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Much ado about a small segment of the global sex industry

Michael Duffy
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A problem that has captured the imagination of our time is the international trafficking of women for sex. It's on the increase because of globalisation, and has become a presence in popular culture. Often the theme of books and television drama, it was the subject of last year's good Australian film *The Jammed*.

But while trafficking, which involves force and deception, does occur and is a terrible crime, its extent has been hugely exaggerated. This is because the so-called rescue industry often deliberately confuses it with another and far more common activity: voluntary travel by women who want to work in another country's sex industry.

We've seen this linguistic subterfuge before. In the days when the Howard government wanted public support for its efforts to deport boat people, we often heard that this was necessary in order to deter evil "people-traffickers". In fact, most of the boat people had not been trafficked but smuggled, which means they were happy to pay someone who could get them to Australia. Those providing this service were breaking the law but (with the exception of men who provided unseaworthy vessels) they were not in the same moral category as those who trick Thai girls into coming to Australia and then imprison them in brothels.

But there aren't many people doing that, although you wouldn't know it from the publicity the Government's anti-trafficking effort gets, assisted by media-friendly raids on brothels by the Immigration Department. Australia is hardly unique in this regard, and it's time to realise that the world, prompted by the current American administration, has exaggerated the extent of this sort of activity. The victims are often legally employed sex workers.

The Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women has published a report called "Collateral Damage: the impact of anti-trafficking measures on human rights around the world". In the Australian chapter, by the Alliance staffer Elaine Pearson, one learns that "government attention to trafficking, as far as sex workers are concerned, has meant increased immigration raids on brothels, harassment of Asian sex workers in particular and disruption of their work. Three sex-worker organisations providing outreach to migrant sex workers stated that non-trafficked migrant sex workers working legally in Australia have been wrongly detained in raids at workplaces ... Sex workers who are Australian citizens of Asian descent have also been subjected to increased harassment."

Someone who has looked closely at sex and migration internationally is Laura Maria Agustin, who has spent years talking to migrant sex workers and those who are paid to "rescue" them in America and Europe. She's just published a book called *Sex At The Margins* (Zed Books), and I spoke to her about it recently on Radio National.

Agustin says many migrants who sell sex choose to do so not because it's a matter of survival or because they're forced to, but because it's a way of bettering themselves.

In Agustin's view, many Westerners get very upset about this because they believe "people who are poor in the Third World are, almost by definition, not able to make any choices, are forced to do things, have been deceived, cannot possibly know what's going to happen to them and therefore are in need of the help of people who understand the world better. And when the situation involves women who sell sex, this is exaggerated by the belief on many people's part that any woman who is selling sex must have been misled, could not possibly want to do that."

But, based on the many women she's talked to, she says they do want to do that. They've decided working in the sex industry is better than the alternatives, a decision no one but they can make.

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One might argue it would be better if they had other options, but they don't. And they have to live the lives they've got, not some fantasy alternative imagined by well-intentioned Westerners.

Agustin is struck by the way the linking of sex and migration exercises such a hold on the Western imagination. Every First World city is full of locally born sex workers, yet rarely is any concern expressed about this. Those cities are also full of migrants being exploited in non-sexual occupations, yet once again, public concern is rare. But when the two are placed together, it creates a sort of moral brain snap.

This is the case in Australia, where, the Global Alliance report notes, the government has been relatively uninterested in migrants trafficked for non-sex work. "From 1999 until the end of June 2005," it says, "159 individuals were identified as suspected victims of trafficking by [the Immigration Department] and/or the Australian Federal Police.

"Of this number, only 7.5 per cent of the victims were in sectors other than the sex industry. This is despite the fact that irregular workers are far more commonly found in sectors such as hospitality, agriculture, manufacturing, retail trade and construction than in the sex industry."

Elena Jeffreys, president of Scarlet Alliance, the Australian Sex Workers Association, told the *Herald*: "The Australian Federal Government has spent more money on anti-trafficking measures targeting the sex industry than has been spent in the entire history of the regulation of our industry ...

"Although the raids on brothels and so on are targeted at Asian women, in a bid to locate those who have been trafficked, they affect everyone else who works there. No other legal industry in Sydney suffers this level of disruption by government officials."

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2008/06/13/1213321616701.html>