

***Illicit Flirtations: Labor, Migration, and Sex Trafficking in Tokyo.* By Rhacel Salazar Parrenas. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011.**

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1 The rhetoric of public officials and anti-trafficking activists, academic discourse, and the media often focus on sex trafficking as the sole defining feature of trafficking. TV programs and movies dramatize and/or sensationalize the plight of trafficking victims, mostly women from Asia and Eastern Europe, in forced prostitution. According to the US Department of State's *Trafficking in Person* Reports in 2004 and 2005, Filipina hostesses are the largest group of victims in global sex trafficking. Parrenas challenges the label of Filipina hostesses as trafficking victims coerced into prostitution. She argues that empirical studies are needed to assess the exact scope of trafficking among Filipina hostesses (or any groups of migrant women) and to formulate appropriate policies for redress. In *Illicit Flirtation: Labor, Migration, and Sex Trafficking in Tokyo*, she deconstructs this generalized portrayal of Filipina hostesses in Japan as trafficking victims through months of fieldwork. She works as an insider (a hostess) and conducts in-depth interviews with hostesses, club owners, brokers, non-governmental organizations, and government officials to understand these women workers' subjectivities and to accurately represent the lived experiences of Filipina hostesses.

2 Parrenas makes significant contributions both methodologically and substantively. While taking a case study approach, she provides comparative analysis without homogenizing Filipinas as a group. For example, she includes transgender women in her study and compares them to other hostesses. In addition, she stresses the importance of differentiating hostesses' experiences based on their immigration status, such as entertainers (contract workers), undocumented workers, and legal residents (often through marriage). These groups face different challenges and obstacles. Undocumented workers, such as women who overstay their visas or leave their clubs during contract, are far more vulnerable to exploitation by club owners or co-ethnics. To avoid detection and deportation under the criminalizing nature of the Japanese government policy, they have to remain invisible and live in the shadow. The comparison among different groups provides a more nuanced depiction of these women's lives in Tokyo.

3 She also provides various insights substantively. Her central argument is to problematize flattening forced labor and trafficking and generalizing certain cases of sex trafficking to a whole group of migrant women. She acknowledges that forced labor exists, not only in the case of hostesses but also those of foreign domestics and migrant farm workers. However, forced labor cannot be automatically translated into trafficking or sex trafficking in this case. Many of the women she interviews deny that they are trafficked victims. They might knowingly enter Japan illegally through the assistance of brokers. They know they would accrue debt and most of their wage would be deducted. They know that they would work as hostesses and understand that working conditions could be difficult. Yet they choose to work in Japan for the better earning. Parrenas uses the term “indentured mobility” to describe the experiences of these women. That is, while these women face structural constraints, such as poverty at home, deplorable working conditions, and illegal status, they do have agency and make their own decisions to work as hostesses. In other words, their actions are a result of the interaction between structure and agency. In addition to taking women’s agency into account, she argues that Filipina hostesses’ work should be considered as a labor migration issue rather than that of trafficking.

4 Parrenas places Filipina hostesses’ vulnerability to exploitation both during and after migration under the context of the Philippine and Japanese government policies. While protective measures, such as minimum age, an accreditation system, standards of employment, and broker regulations, are established for the best interest of these women, these policies, embedded with a culture of benevolent paternalism, end up legitimating women’s dependency on middle brokers (promoters, promotion agencies, and talent managers) for overseas employment and decreasing their ability to work overseas as independents. This state sanctioned dependency through paternalistic regulations engenders their vulnerability to servitude and deprives women of their agency.

5 In addition to the disempowering nature of state policy and brokerage system, she examines the intricacy of the labor regime and its bodily discipline within the clubs, which is another contextual factor constraining women’s agency. Parrenas uses the term bodily capital to refer to hostesses’ efforts to maintain their appearance to fit the beauty standard desired by the customer. The requirements for hostesses’ bodily movement and appearance aim at reinforcing their femininity and sexual desirability. For example, hostesses have to sit with their back

straight, one leg in front of the other, and their head tilted to one side. During the waiting time, hostesses are expected to sit or stand with their back straight, maintain a delightful demeanor, and express their excitement when being selected by a customer. They must constantly display their sexual desirability and use their flirtations to maximize their sale. Hostesses' provision of feminine appeal is to strengthen Japanese men's sense of masculinity through emotional, bodily, and ascetic labor. She makes an insightful observation about the similarity between the clubs' bodily control and the principle of Taylorism and its scientific management in assembly line. However, this is not to say that hostesses are completely powerless to resist. While they have to obey rules at the clubs, they are able to utilize their flirtatious skills outside clubs for financial gains. They invoke men's expectations for romance, love, or even sex when possible. Their flirtation and display of affection mean little to them. This pragmatic strategy does not necessarily violate their sense of moral value.

6 It is often questioned whether the hostess' occupation is considered as sex work and whether hostesses are prostitutes (or sex workers). While the Japanese society considers hostesses as prostitutes, women have their own definitions about their work depending on their own moral system. She divides these women into three groups, moral conservatives, moral-in-betweeners, and amoralists. The boundaries between these groupings are shifting and blurred. Further, clubs also impose their own moral regimes. She points out that moral regimes are different depending on the clubs and are thus not static. Women often find clubs of which the moral regime fits their value system. She also stresses that women's moral value does not remain stable and would switch their workplace based on their changing value system. This demonstrates the shifting and contextual nature of women's moral value. The important question we need to ask is: Who should have the authority to define these women's work and thus who they are? Should it be by government officials, activists, or women themselves?

7 Finally, Parrenas makes an important critique about the solution of anti-trafficking policies and campaigns, which frame these women as victims in need of rescue, rehabilitation, and reintegration. This paradigm of victimhood contradicts women's own view of themselves as agents capable of making choices, including choices to engage in sex work. The dominant discourse on sex trafficking, espoused by many Western feminists, denies women's agency and leads to their disempowerment. She argues that anti-trafficking needs to be delinked from anti-

prostitution, which is often based on white middle-class moralistic value about proper womanhood. Further, eradicating the opportunity for women to work as hostesses deprives them of their livelihood. Efforts to reduce their dependency on brokers, enable them to work as independents, better their working conditions at the clubs, de-criminalize their immigration status, and ensure their citizenship and human rights would be central to their empowerment. Most importantly, empirical work is needed to assess the true extent of trafficking and to formulate appropriate policies accordingly. What it entails is to listen to women's voices and understand their subjectivities.

8 Throughout the text, Parrenas maintains a delicate balance between structural constraints and women's agency. As mentioned earlier, Parrenas makes significant methodological and substantive contributions. This is an excellent book. Her study sets an important future research agenda that calls for more empirical work and has policy implications. This book is definitely a must read for scholars interested in fields of migration and trafficking.