Anthropological Perspectives on the Trafficking of Women for Sexual Exploitation

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ABSTRACT

The sexual exchange of girls and women embodies deep cultural practices and is historically embedded in many family and kinship systems. Contemporary trafficking operations transform traditional bride wealth and marriage exchanges (prestations) by treating women’s sexuality and bodies as commodities to be bought and sold (and exchanged again) in various Western capitals and Internet spaces. Such operations are also global with respect to scale, range, speed, diversity, and flexibility. Propelling many trafficking exchanges are political economic processes, which increase the trafficking of women in times of stress, such as famine, unemployment, economic transition, and so forth. However, the disparity between the global market operations, which organize trafficking, and the late nineteenth century social/public welfare system of counter-trafficking suggests why the latter do not effectively address women’s risks and may even expose them to increased levels of violence and stress. Drawing on historical accounts, anthropological theory, and ethnographic work in Viet Nam and Bosnia and Herzegovina, this essay examines how specific cultural practices embedded in family and kinship relations encourage and rationalize sexual trafficking of girls and young women in times of stress and dislocation. The essay also analyses how technologies of power inform both trafficking and counter-trafficking operations in terms of controlling women’s bodies, sexuality, health, labour, and migration. By analysing sexual trafficking as a cultural phenomenon in its own right, such an analysis seeks to inform and address the specific situations of girls and young women, who suffer greatly from the current migration regimes.

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INTRODUCTION

My husband has two ancestors who were trafficked women. The first, as a young woman, was caught stealing a handkerchief in Bristol, England, and was immediately put on a boat bound for Sydney. Upon arrival in Australia, the magistrate, who heard her case, made her pregnant and later married her. The second, as a young girl in the St. Germain District of Paris, ran away from home when her mother died and her father remarried. Because she reportedly slept with several men (who had no intention of marriage), her father turned her over to the police who put her on a boat bound for New Orleans. There, she was married off to a young farmer who probably treated her as indentured labour. The specific details of these young women’s suffering – their imprisonment, forced marriage, indentured labour, and loneliness – are lost. Over time, their children must have conveniently forgotten and later their ancestors never heard or knew these aspects of their stories until my brother-in-law decided to investigate why they migrated overseas.

Most likely these two young women were trafficked for sexual exploitation in many of the same ways an estimated 700,000 girls and young women are trafficked each year today (US State Department, 2001). Although today they travel less frequently by boat, their journeys too transverse continents by plane, buses, trains, trucks, and cars and are equally well organized by tour companies, traffickers and smugglers, and police and government officials. As our ancestors, young women today may be bonded by another family member or by those in positions of power and authority; without identity documents or the financial means, they are hostage to those in an unfamiliar land. Sex is offered for safe passage and they are held as virtual slaves with no rights over their own bodies and labour. What distinguishes these historical accounts from many others over time is that these two young women survived and prospered to pass on valuable capital to kin and future generations.

Contemporary markets for sexual trafficking also benefit from globalization and growing female migration within an internationally gendered labour market (Wijers and Lapchew, 1999; IOM, 1995). By definition, trafficking for sexual exploitation involves some aspect of forced labour and/or migration for the purpose of exchange of sexual services (Kelly and Regan, 2000). The forms of trafficking reflect a continuum of limited autonomy to complete bondage (Long, 2002). In the most extreme forms of sexual slavery, the girls or women may be forcibly abducted, raped, and imprisoned. However, many trafficked women may initially choose to sell sexual services in return for safe passage and a livelihood in an affluent Western capital and then find during the course of the journey or
transaction that they have little control over their labour (Long, 2002). In the Australian case, the women were vulnerable to trafficking because of being transported for a petty crime after which their sexuality could be exploited to gain economic advantages. At a macro level, England at the time actually encouraged sexual unions and marriages to stabilize its colonies and thus, encouraged systematic exploitation (Rees, 2001). While male migrants may also be forced to provide bonded or indentured labour (and held as slaves), the vast majority of cases of trafficking for sexual slavery involve girls and young women (Kolakovic et al., 2002). Other forms of trafficking that are not gender specific include selling organs of children and adults and bonded or indentured labour of any kind (Kelly and Regan, 2000). The trafficking of young women for sexual exploitation, however, is highly gendered and its current scale affects the social and economic security of all young women by the actual occurrence or threat of being so exploited (US State Department, 2001).

The trafficking of young women for sexual exploitation has become an increasing concern of various political, religious, and migration authorities. Such accounts largely position women as victims, who need the protection of vested powerful and institutional interests. For example, accounts of trafficking portrayed by the US Government, Catholic Church, or European Union (EU) immigration authorities are used to justify a particular political, moral, and economic regime. Their prescriptions, often arguing for controls on women’s labour, sexuality, and mobility or on organized crime fail to address the underlying causes of this form of trafficking, which include high rates of unemployment, limited legal migration opportunities, and the position and treatment of young women by their families and communities.

In contrast, most press and non-governmental organization (NGO) accounts begin with the women’s own descriptions and reported experiences (Finkel, 2001; Human Rights Watch, 2002). Such accounts acknowledge the social and economic conditions which place women in harm’s way. Yet, media and NGO awareness and investigation have their own unexamined interests. At one extreme, media accounts capitalize on the combination of sexuality and exploitation to provoke a public voyeurism that sells copy but also effectively distances audiences from real lived experiences. For the women themselves, such accounts may further victimize and dehumanize by treating the women as objects rather than subjects of their own histories. Other accounts privilege the contemporary social and economic complexities of women’s experiences but fail to show how historically trafficking exchanges are embedded in family and kinship relationships. In such accounts, the sexual trafficking of women usually appears in relation to and/or to justify other interests related to migration, crime, public health, and human rights concerns.
Ironically, some of the most compelling and insightful accounts may come from Interpol and police records and analyses of organized crime organizations and operations (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2000). Policing efforts must address the social, economic, and cultural aspects of trafficking in order to be effective, although far too often their own members may be implicated and embedded in such operations (Human Rights Watch, 2002; Long, 2002). While largely ignoring individual histories and the unique aspects of this phenomena (e.g. that these young women often come from families who already exploit their labour and social capital), policing operations consider the social and political contexts, networks, and relationships within which migration trajectories and work experiences are organized. Earlier historical accounts of trafficking, reflecting a moral or religious indignation, nevertheless provide similar insights, which many contemporary accounts largely ignore (see for example, Bell, 1910).

