

On the footsteps of women trafficking: a woman's journey in South-East Asia. Book Review of Louise Brown's Sex Slaves: The Trafficking of Women in Asia, Virago Press, London 2001.

I shall begin by saying that it is hard to do justice to Louise Brown's work with a book review. *Sex Slaves* cannot be easily summarized or even fully described, as each single line of its 276 pages touches the very heart of sex trade, and the very heart of the reader with sensitivity and unforgiving clarity. I shall only present parts of Brown's argument, and highlight how this book is growing in importance today, as women trafficking becomes ever more practiced, and ever more ignored. The information that Brown collects details the dynamics of sex trade in Asia. Her research spreads from China to India, passing through Thailand, Cambodia, Burma and Vietnam; Nepal, Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia. Practicing sex workers are Brown's main sources of information, although interviews with these women were understandably short due to both brothel control and labor demands.

Brown is very critical about traditional research methodology:

Prostitution is not a subject that is easily tackled using traditional research methodology. Standard research techniques were particularly useless when the issues to be investigated were trafficking and sexual slavery, as the slave owners were understandably sensitive about an outsider interviewing the slaves. Close observation of the girls' time with their clients was also out of the question, and approaching clients directly proved to be personally risky [...]. Many of the sex workers who had achieved a degree of independence welcomed me into their rooms with a generosity of time and a warmth of spirit [...]. Some of the most rewarding hours of my life were spent in the company of these women. My thanks for this can never be adequate enough (p. X).

Historically speaking, Brown traces the origins of mass prostitution back to World War II. Although women were sexually abused in the form of concubinage and landlord's abuse before, it was only after WWII that the growing affluence of a few sectors of Asian society enabled men to spend their money on the purchase of sex, and it was only after WWII that military prostitution came to assume mass proportions.

What gave military prostitution a real boost was the arrival of high-spending American troops during the Korean and especially Vietnam Wars. During the 1960s and early 1970s United States servicemen posted to Vietnam traveled to Thailand for R&R, or Rest and Recreation. More accurately, this was referred to as I&I, Intercourse and Intoxication (p. 9).

A vast and lucrative sector of the sex industry developed wherever US troops were based: from Thailand to Korea and the Philippines. When the U.S. pulled out of Vietnam the sex business survived by replacing military personnel with tourists-customers from any developed nation of the West who were desperate to find "young, beautiful, submissive, sexy and cheap Thai girls" who could "cater to their

unfulfilled needs” (p. 9). The petty conduct of weak Western males seeking “better treatment than that meted out by aggressive, demanding and unfeminine Western women” (p. 9) in the sexual exploitation of Eastern women has been largely emphasized by Western media in order to fasten up tourism. However, “contrary to the image of the sex tourist as a Western middle-aged or elderly pervert”, the men escorting beautiful women in these countries were “drawn from a whole spectrum of Western males. These men are our fathers, husbands, brothers and sons”(p. 10). And not only: while Western complicity in the Eastern sex trade is visible,

What this does is to obscure other, even more crucial consumers from view. In fact, most Asian prostitutes sell sex to Asian men. By comparison, the number of Western clients pales into insignificance, although these men are important because, on average, they pay for more. The sex tourism business grew from, and now grows alongside, the indigenous sex trade (p. 11).

Generally speaking, critical Western social scientists may have a hard time pointing their fingers at the indigenous responsibility in the Asian sex trade. In large part such resistance is ethically understandable as well as necessary, as the work of Western scholars should be directed towards the contradictions in their own native lands. However Bown’s argument is worth investigating, as ultimately women’s exploitation can only flourish in patriarchal societies, and in this sense the East is unfortunately not better off than the West.

Brown describes women’s poor life conditions in Asia by collecting the life-stories of many women. She describes how these women frequently tell similar stories about the background of their work. According to their interviews, for most women the main problem is the enormous gender inequality of traditional Asian society. In traditional Asia, a woman is validated by her relationship with a male. Even though the economic context of Asia is changing rather quickly, old forms of discrimination are being reformulated to preserve the sexual privileges of men (p. 31). In this context, problems within the family, as well as poverty, are the most important factors pushing girls into prostitution. A major issue in this context is the institution of dowry.

In traditional Asia, families need to pay for their daughters to be married and the status of the match depends on the size of dowry. It goes without saying that this practice problematizes marriage for poor women and reinforces marriages within the same caste.

In most parts of poverty-stricken South Asia the birth of a daughter is unwelcome because a female is considered to be an economic liability [...]. So not only does a girl's family have to feed and raise her but they also have to pay a substantial sum to marry her off [...] It is with good reason that a girl in South Asia is often described as a guest in her father's house (p. 31).

For those who cannot pay dowry the options are marriage with an unpromising husband or no marriage at all. A sixteen-year-old prostitute in Kolkata explained that:

My mother died three years ago and my father married again soon after. My new mother didn't want me... Especially when she had a new son. And my aunts and uncles didn't want me either because no one wanted to have the expense of marrying me. So I was sent to the city to find work. That way they said that they wouldn't have the cost of feeding me either (p. 31).

