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What I Learned by Being a Migrant Sex Worker (Part 1): Parrenas

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By Rhacel Salazar Parrenas

(This is the first of two excerpts from Rhacel Salazar Parrenas's new book, "Illicit Flirtations: Labor, Migration, and Sex Trafficking in Tokyo.")

Oct. 13 (Bloomberg) -- A decade ago, the U.S. government determined that apart from terrorism, the gravest threat to democracy in the world was human trafficking. It vowed to wage war on this scourge as well as on terrorism.

A series of congressional hearings focused attention on what was said to be the forced labor, debt bondage and coerced migration of 800,000 individuals, 80 percent of whom supposedly were women and children, throughout the world. Emphasis was placed on trafficking in the sex industry. The hearings culminated in passage of the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000.

The act requires the U.S. Department of State to submit to Congress an annual report -- the Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report -- describing the efforts of foreign governments to eliminate human trafficking. A country that fails to take significant actions receives a "Tier 3" assessment, which can trigger the withholding of non-humanitarian, non-trade-related assistance from the U.S.

According to the 2004 report, Filipinas who work as hostesses in clubs in Japan constituted the world's largest group of sex-trafficked persons, making up more than 10 percent of those 800,000 victims. They were identified as trafficked under the assumption of their "sexual exploitation." These women and male-to-female transgendered individuals generally enter Japan on visas that allow them to work as artists or entertainers, a vehicle the U.S. claimed traffickers exploited to bring them into the country.

Visa Changes

After being placed on the Tier 2 Watch List, a deeply embarrassed Japan imposed new visa requirements and a more rigorous screening process for migrant entertainers from the Philippines. No longer can the Philippine government evaluate the artistic ability of entertainers seeking visas for Japan. Instead, to qualify for a visa, an individual must have had two years of training or an internship as a performing artist, and work experience in Japan does not count.

Afterward, the number of Filipina hostesses employed as contract workers in Japan fell 90 percent, from 82,741 in 2004 to 8,607 in 2006.

This might seem to suggest a victory in the global anti- trafficking campaign, but I argue it poses a setback to the emancipation of women. It has stripped thousands of migrant women of their livelihood, forcing them to stay at home, often in impoverished conditions. I challenge the identification of migrant Filipina hostesses as sex-trafficked persons. In fact, prostitutes are a small minority of all Filipinas in Japan, just 2.8 percent.

How do I know?

In a nine-month study in Tokyo in 2005 and 2006, I interviewed 56 Filipina hostesses and worked as a hostess myself. None of the hostesses I encountered wanted to be rescued from their employment. Most found that migration had made them breadwinners in their families, a position that granted them decision-making power and earned them the respect of their kin. In some instances, participating in commercial flirtation allowed them to challenge conservative norms that limited the acceptable sexual activities of women.

Here's something else I found, an observation supported by other studies: Filipina hostesses in Japan sell drinks, not sex, in hostess clubs. While they perform sex work in that they titillate customers via commercial flirtation, "sex work" is not "prostitution." It encompasses a wide array of services including flirtation and stripping -- in addition to prostitution. For hostesses, acts of commercial flirtation include playful bantering, seductive dance and song performances, and, in rare instances, sex acts such as groping and discreet masturbation of customers beneath the table.

No Coercion Seen

For the most part, no one coerced my fellow hostesses to work in Japan. They were not drugged, taken on planes and trapped in clubs. No one lied to them or

explicitly told them they would only be singing and dancing onstage.

This is not to say that migrant Filipina hostesses do not face serious problems. First, middleman brokers who arrange for visas, transit and job placement charge high rates upfront, subjecting hostesses to what amounts to indentured servitude. Once in Japan, hostesses cannot legally change clubs. Because being undocumented is a crime, those who are fired and remain in Japan become dependent on their next employer and on other Filipinos who may exploit their vulnerability by withholding wages or overcharging them for housing.

Still, migrant Filipina entertainers see servitude abroad as a much better option than their other choice of immobility in the Philippines. The current solution to their problems ignores their preference to be left with the option to work in Japan, ideally under improved conditions. What those conditions were like, at least as I experienced them, will be the subject of the next installment.

(Rhacel Salazar Parrenas is a sociology professor at the University of Southern California. This is the first in a two- part excerpt from her new book "Illicit Flirtations: Labor, Migration, and Sex Trafficking in Tokyo," to be published Oct. 15 by Stanford University Press.)

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