Despite the current popularity of this topic, contemporary sexual trafficking experiences remain largely invisible, reflecting in large part the particular interests and agenda of those defining trafficking for sexual exploitation rather than the lived experiences and perceptions of those who are trafficked. Thus, despite the current preoccupation and popularity of this issue, such experiences are largely the contemporary hidden histories, exposed to illuminate other, “larger” political events and trends and to justify political, moral, and social regimes (Wolf, 1982; Schneider and Rapp, 1996). Given the growing and widespread occurrence, the trafficking of young women for sexual exploitation, however, is worthy of analysis in its own right.

As anthropologists have long observed, the reason that sexual trafficking of women as a phenomena in its own right remains largely hidden is because the sexual exchange of girls and women embodies deep cultural practices and is historically embedded in many family and kinship systems (Mauss, 1990; Rubin, 1975). Yet, contemporary trafficking operations transform traditional bride wealth and marriage exchanges (prestations) by treating women’s sexuality and bodies as commodities to be bought and sold (and exchanged again) in various Western capitals and Internet spaces. Such commodification, which is highly gendered, is not unique to trafficking but may also be seen as an outcome of public symbolic representations of young women in Western cultures and in their treatment as consumers and producers in global markets (Ginsburg, 1989; Vance, 1990). Becoming Western for many countries of the former Soviet Union is idealizing these commodified, sexualized images of women’s bodies in employment and immigration practices (e.g. specifying women’s measurements in want advertisements or promoting the sale of women’s sexual services across national boundaries).
Trafficking markets are also global with respect to their scale, range, speed, diversity, and flexibility. Thus, a young rural woman trafficked from Ukraine may travel through Cancun and end up performing in the bars of Los Angeles within a period of a few short weeks (as reported in a personal communication with an INS officer in 2001). Propelling many trafficking exchanges are political economic processes, which increase the trafficking of women in times of stress, such as famine, unemployment, and economic transition, etc. The desire to gain enormous profits and to use trafficking operations to disguise more lucrative and dangerous operations, namely the smuggling of arms and drugs, also results in young women being enslaved and subjected to horrific forms of violence. However, such violence, like rape, reflects gendered relationships of power, control, and profit rather than having any inherent sexual meaning.

As these issues suggest, trafficking for sexual exploitation is a highly complex phenomenon. Using anthropological analysis and insights, this essay explores contemporary forms of trafficking of young girls and women across regional and international boundaries. The essay draws on historical accounts, anthropological theory, and ethnographic experiences, including my own professional experiences in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Viet Nam. Following the war and break-up of the former Yugoslavia, Bosnia and Herzegovina became a nexus of a major trafficking and migration route from Central and Eastern Europe (primarily Moldova, Romania, and Ukraine) to Western Europe and North America. During that period, I worked with and interviewed many trafficked girls and young women, NGOs, governments, international organizations, police, investigators, prosecutors, and private individuals with some knowledge of the situation. In Viet Nam, I conducted research on trafficking, migration, and sex work on the Cambodian border for design of HIV/AIDS intervention strategies (Bao et al., 1999). The essay that follows incorporates observations and interviews from those experiences.

In this essay, I first examine how specific cultural practices embedded in family and kinships systems in periods of social and economic stress and dislocation encourage and rationalize sexual trafficking of girls and young women. Second, I analyse the technologies of power, which inform both trafficking and counter-trafficking operations in terms of controlling women’s bodies, sexuality, health, labour, and migration. I also contrast the global market operations, which organize trafficking, in contrast to the late nineteenth century social/public welfare system of counter-trafficking. The disparity in these two organizational forms may explain why the current counter-trafficking systems do not address women’s risks and expose them to increased levels of violence and stress (by increasing the costs of some market exchanges). Throughout, I reference specific examples and experiences from contemporary operations and from written historical
Long records. My objective in researching and writing this essay was to explore sexual trafficking as a phenomenon in its own right. In so doing, I hope this analysis may lead to new theoretical insights and policy perspectives, which might better inform and address the specific situations of girls and young women, who suffer greatly from the current migration regimes.

TRAFFICKING AS CULTURAL PRACTICE

Once in a closed carriage, they are lost (E.A. Bell, Attorney General, Illinois, 1906, describing young rural girls being trafficked in Chicago).

The asymmetry of gender – the difference between exchanges and exchanged – entails the constraint of female sexuality (Rubin, 1975: 183).

As an issue in its own right, trafficking for sexual exploitation is very difficult to address because: (1) as Bell (1910) observes it largely involves a private and hidden exchange that is on the move (mobile); and (2) as Rubin (1975) observes, trafficking – and specifically the giving of women as gifts – underlies most marriage and kinship systems. While Bell’s observation suggests the logistical difficulties of making these phenomena visible, Rubin’s classic analysis on trafficking of women, suggests the socio-cultural basis of these phenomena across many societies and in many different economic systems (not just capitalist free markets).

Rubin (1975) poses the gender and cultural arguments to explain why trafficking is both pervasive in many different societies and, yet, invisible. She agrees with Mauss (1990) that gifts – and the most precious being women – between societies form the basis for much of social intercourse. As numerous scholars have observed such gifts were historically used to achieve peace (the underlying social basis of exogamy) (Comaroff, 1980; Hutchinson, 1996; Mikell, 1997). However, while agreeing that the exchange itself does not necessarily objectify or commodify women, she observes that there is a distinction between the gift and the giver. As the gift, women themselves are in no position to realize the benefits. Thus, she locates women’s oppression within the practice of trafficking and suggests that most if not all forms of marriage and exchanges of that kind are implicated. While Rubin (1975: 203) recognizes that a sex/gender system is not “immutably oppressive”, she also notes that kinship and marriage are always tied into larger economic and political arrangements. Rubin’s distinction between the gift and giver underscores the gendered basis of trafficking and why women in non-capitalist and pre-capitalist societies may be equally oppressed (even if they are not commodified).
Traditional practices