According to Brown, sixty per cent of girls from Northern Thailand enter prostitution in order to support their parents (p. 59). A recent survey by UNICEF of Nepali prostitutes working in India revealed that around 86% of these women did not know that they were destined for the sex market until when they left home. Of those that were duped into prostitution 82% had been promised a job (p. 66). Another common story repeated through South Asia is that of a failed romance becoming a prelude to prostitution:

I am from a village a long way from here in West Bengal. My family is very, very poor. There were four children in our family. My father is dead and my mother could not feed me and my brothers and sisters. We didn't have a proper home and we were always hungry. Everyone in the village looked down on us because we were poor and from a low caste. When I was thirteen some youths from our village took me into a field away from the village and they raped me. There were five of them and they were from a high-caste family. I was crying and I went back to the village but the youths said I went with them willingly. the village *panchayat* [council] said that I had a bad character and was not respectable and that I shouldn't tell lies about the youths. They told my mother that I had to leave the village because I was a bad influence. No one wanted to marry me and my mother could not afford a dowry so she brought me here. There was nowhere else I could go (p. 47).

In other cases many wives are completely at the mercy of their husbands and “what the businessmen of the sex trade do is to marry a woman and then pimp her out” (p. 68). It is a similar story for the dispossessed everywhere, writes Brown. Many times these women say that their families sent them or at least gave them permission to leave home. For most people, in most communities, prostitution remains an “unacceptable trade”. Yet, the mixture of poverty, consumer culture and lack of better opportunities has dramatically altered societal values about prostitution in several areas of Asia. In Northern and North-Eastern Thailand, in parts of Nepal, Indonesia, China, Burma and India, families know that their daughters will become sex workers (p. 52). In some cases families pretend not to know “in order to spare themselves the shame of sending a girl into prostitution” (p. 53). However, for many of them it is “unspoken knowledge” (p. 52). In places where inequitable patterns of economic growth have excluded most sectors of society from basic food and survival requirements, prostitution simply becomes a “quick financial fix” (p. 27).

Selling sex – or being sold for sex – is a form of work that the poor and badly educated can easily enter [...]. Prostitution is also a form of work that will continue to ensure that the poor, apart from a lucky few, remain poor and badly educated. It is, nevertheless, an employment trend, or a survival mechanism, that is fast becoming acceptable in large parts of Asia. It is acceptable to countries like Thailand and the Philippines, which see the sale of their women

as a development strategy. It is acceptable to some families who will sell their children into prostitution. It is acceptable to girls who are raised and educated for little else, and acceptable to those women who see it as a lucrative career option. Nepali women figure prominently in this record of sex slaves of Asia's brothels. And so do Indian, Bangladeshi, Thai, Burmese, Pakistani, Cambodian and Filipina women. Many of these women have had little to say in the narrow options that have determined their fate. Some have had absolutely no choice. A few of the accounts tell of irredeemably shattered lives (pp. 27-28).

Brown's interviews to these women are harrowing. They tell stories of women sold when they were merely a few years of age, and whose gifts of beauty and vitality served them only the gain of ten more customers a day or a sexual disease. Many trafficked girls and those who are directly coerced into prostitution in Asia share lower class origins and low educational levels (p. 57): a report by the International Labor Organization found that sex workers were less educated than the average woman. In India, most women are illiterate, and brothel-based prostitutes and streetwalkers have little or no schooling. In Songachi, which is the biggest brothel in Calcutta, only 15% of the women are literate. In all these cases, "the extent of prostitution, trafficking and abuse within the sex trade is inseparable from the level of sexual repression within a society and the degree of control that is exercised over women" (p. 25).

It is no accident that life for poor Pakistani prostitutes is abysmal because it is also pretty tough for most Pakistani women. There is a beautifully neat symmetry: strict sexual codes and rigorously male-dominated societies are mirrored by widespread system of sexual slavery and a regular supply of trafficked women to the sex trade. When these unhappy factors are added to poverty and to wide income disparities their results are catastrophic for most vulnerable women (p. 25).

As a result, these women are a mirror for some of the worse contradictions of society: a society which is still ruled by strong gender inequality and where women still lack basic respect and social opportunities.

I don't like this work but there is nothing else that I can do, I haven't got a good husband and family. I haven't got an education. I am an ignorant woman. This thing – entertaining men – is the only thing I can do (p. 245).

The evils of this picture unfortunately are not confined to Asia. The Asian sex trade overcomes regional borders both in its ability to attract foreign customers and in its proven ability to export sex slaves. It follows that in both the Eastern and in the Western hemisphere, women are objectified and subjugated by strong patriarchal ties. In this context prostitution becomes a symbol for "the very worst of human failings", as Brown defines it (p. 247):

The exploitation of the weakest; the power of money; the superficiality of appearance; men's abuse of power, and the categorization of women according to their sexual utility and their relationship to men (p. 247).

Given the complex intersection of patriarchy, poverty and lack of better opportunities for these women, it is important to keep working against the pauperization of the peripheries and the feminization of poverty and exploitation; and to resist a new distribution of privileges and power along gender lines: women deserve a long-overdue emancipation. Yet, despite the grim circumstances that ruled their lives, Louise Brown's passionate description of their life-stories shows that their experiences become not only symbolic of excruciating life conditions, but it is also "a testimony to the capacity of individual women to cope with exploitation and to survive it with an inspiring dignity" (pp. 27-28).

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