S. government often do not take into account migrant women’s voices, their needs, and their (possible) desires for wanting to stay in a brothel to work as a prostitute (Jones, 2003). The new report by Jones (2003), also referenced in Farr’s book, stated that these rescues did not lead to significant jail time for the trafficker, but rather, punished the sex worker by taking away her only means of survival.

In a few concluding paragraphs in her final chapter, Farr asserts radical feminist notions that patriarchy is the cause of women’s oppression. While this may be a contributing factor in the trafficking phenomenon, it is crucial to look at trafficking from a more global feminist lens, taking into account racism and the agency of women from developing countries. While this book presents one side of the trafficking debate, it only briefly addresses issues that are crucial to consider; the phenomenon of trafficking is much more complex and multi-faceted. A more global feminist lens, rather than a narrow radical feminist lens, would take into account the multiple voices of women of color who have been historically oppressed and denied agency.

Regardless of its limitations, this book has many strengths, including its structure and organization. The globalization policies that cause and exacerbate sex trafficking are explained in a way that is easy to read and understand for both students and scholars. This book addresses the complexities of the phenomenon, such as the various immigration policies and prostitution policies in each country that women are trafficked into. There is a plethora of sources that are included in this book, although not all perspectives and research studies are given the same attention (which is understandable

given the author's point of view). In spite of these virtues that contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the dominant view of sex trafficking, additional limitations exist in this book.

Although the book focuses on sex trafficking, it is important to note that not all cases of trafficking are into the sex industry and the magnitude of sex trafficking cases is overestimated. In addition, while sex trafficking stories and cases provide a context for describing the phenomenon of sex trafficking, this serves to sensationalize and stereotype the experiences of those who have experienced the labor abuses of trafficking, while also implying that women of developing countries are 'victims' who are ignorant, easily duped and in need of rescue. Most labor rights feminists reject the term 'victim' because it does not take into account those migrants who willingly leave their homes for a better economic future. Referring to trafficked women as "vulnerable" (7) or "naïve" (2) takes away the agency and voice of women of color. This reinforces oppressive racial stereotypes about women from developing countries and implies that these women need to be "rescued" by western feminists who are smarter and stronger.

Farr's book provides extensive coverage of the history and operation of organized criminal networks, which is understandable given Farr's academic work in the area of crime and criminalization. However, the book does not present the history of trafficking (e.g. the 1910 Mann Act, also known as White Slave Traffic Act) and recent trafficking policy, both of which provide a context for current trafficking discourse. In addition, the two distinct feminist camps are not described in this book. These feminist wars regarding the definition of trafficking and the conflation of prostitution with sex trafficking have been instrumental in policy formation and media attention around trafficking. With the neo-abolitionist feminists' view that any prostitution or sex work is violence against women, advocating a criminal justice perspective as a response to (sex) trafficking only drives the sex industry further underground (Mellon, 1999), which results in making the conditions for women in the sex industry worse. It is important for scholars, policy makers and social services agencies to consider the complexities of the trafficking phenomenon and the multiple realities of migrants whose stories do not fit that of the dominant trafficking discourse which focuses on the sex industry.

In research relevant to trafficking, it is crucial to re-think the construction of violence within the trafficking framework and the need to turn to the state for protection. Instead, it is important to begin advocating for the human rights of all people through fair immigration laws and labor rights protection. It is time to start listening to the voices of immigrants who have experienced abuse while working in the sex industry, as well as domestic labor, factory work, agriculture and other areas. If the focus of trafficking is shifted from prostitution to various other areas of work where illegal migrants often experience abuse, those immigrants seeking assistance under the trafficking policy can begin to receive the protection needed against exploitation. A more inclusive perspective of trafficking that takes into account other types of work is crucial for addressing the oppressive and unsafe working conditions faced by migrants.

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