Specific traditional practices also help to rationalize forms of trafficking. Rubin (1975: 163) observes that the "ethnographic record is littered with practices whose effect is to keep women in their place". While she would argue that all marriage and kinship exchange involves trafficking of women, certain cultural practices precursor and/or more directly create the preconditions for contemporary forms of sexual trafficking across national and international boundaries. Amongst Vietnamese Khmer parents in southern Viet Nam, an exchange of gifts (usually food, clothing, and money) at time of marriage was common. Following the marriage, the woman was expected to move to her in-laws (patrilocal residence) and provide labour for the husband’s family. These exchanges benefited both families’ welfare (the loss of the daughter’s labour and the gain of a daughter-in-law’s labour). Faced with increasing impoverished rural communities, the Vietnamese Khmer described how many young eligible men migrated to the cities. Because of shortages of eligible men, many parents were enticed by the payments and promises offered by traffickers, who then transported the young women to brothels in Saigon or across the border to Phnom Penh and Bangkok. Initially, many parents believed the traffickers’ promises of finding an eligible husband for their daughters. The young women themselves saw these journeys as a necessary sacrifice to benefit the entire family. However, forms of bride wealth (marriage payments and prestations) when appropriated in a trafficking exchange in modern capitalist societies transform traditional exchanges into market transactions. While a traditional society may see no moral problem with exchanging the woman and the woman herself may believe she is thereby benefiting her family and kin, once the transaction enters an international market, its whole meaning and value changes. For the trafficker, the woman’s body becomes a marketable asset and her sexual labour is seen as surplus to be exploited to its maximum extent.

As Rubin suggests, different traditional forms of bridewealth (prestations, bride payments, and dowries) are trafficking exchanges, which expose young women to harm and exploitation in different ways (e.g. dowry deaths or enslaved domestic labour). For example, the practice of marriage by capture to some extent in more traditional settings can be used to justify abductions, particularly of virgins. Traditional values attached to purity and practices of proving virginity (or the appearance of virginity in the form of younger-aged women) are also exploited in modern markets because of the new boundaries of pollution constructed around HIV and AIDS. In areas with high prevalence rates, virgins (e.g. in Myanmar) bring higher prices putting young girls at risk of being trafficked. In South Africa, seropositive men also seek out virgins to cleanse and purify themselves, which has further increased demands for younger women.
While certain traditional practices lend themselves to being extended to modern forms of trafficking, wars and other extreme social upheaval permit practices that in normal times, most societies would consider immoral or taboo. In contrast to the gift of women that brings peace, the objectification of the “other” provides a social and moral terrain for rape and sexual humiliation. Rape when used as a weapon of war is a practice designed to humiliate an entire social group (Herman, 1992; Long, 1995). Such rapes are less about doing harm to the woman herself (although that is surely significant) but about destroying the fabric of her kinship system and attacking the men themselves – thus, a rejection of the gift. However, such practices generate their own momentum and have larger social consequences. The practice of raping the female kin of one’s enemy during the recent conflict in the former Yugoslavia created a moral space for the sexual trafficking of “other women”. Women and children were also treated as the spoils of war. Along with drugs, guns, and other illegal movements of people, such trafficking provided the necessary business operations and routes that could be developed and elaborated in more peaceful times.

Receiving countries and clients also have their own cultural practices that support trafficking. For example, Watson (1991) and Jashock (1988) describe how class, status, and gender divisions permeated the inner courts of Chinese households during the Sung regime in the early 1900s so as to distinguish concubines and bonded maids from wives (but also, creating a gender regime that kept each category in its place and subservient to the male patriarch). The concubines and bonded maids (mai jai) were sold into the households and as Watson (1991: 248) observes, “lived at the edge of the social world”. These women were sold at will and incorporated into the households with few or no links to outside resources. Today, trafficked girls and women are often treated much as the concubines and bonded maids of earlier periods. What is interesting about this particular historical analysis is how the threat of replacing the wife for the concubine serves to regulate the behaviour and status of all women (Gates, 1989). A woman’s status varied in relation to male kin; specifically, according to her incorporation into the household. Being bought in with fanfare (versus sold) and possession of a dowry – set the status of the wife apart from the maids and concubines (Watson, 1991). However, the boundaries between free and servile women were less distinct than those for men.

Such traditions (whether explicitly categorized as concubine or mai jai) suggest some of the historical precedents for contemporary forms of trafficking. The mail order brides today may be incorporated as concubines and/or maids (even though they usually have the legal rights of marriage and citizenship). Like the concubines of an earlier time, they achieve status of a wife through later incorporation of children, or may be treated as virtual slaves, the mai jai of
today (Langevin and Bellau, 2000). As in other forms of trafficking for sexual exploitation, there is a continuum of experiences. Women may knowingly exploit the situation to achieve higher status and cannot be considered trafficked if they have full political and civil rights.

Specific trafficking practices, trade routes, and markets often reflect cultural practices and traditions of another era. For example, the largest number of women currently trafficked to the United States come from South-East Asia, which reflects earlier cultural stereotypes about pliant South-East Asian woman. Specifically, many men are said to value Filipino women for their sacrifice, subservience, and hard work, and thus, they are highly sought after as brides both in the United States and Japan. However, these contemporary marriage markets, trafficking routes, and stereotypes also reflect a historical continuum of enslaving Asian women to service the bonded male labour on the railroads and single males of the California Gold Rush. More recently, during World War II, both Korean and Filipina women were enslaved as comfort women to service the Japanese soldiers. Other examples of girls or young women, who have been historically treated as familial or corporate assets, to be bartered or sold, and are being trafficked today may be seen amongst rural Albanian clans, Vietnamese Khmer in southern Viet Nam, Roma families in Serbia and Kosovo, and ethnic minorities from the former Soviet Union.

