

Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, **Illicit Flirtations: Labor, Migration and Sex Trafficking in Tokyo**, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011, 336 pp., \$65.00 (hardcover), \$15.35 (paperback), \$21.95 (e-book).

Reviewed by

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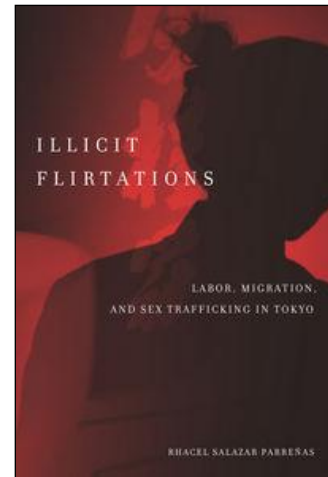
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Employing deep empathy and sharp self-reflection that often borders on the comedic, Rhacel Salazar Parreñas' *Illicit Flirtations: Labor, Migration and Sex Trafficking in Tokyo* delves into the world of Filipina hostess clubs in Tokyo, unpacking the nuances of affective and emotional labor that characterize this particular type of sex-work. The author exposes the problematic policies and moralistic underpinnings of the U.S.-driven antitrafficking movement in Japan.

Her subjects are the women working at "Manila," a B-rated, or working-class club on the periphery of Tokyo in which Filipina contract workers in their 20s and 30s invent and reinvent a form of labor known as hostessing. The younger workers, called *talents*, are lauded for their seemingly innocent youth; those in the older group are known as *arubaito*, often wiser women but less valued due to customers' suspicions that they have heavier financial burdens in the form of filial piety and thus are less "authentic" in their flirtations. The world of the hostess club is not unlike the world of many commercial erotic establishments in the United States. Sitting with male customers, conversing, teasing, comforting, and titillating them are part of the labor rituals, as is dancing and, on occasion, going out with customers on "dates." As Parreñas observes, these rituals of erotic and emotional performance serve to "buttress the masculinity" of customers who frequent such clubs (p. 90).

Parreñas skillfully deconstructs the way that affective and emotional labor translates into raw economics and paints a vivid portrait of the structural conditions that underlie this exchange, including families in the Philippines whom hostesses must care for due to their status as daughters and children and others who depend on their remittances to survive. Transgender hostesses and Filipina brides of Japanese men also receive analysis.

Central to Parreñas' study is the question of consent and coercion in hostess work and antitrafficking policy's response. Complicating the circumstances of an otherwise arguably autonomous and empowering vocation are club managers and middleman brokers, who take exorbitant cuts of the hostess' income. Perhaps the most important point underscored in this book reveals the policies that allow for this particular exploitative condition: Ironically, they are based in antitrafficking law. Because of their presumed status as severely trafficked persons in the State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report, Filipina hostesses are subject to paternalistic policies designed to protect them from the horrors of prostitution. However, as Parreñas reveals, it is these very policies that underlie their exploitation in other arenas, namely, the lack of protection under Japanese law and the burden of debt owed to middlemen,



who exploit the "liminal" legal status of talent hostesses (p. 78). She describes this exploitation occurring in the form of heavy penalties and fines for straying from strict beauty standards and behavioral rules of the club.

Certainly, life as a hostess in Tokyo has its drawbacks. But Parreñas is not content—nor should we be—to take these conditions at face value. In linking the exploitation of hostesses with antitrafficking policy itself, she exposes what has become one of the more controversial but crucial debates in antitrafficking scholarship: the implicit antiprostitution crusade that characterizes U.S. foreign policy. Antitrafficking policy masks a moral crusade against sex work and in so doing reestablishes the dominance of Western morality in one essentializing fell swoop. While some scholars argue in favor of this crusade, many "pro-rights" researchers argue that it almost always does more harm than good.

Parreñas' monograph makes an important contribution to this contested debate. As a sociologist, she is concerned with the economic and structural underpinnings of women's experiences and as such infuses her discussion with an unflinching look at the rate of exchange for services of affection. Laughter, companionship, flirting, feeding customers their meals, putting them at ease, looking pretty, and staying thin all have market value, while the actual sex act remains, for the most part, off the table. When sex is involved in hostess work, it is done away from the club and voluntarily. The detailed discussion of these nuances raises the question of what defines sex work, affect, emotional labor, and shows precisely how these forms of labor are commodified.

The book raises important questions about the meaning and morality of sexual labor and affective labor. Antiprostitution advocates will have to pause and question where such affective labor ends and where the sex act begins and in so doing be forced to question their judgments about the morality that underpins their crusade. If flirtation were a form of trafficking, then logic would follow that all women in any kind of dating relationship with a man who pays for dinner are being exploited. Through detailed accounts of the women's experiences, Parreñas exposes the danger in making sweeping generalizations about the sexual experiences of all women.

Compounding this exposure of the fallacy of the moral crusade is the equally pertinent discussion of the feminization of labor migration (Sassen, 2000) that is taking place across the globe. Parreñas shows how antitrafficking policy has worked to curtail migration from the Philippines to Japan—a circumstance that undoubtedly robs thousands of women of the opportunity to make a living and a life and subjects them to circumstances of poverty and disparity that would be unacceptable to many in the privileged West.