**Periods of social and economic disorder**

In addition to specific cultural practices, periods of famine, depression, and social economic transition place girls and women at increased risk of being trafficked. During the eighteenth century in England, for example, when soldiers returned from the war in colonial America, they faced massive unemployment and in turn, threw many women out of work (Rees, 2001). England solved its political problems with dissidents and unemployment by shipping “convicts” (some who were falsely charged or had committed minor misdemeanours) to Australia. Impoverished women, in turn, were sentenced for even the most minimum or non-existent infractions and shipped to service the immigrant men. As trafficked women today, the authorities treated these women as commodified (and illicit) bodies to be bought, sold, and transported across international borders at will. These women’s experiences also demonstrate how courts, police, transport companies, and governments all conspire in organizing complex trafficking systems (while limiting the possibilities of return in counter-trafficking operations). Thus, their experiences suggest some of the precursors of modern technologies of power that seek to control women’s bodies, labour, and migration (Foucault, 1979; Vance, 1990).
In many former socialist states, women were the last hired and the first to be laid off (Verdery, 1996). Socialist ideology, to some extent, increased women’s labour value but also added to their triple burdens as caretakers, household producers, and workers. In periods of economic downturn, women, in their roles as workers, are expected to seek new forms of employment and household livelihoods usually depend on two incomes (or in cases where men are forced to retire, on the woman’s alone). Social economic stress often has the most negative effects on the most vulnerable groups in a given population, who lack the resources and political capital to cushion and/or offset the changes. Within family and kinship systems, girls and women may serve as assets or resources to be traded and exchanged to ensure the survival and livelihood of the larger family, as documented in the Philippines, Thailand, and Viet Nam (Coalition, 1993).

While there is an ideological expectation that women will continue working, they face two major forms of discrimination in many transitional economies. First, as property is privatized, title is transferred only in one name and that is usually the senior male in a household (Long, 2000; Coalition, 1993). This means that women lose an important resource (land ownership) that often confers access to credit and other opportunities. The second trend is that as agricultural land is privatized, former communally owned properties are sold and ownership is concentrated in the hands of a few large businesses. Small farmers, who are no longer competitive, are forced to sell and find work in the cities (Coalition, 1993). In countries where women dominate in agriculture, they lose their main source of income without having other skills to find work elsewhere. These two trends coupled with expectations and assumptions about women’s labour (as well as the necessity for two incomes) have forced many young girls and women in the transitional economies of Central and Eastern Europe and Asia to seek work in the service sector as domestics, au pairs, waitresses, and so forth, and to migrate afar to find opportunities.

**Contemporary cultural practice**

Contemporary forms of trafficking differ from earlier forms by the extent and commodification of girls and women’s bodies. Modern transportation, financial, and travel systems allow traffickers to move their goods over vast distances quickly and frequently (IOM, 2000). Modern forms of communication through the Internet create even more closed and privatized carriages – spaces where women can be advertised, bartered, and sold. Although women were trafficked in many former communist states, there were stricter controls and an ideology of equality coupled with conservative social values that limited trafficking to a small sector of society and women. Since the social economic transformations, central government controls on trafficking in the former communist countries...
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have substantially lessened while access to Internet and Western media of all kinds has substantially increased.

In many countries, an ideology of formal equality is being replaced by the pressure to succeed and conspicuous consumption. Men gain wealth in black market activities and the new mafias. Both women and men seek positions in companies and firms with ties to the West and in the case of women, many openings for women explicitly state physical appearance criteria. Even though economic opportunities are highly limited and competitive, women in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries may also earn more with modelling, waitressing, and dancing jobs in the West than they would earn as government workers, teachers, health care professionals, etc., in their own countries.

A Western ideology of “everything for sale” is increasingly extended to sexual bodies (Kuttner, 1997). Advertising and the media promote an image that beautiful girls and young women can gain wealth and recognition through modelling and selling their bodies to the highest bidder. The growing commodification of young women is evidenced in popular Western images of sexuality and beauty, which idealize models with slim, adolescent shapes as well as young figure skaters and gymnasts. While these same images are gaining in popularity in some parts of Central and Eastern Europe, they are highly contested in much of the Islamic world (as witnessed by the riots against the Ms. World contest in Nigeria).

The growing international market in young bodies is witnessed in its most extreme forms by the sexual violence and sale of female infants (although reported in India and South Africa, the recent arrests in Europe and the United States of child pornographers on the Internet indicate that pornography is globalized) (Rosario, 1988). In addition, there is a growing interest in young virgins given the growing incidence of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), in general, and HIV, in particular. Traffickers reportedly received higher prices for young, rural girls.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, many bar owners required their trafficked women to have regular STI checks (but did not require clients to use condoms) and openly advertised the cleanliness and purity of the women offered. Some bars required their clients to use condoms or pay a higher price but women reported that 100 per cent condom use was not the norm. When a girl or young woman looked unhealthy, the bar owner sold her to a less profitable and more rural establishment or released her to the police and NGOs. While health advocates report a growing epidemic of STIs among trafficked girls and women, it is difficult to provide appropriate services that really benefit the women themselves. Many clients still refuse to use condoms and the growing awareness also contributes to a demand for bodies that can be marketed as fresh and
unpolluted, thus increasing the value of virgins. Such practices have been evidenced in Thailand, Cambodia, Italy, India, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo (to name a few). In many countries, in part because of a growing awareness of HIV, the mean age of trafficking is decreasing (Long, 2002).

While migrant women may be disadvantaged by a lack of skills, they also face gender segmented and protected labour markets, which limit their opportunities (Wijers and Lapchew, 1999; Skeldon, 2000). As migrants, girls and young women are often channelled into service sector work and into the lowest-paid positions (e.g. domestics). Two International Organization for Migration (IOM) studies of migration streams and routes through Bosnia and Herzegovina provided evidence of strong gender differentiation (Kolakovic et al., 2002; Long, 2002). Young men from the Middle East, South Asia, and North Africa were smuggled through Bosnia and Herzegovina to reach existing social networks and communities in Western Europe (primarily England and Germany). These young male migrants tended to be single, educated, and with some financial resources. Many were seeking jobs in information technologies, construction, and electronics.

In contrast, girls and young women from Central and Eastern Europe and Asia were trafficked through Bosnia and Herzegovina and sought jobs in the service sector as waitresses, domestics, bar girls, dancers, and so forth. This second group included young married women who had left children behind at home. The vast majority had no major sums of money on their possession during the journey; and many had no knowledge of their final destination or freedom of movement. A third group of both young Chinese men and women were smuggled through Serbia to clothing factories (the manufacturing sector) in northern Italy. Like the smuggled men, many people in this third group paid their smugglers for a successful journey but the women, in particular, faced some of the same sexual demands as women trafficked for sexual exploitation. As other trafficked women, they were also particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation with their limited language skills and financial resources. Like the women, their movements were also constrained and all three groups were dependent on their handlers (smugglers and traffickers) to reach their eventual destination.

TRAFFICKING AND COUNTER-TRAFFICKING OPERATIONS

Trafficking markets and regimes

The specific forms of sexual trafficking vary by region and markets of sending and receiving countries. First, as noted, sexual trafficking is occurring through the commerce in mail order brides. Until recently, this has been most common
in the Philippines and Thailand but is a growing business in the transitional socialist states of Central and Eastern Europe, Russia, and Central Asia. For example, potential Australian grooms working on a construction site in Papua New Guinea, were invited to sex weekends in Manila to try out various Filipina women until they found a suitable partner. Some women were propelled and even sold by their families; others joined voluntarily. In this case, the men initially moved transnationally. However, when a chosen bride is taken across borders and imprisoned against her will, then she is trafficked. Nevertheless, at that point, it is difficult to make further contact with the woman and issues of bondage and enslavement, if recognized at all, are often treated as domestic violence.

Although the mail order bride exchange may not necessarily involve an act of trafficking and there may be mutual consent, these kinds of operations create opportunities for “husbands” to exploit the brides. It is also very difficult to regulate this practice and to determine under what conditions the woman is transported and works. Nevertheless, the mail order bride business also provides opportunities for women, since it also allows the bride and her family to increase their social and economic status (female hypergamy). For example, a 30-year-old single woman in China voluntarily chose to become the mail order bride of a 50-year-old professional Western male. On one hand, most would argue that the man’s desire for a submissive Chinese woman (as advertised in the promotional literature) betrayed an inherent discrimination, on the other hand, her own village and kin, who, in effect, ostracized her socially after she was age 25 and offered her few social opportunities, created the conditions for a trafficked exchange. In some states, this practice is a well-developed business and source of foreign exchange earnings for the governments themselves.

Second, sexual trafficking is often associated with sex work around military bases and peacekeeping operations. For example, much of the contemporary sexual trafficking developed to service the demand of US servicemen in Olangapo, Clarke Air Base, and at the American bases in Thailand. Likewise, a vast sexual services and trafficking industry has grown up around the United Nations peacekeeping operations in Cambodia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo (and is on the rise in Afghanistan as well). Although many prostitutes willingly work in this sector, others are trafficked to service the high demand entailed. The use of trafficked women to increase the supply is also a means to depress the price of sex workers (and to control those in that sector), while women’s surplus labour generates high profits for the traffickers themselves.

Third, trafficking occurs in conjunction with the demand for domestic labour. Certain service sector jobs entail risks of being sexually exploited and trafficked.
For example, Vietnamese Khmer waitresses were trafficked from restaurants across the Cambodian border to the brothels of Svay Pak, or Romanian students seeking summer waitressing jobs in Greece were trafficked to Serbia. Although some employment and recruitment agencies do match women with legitimate jobs in wealthier Western countries, others are fronts for trafficking operations. Likewise some employers take advantage of the migrant’s vulnerability and his/her control over the employee’s visa status to force sexual favours and services. For example, Filipina women working as domestics in Japan, Hong Kong, and Saudi Arabia (to name a few) have reported such labour abuses.

Several Romanian and Moldovan women described how high-tech recruitment agencies promised lucrative banking, au pair, nursing, waitressing, modeling and/or dancing positions in London, Athens, Brussels, and several other Western European cities (to name just a few of the offers made). Once recruited, they were often stripped of all identity papers, drugged, and/or forced at gunpoint into hostage and prisoner situations and were trafficked during the journey westward. Some girls in Romania reported being abducted and then trafficked across one or more international borders. Others were abducted while en route by smugglers, government officials, border police, bar owners, and others. They were often forced to provide sex in a country en route to obtain passage onward. Once in their final destination, young female migrants without the proper identity documents could be trafficked again with the threat of being turned over to the local authorities for deportation and/or with threats by traffickers to parents or siblings back home. Thus, trafficking may occur at several points of a labour migration journey and each stage entails specific dangers and concerns.

Whatever its form, sexual trafficking operates at the nexus of different gender, labour, migration, and health regimes. Even though trafficking is an important issue in its own right, it is often treated as a subset of one of the four other regimes and to some extent, exploited or marginalized in ways that stigmatize those who are trafficked. For example, trafficking is used as a moral argument to erect barriers against irregular migration (e.g. to justify a Fortress Europe). On the other hand, sexual trafficking of women also allows gender discrimination to be recognized as a human rights issue and in several Western countries, they can apply for refugee status. Nevertheless, while this approach has benefited a few women in obtaining refugee status, the vast majority of girls and young women, who are viewed as illegal immigrants, are afraid to apply. In terms of seeking legal redress, most lack the social and financial support and resources to have their cases heard. Treating trafficking abuses from an individual human rights perspective also fails to address the economic gains and socio-cultural rewards from trafficking. Trafficking is increasingly recognized as a migrant labour issue. However, since trafficked girls and women are often working
without the necessary identity papers, they often fall outside of the normal labour protections afforded sex workers in even the most liberal states (e.g. Dutch sex workers are protected but not trafficked migrants).

As a health issue, trafficked women are all too easily stigmatized. Even though many HIV/STI prevention programmes do not want to target women explicitly, it is very difficult to reach the male clients. Thus, many health workers are forced either to provide services to women on the traffickers’ terms or risk not reaching the women at all. In providing services, HIV/STI prevention programmes often do not distinguish between sexual trafficking and consensual sex work because of the potential threat of violence. Yet, there is a need to address the specific health risks trafficked women face in order to design more effective approaches and services.