Exposing how antitrafficking policy restricts the mobility of women is an equally crucial conversation, one that must be revisited wherever the trafficking debate takes place. As other scholars studying the antitrafficking movement have pointed out, migration is a social and economic human right and therefore just as important as the civil and political rights (e.g., the right to free speech, the right to a trial) that tend to be lauded in the masculinist conception of the public sphere (see *The Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women*, 2010; Segrave, Pickering, & Milivojevic, 2009). Denying women the right to

freedom of mobility, Parreñas shows, is more detrimental to the circumstances of Filipina hostesses than is the danger of sexual coercion and exploitation.

The book argues that the potential exploitation of some does not justify a mass crusade for rescue of all. In other words, antitrafficking policy fails to account for the totality of women's experience in its insistence on collapsing the circumstances of all women. Parreñas argues that the State Department's 3P's (prevention, protection, prosecution) and 3R's (rescue, rehabilitation, reintegration) diminish the complexities of women's nuanced and subjective experiences (p. 148). This argument reiterates what scholars of feminist international relations have conceptualized as a positivistic, imperialistic move in policy (see, for example, Alcoff, 1991–1992; Mohanty, 2003; Tickner, 2001; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Parreñas names this move "benevolent paternalism" (p. 31), criticizing the State Department for implementing policies that, under the guise of rescue, actually restrict women's autonomy and enhance their vulnerability. She explains,

The universal solution of "rescue, rehabilitation, and reintegration" that is advocated by the U.S. government and followed by Japan does not address all of their needs. Some [hostesses] may not want rescue, which for many means job elimination, but instead job improvement and labor market flexibility. (p. 175)

Parreñas' argument underscores a crucial push pack against the dominant narrative of trafficking, which uses the rhetoric of universalism to justify an international movement against all things related to sex-work. This argument is important because it challenges the supposed liberal ideology of the West and exposes its hegemonic (indeed, neo-colonial) policies in the developing world.

Exemplifying this hegemonic trope are journalists such as Nicolas Kristoff, one of the antitrafficking movement's foremost Western spokesmen, who has been a leader in this stance with his "Half the Sky" campaign. In an interview with Urmi Basu, an activist working against sex trafficking in India, Kristoff notes,

The underlying theme of violence and fear is the same anywhere in the world where humans are bought and sold as chattel and forced to perform degrading acts for the profit of others, from the North American flesh trade to the brothel in a far-flung corner of Cambodia. (www.pbs.org)

Such sweeping universalisms not only strip women's subjective experiences and relativistic cultural attitudes toward sex, sex-work, and labor, but they also privilege a narrative of law and order over the subjective needs and experiences of communities and women (Segrave et al., 2009). As other feminist scholars have noted (see Chuang, 1998; Doezema, 2010), claiming that sex trafficking is the same as sex-work, and that this circumstance is inherently degrading and demeaning to women all over the world denies women agency. In the words of Parreñas, it "flattens" the experience of women, homogenizing and thereby ignoring their needs (p. 6).

As Parreñas points out, hostesses engage in "moral autonomy," choosing for themselves to what extent their performances incorporate affection and sexuality:

Contrary to hostess' one-dimensional portrayal as victims of forced prostitution, I found that they carry a semblance of control over their interactions with customers and accordingly maintain different levels of sexual intimacy with them. Migrant hostesses play with their gender and sexuality at work, where customers pay per hour to receive care, accolades, sexual titillation, entertainment, and servility. Hostesses accordingly feed, praise, touch, perform by singing or dancing, and playfully flirt with customers. Yet they do so not uniformly but instead according to their morality. (p. 147)

The subjectivity of hostesses' experience and control over the parameters of their work contradicts the State Department's definition of these women as severely trafficked persons and exposes the collapsing of forced and consensual sex-work, which, in this case, extends into the realm of labor that does not even include the sexual act of penetration. In this study, intimacy is redefined as "emotional labor" (p. 132) and analyzed along a continuum of expressive acts that may or may not be sexual or even emotionally "authentic" in nature (p. 151). Such a deconstruction calls into question the fetishization of romantic love that characterizes the West's ongoing concern over prostitution.

Why has the State Department made such an egregious error? Parreñas explains that it is the moral crusade of antiprostitution that colors the State Department's antitrafficking policy. The argument that sex-work is a violation of women's rights continues to loom large in the antitrafficking debate. However, in examining the actual daily work activities of these Filipina hostesses in Tokyo, readers must ask: If moral, emotional, and financial autonomy are not the true mark of freedom, what then would freedom for women really entail?

Illicit Flirtations offers a crucial contribution to the push back against a narrative that seeks to homogenize the experiences of all women and privilege the morality of the West. It is an important book that should be read and reread by those compelled to look underneath the veneer of human rights rhetoric for a deeper understanding of the complex issue of human trafficking.

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