Trafficking also entails a relation between sending and receiving groups – between the suppliers and their clients. On one side, those countries and communities who send trafficked women often face severe economic crises and/or have suffered conflict and/or famine and other social-economic upheavals. At the same time, not all cultural groups, who face such stresses, traffic women. Thus, there are already certain cultural practices that create the pre-conditions for treating women as economic resources in such periods. On the other side, are clients who can afford to pay for services. Clients, however, need not necessarily be that affluent and often have less financial resources than clients of sex workers, who can afford to pay a higher price. A rationale indeed for many bar owners to provide trafficked women is that they cost less and therefore, they can correspondingly charge their clients less. However, trafficking as an operation also requires a large market; clients that can afford to pay and the necessary infrastructure to move women around quickly and easily. Even though many of the clients in Bosnia and Herzegovina were local men, the peacekeeping operations and troops also provided the necessary influx of funding and political milieu for this activity. Often the social economic disparity between the sending and receiving groups – between countries and communities – also creates economic and social incentives for trafficking. How trafficking is defined and has evolved as an international policy concern in turn reflects the different motivations and positions of countries and communities themselves in a global political economy. The meanings of this practice vary in different cultural and social-economic contexts and these meanings change as well over time.

Counter-trafficking

Because sexual trafficking is a global practice and invokes far-ranging networks, there has been a growing awareness of this practice in international forum. In
1895, the first international conference on trafficking of women was held in Paris followed by conferences in London and Budapest. In the early twentieth century and now, the US Government has been at the forefront of organizing counter-trafficking operations but ironically refuses to ratify some of the major relevant conventions (and does not categorize its own operations as it does other countries). As early as the beginning of the twentieth century, US authorities, such as Edwin A. Sims, the US District Attorney in Chicago, were quite concerned about “White Slave Traffic” – depicted as rural white innocent girls – who were being taken advantage of by “notorious” Parisians and dark-skinned Mediterranean men (never mind the clients who undoubtedly included some upstanding Chicago businessmen). According to Bell (1910: 261), Secretary of the Illinois Vigilance Association and a legislator, “By no means all the traffickers are French… But, it is Paris that has made the white slave trade a wide spread systematized commercial enterprise.” Interestingly, the counter-trafficking programmes and responses in the early twentieth century are much the same as one sees today: (1) a major conference and documents outlining the problem and decrying the evils of trafficking; (2) rescue attempts and shelters organized by missionary societies and charity organizations; and (3) attempts to prosecute the main traffickers with fines and jail sentences (which were generally quite abbreviated and minimal in relation to the gravity of the crimes).

In 1904, the first “International Agreement for the Suppression of the White Slave Trade” was passed at a meeting of 16 nations in Paris. In 1910, this Convention was expanded to include trafficking within national boundaries and in 1921, to include trafficking in boys. As Wijers and Lapchew (1999) observe, this first convention focused on recruitment and neglected women’s enslavement. In 1933, an international agreement added the requirement of constraint but only across international boundaries. A 1949 Convention for the “Suppression of Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others” made sexual trafficking punishable even with the woman’s consent. During the Cold War, post-war period, there is little discussion of this issue and trafficking does not appear on the international agenda again until the 1980s. Wijers and Lapchew (1999) suggest that the strength of the women’s movement and the spread of AIDS bring this particular issue to the forefront of international attention again.

After various working groups and proposed programmes of action during the 1980s and early 1990s, in 1994, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on the “traffic on women and girls which condemns illicit and clandestine movements of persons across national and international borders” (UN Resolution 49/166 of the General Assembly). In the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the Platform of Action also considered forced marriage and labour as
other forms of trafficking and slavery. By 1996, the 1949 Convention had been ratified in 70 countries (Kelly and Regan, 2000). The 1997 “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women” further shifted the focus from combating prostitution per se to the exploitation of prostitution. In November 2000, the UN General Assembly adopted the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children. Other relevant international instruments were the International Labour Organization Convention 182 concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour and the Protocol to the Convention on the Right of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography (Long, 2002; Skeldon, 2000; Wijers and Lapchew, 1999).

Wijers and Lapchew document five definitional shifts over time that expand the understanding of trafficking for sexual exploitation to: (1) add commercial exploitation in addition to physical recruitment; (2) go beyond coercion to even with consent; (3) enlarge trafficking in women to “illegal migration”; (4) specify the conditions of violence within prostitution rather than proscribing prostitution per se; and (5) add a range of informal and unregulated labour (not just prostitution). They point out that it is important to include recruitment and transport as well as the slave-like labour practices (the work context) in preventing trafficking. A woman may initially be transported under coercion and then later set free and/or while migrating (or moving internally), she may be forced into prostitution and into a trafficking situation. In either case, she is exploited and enslaved. Thus, Wijers and Lapchew (and many others) argue that the League of Nations Slavery Convention of 1956 and the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) Forced Labour Convention no. 29 may be applied more effectively to the various forms of coercion associated with trafficking. As Wijers and Lapchew (1999: 46) astutely observe “clarity exists only in conventions that do not address gender specific behaviours and are therefore not gender-based”. Interestingly, they also argue that the more generalized conventions allow for more emic level interpretations.

Organizations assisting women often reflect their own biases and interests in how they define trafficking, which women they are able and/or willing to assist, and what kinds of assistance they are willing to provide. For example, IOM (with whom I worked), focused on providing support to women to return home but we were much less effective at addressing the labour conditions which allowed for trafficking situations or in finding asylum for many of the women. In contrast, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) often wanted to define trafficking as pre-eminently an asylum and refugee issue when many of the women migrated for work. ILO focused on the labour aspects
but has great difficulty in addressing issues around sexual labour and irregular migrant labour. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the various police and strike forces focused on the human rights’ aspects and tried to increase prosecutions but the women themselves were often afraid and even terrified of testifying. Most trafficked women have yet to benefit from the witness protection programmes afforded to others who testify against major mob or political figures.

Despite the plethora of international instruments, current legal regimes are also highly ineffective and largely discriminate against the women themselves. Trafficked women are often afraid to testify because of the threat of future violence by the accused and/or his associates. Individual cases rarely dismantle a trafficking network and thus, the complainant and/or her family is vulnerable (and may be even more so after a successful indictment). Standard judicial practice requires that the women be able to prove a specific act of discrimination, which much like rape, places the burden on girls and women to provide evidence and by their mere presence in a specific event, often makes them complicit. In courts, trafficked women are often treated as guilty until proven innocent while traffickers as innocent until proven guilty. In order to withstand a legal process, most women require extensive support. However, most legal systems still do not provide the necessary psychological support and security to allow women to feel safe enough to testify. Witness protection programmes are costly but crucial. A broad focus on particular transactions and economic activities, however, would allow courts to prohibit certain actions specific to the traffickers themselves, such as violations of tax laws, which are more evident and can be prosecuted.

A major divide among counter-trafficking organizations (and even within organizations) occurs in how they view prostitution and sex work generally. Some feminists and religious organizations argue strongly that all forms of prostitution are sexually exploitive and coercive and inherently degrade women (Coalition, 1993). Yet, many trafficked women do not want to be rescued by organizations with this agenda since they view sex work as an opportunity to gain status and income. Other organizations trying to deliver health services or improve labour and working conditions of sex work argue that the specific conditions and terms under which women work are most relevant as to whether or not she is trafficked. Yet, this approach sometimes mean that the providers end up accepting the terms and conditions of the traffickers to deliver services (thereby, providing tacit acceptance of the practices). Some argue for the legalization of prostitution as a means to counter-trafficking but experience has shown that irregular migrants rarely benefit from legalization since their status sets them outside the protections afforded to sex workers who are citizens.
What is most disturbing in all these debates is that the ideas and views of the girls and women themselves are rarely considered and each perspective serves some larger institutional and political interest. While there is always insufficient funding to address the needs, the various groups and interests involved spend far too much time arguing among themselves, rather than trying to develop a range of coherent services to address all aspects of trafficking. Unlike other social programming, there has also been insufficient effort to consult the clients themselves as to which services are most needed. Religious groups and conservative governments, who are the first to campaign against trafficking, are also the ones most willing to curtail women’s rights. Ironically, one of the great difficulties current counter-trafficking programmes face in helping trafficked girls and women who become pregnant is helping them obtain abortions and other reproductive health services.

Within the media and contemporary trafficking narratives how the girl or woman is portrayed and treated in a larger system of trafficking and counter-trafficking may be class, race, age, and location specific. Portrayals of trafficked girls and women often reflect a classic “virgin versus whore” dichotomy, which is often class and racially constructed. Even though white women or young virgins may command higher prices in certain markets than women of colour or older women, the former are more often likely to be seen as the victims of oppressive regimes. Likewise, Nigerian girls trafficked to Italy for years were treated as “whores” because of their race and origin. The discourse against “white slavery” itself reflects the inherent class, ethnic, and racial discrimination of most anti-trafficking campaigns and has its own historicity. For example, young rural white girls and women from Iowa in the early 1900s were deemed worthy of protection from dark-skinned Mediterranean men while US legislators failed to address the needs of trafficked African-American slaves for more than 150 years and to this day, reparations are highly contested. Currently, CEE girls and women often command greater press than many of their counterparts from countries in Asia and Africa. A recent counter-trafficking campaign in Bosnia and Herzegovina also translated trafficking as “white slavery” (although nearby in Italy, more young Nigerians were being trafficked).

While the service delivery system for counter-trafficking would benefit from a critical analysis, the disparity between the resources and regimes around trafficking and counter-trafficking is truly of David and Goliath magnitude. The organization of sexual trafficking across international boundaries today employs new technologies of power that depend on privatized and monopolistic markets (“everything for sale” but concentrated in the hands of a few), decentralized operations, new forms of communication and transport (such as the Internet), weak national regimes and legal systems, permeable borders, and systematized
corruption. In contrast, the organization of counter-trafficking often reflects dated and outmoded institutionalization, rigid application of regressive migration regimes limited to non-existent information and communication, and limited organization and coordination with highly centralized operations. The difference between the two technologies – a highly effective system of trafficking versus a highly ineffective and outmoded system of counter-trafficking – is not surprising given that trafficking commands billions of dollars each year in a relatively stable market whereas counter-trafficking at most annually receives a few hundred million of highly variable donations.

Trafficking currently figures prominently in the international media and government campaigns as part of an overall preoccupation with irregular (or illegal) migration. As a policy concern, trafficking provides one of the more persuasive moral arguments for the dangers of not regulating migration practices and routes. However, such arguments rarely address whether authorities are committed to providing morally better, economic, and practical alternatives. Much of the current system is designed to benefit the intentions of receiving governments and to regulate women’s migration. The counter-trafficking system is largely funded to return women home safely but often back to the same conditions and family and economic situations that propelled their departures.

Many feminist scholars argue that prostitution commodifies women’s bodies and all sexual transactions (whether or not seemingly consensual) are violent and dehumanizing (Kelly and Regan, 2000; Coalition, 1993). Such an absolutist approach avoids making women have to prove their victimization. However, this approach also neglects the role that trafficked girls and women play in seeking their own migration alternatives. For example, several CEE young women were either well aware that they would exchange sex for migration passage and/or preferred selling sex to having no income at all to support their family. As noted earlier, in several brothels where trafficked women were paid a minimum wage, they also earned more selling sex than in practicing most professions in their home countries, where teachers, for example, did not earn enough to survive. Many if not most knew that they might be forced into sex but were willing to take the risk for the potential rewards they hope to gain. In effect, given their options they made rational calculations and often with full knowledge of the likely risks. Despite their horrible experiences, they were obviously not keen to return to home with the possibility of being trafficked and exploited once again.

CONCLUSIONS

While trafficked girls and women have often played significant roles in pioneer societies, colonialist regimes, industrial revolutions, wars, periods of post-war
reconstruction, and emerging capitalist markets, how and under what terms they survived to reach a particular destination is rarely discussed. Among their contemporaries, they are largely invisible: they may be despised, shamed, and shunned (in the case of the New Orleans relative), or treated as innocent victims (in the case of young Iowan girls trafficked in Chicago in the late 1880s). How they are treated as commodities in the global economy, portrayed by the media, and/or assisted by counter-trafficking organizations reflects their class, race, and/or ethnicity.

Many trafficked women initially leave home because they are ambitious, want to succeed financially and socially, and/or hope to contribute to the larger household welfare. They are often willing to take risks; yet, some have no choice and are sold by families and friends. Most come from societies that place little to no value on the individual woman’s welfare while they are trafficked into societies that value female bodies even less. In a globalized economic system, the contemporary promotion and organization of sexual trafficking by both sending and receiving societies commodifies all girls and women’s bodies and the existence of trafficking devalues all women. Trafficking also inherently involves an exchange between suppliers and consumers and both are implicated in the transaction.

The discourse around trafficking and during which periods this issue becomes visible and is articulated, has its own historical specificity. Counter-trafficking campaigns are viewed in light of larger migration, health, gender, and labour regimes. When trafficking becomes an issue, it may be used to control women’s and girls’ bodies – and is often based on a politics of fear rather than empowerment. The threat of trafficking is used to remind all girls and women that if they do not behave in certain socially acceptable ways and particularly if they are too mobile, they place themselves at great risk. Much like the larger illegal immigration debates, which gloss over gross economic inequalities between countries and communities, the counter-trafficking debates gloss over family, kinship, and gender inequalities.

While trafficking and counter-trafficking regimes employ disparate technologies of power and control, the current regimes serve to move women expeditiously and economically across borders and boundaries, which are fluid for traffickers and increasingly fixed for the women themselves. Although many counter-trafficking operations are designed to return women home, the women themselves are often seeking better lives and meeting family and kinship obligations. These obligations must be understood and honoured when seeking ways to protect the women themselves. Although trafficking for sexual exploitation is a worldwide phenomenon, any given trafficking situation implicates cultural prac-
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Practices and historical precedents. Thus, the situations are not easily amenable to simplistic and universal solutions. However, inherent in many trafficking situations is a distinction between the giver and the gift. In today’s contemporary global market economy, that gift is treated as an increasingly commodified body. Since the current trafficking regimes affect the status of all women, the stories of the two women, the Australian and the American, matter – and the contemporary versions should be told.

NOTES

1. The initial reason for migration was often economic – as a way of addressing unemployment and to alleviate pressures on prisons. Initially more men than women were transported to the colonies but then the Government realized that they needed to transport women to service the male convict communities (Rees, 2001). Because of their situation, they were vulnerable to sexual exploitation by the administrators and military (and in the case of Louisiana, could be sold into marriage).

2. This analysis of how gendered regimes organize sexuality is informed by Vance, 1990; Ginsburg and Tsing, 1990; Martin, 1990; and Foucault, 1979.

3. From September 2000 until February 2002, I helped organize a shelter and return programme for more than 400 girls and young women. In Viet Nam, I conducted research on trafficking and sexual exploitation on the Vietnamese Cambodian border.

4. See Comaroff, 1980 for analysis of marriage prestations in traditional societies and Hutchinson, 1996; Mikell, 1997 for recent ethnographic analysis. All three analyses depict these gifts and exchanges in kinship systems unaffected by globalization and market economies.

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LA TRAITE DES FEMMES AUX FINS D’EXPLOITATION SEXUELLE VUE SOUS L’ANGLE DE L’ANTHROPOLOGIE

Les échanges sexuels de femmes et de jeunes filles sont la traduction de pratiques culturelles très anciennes, dont portent témoignage bon nombre de systèmes basés sur la famille et la parenté à travers les âges. Les méthodes contemporaines des trafiquants ont pour effet de transformer les pratiques traditionnelles liées à l’apport de la dot et aux échanges (prestations) auxquels donnent lieu les mariages en une sorte de marché où la sexualité et le corps des femmes font office de marchandises qui se vendent et s’achètent (pour faire à nouveau l’objet d’échanges) dans différentes capitales occidentales et par le biais de l’Internet. Par leur ampleur et leur diversité, et par la vitesse et la flexibilité avec laquelle elles s’effectuent, ces pratiques s’inscrivent en outre dans un contexte mondial. L’un des moteurs de ce trafic sont les processus économiques-politiques qui ont pour effet d’intensifier la traite des femmes en période de tension, ce qui est notamment le cas lors des famines, dans les situations de chômage, de transition économique etc. Cependant, la disparité entre les opérations s’effectuant sur le marché mondial, où s’organise la traite, et le dispositif social mis en place par les pouvoirs publics pour contrecarrer la traite, hérité de la fin du dix-neuvième siècle, explique pourquoi ce dispositif n’est pas en mesure de prendre efficacement en compte les risques auxquels sont exposées les femmes et pourquoi il peut même les exposer à des difficultés et à un degré de violence accrus. En s’appuyant sur des faits historiques, sur la théorie anthropologique et sur le travail ethnographique effectué au Viet Nam et en Bosnie-Herzégovine, cet essai examine de quelle manière les pratiques culturelles spécifiques ancrées dans les relations familiales et de parenté encouragent et rationalisent la traite des femmes et des jeunes filles aux fins d’exploitation sexuelle en période de tensions et de bouleversements. Il analyse également la manière dont les méthodes de traite et de lutte contre la traite s’inspirent des techniques du pouvoir aux plans de l’emprise sur les femmes en tant qu’objets sexuels, sur leur sexualité, leur santé, leur employabilité et leurs migrations. En examinant la traite aux fins d’exploitation sexuelle en tant que véritable phénomène culturel, cette analyse tente d’éclairer la situation particulière dans laquelle peuvent se trouver femmes et jeunes filles, qui pâtissent énormément des systèmes migratoires actuels.
El intercambio sexual de muchachas y mujeres está enraizado en prácticas culturales y viene históricamente de muchos sistemas familiares y de parentesco. En varias capitales occidentales y en Internet, las operaciones contemporáneas de trata de personas transforman las tradicionales dotes e intercambios matrimoniales (prestaciones), tratando la sexualidad y el cuerpo de las mujeres como bienes de compra y venta (intercambiables). Estas operaciones son de alcance mundial en escala, variedad, rapidez, diversidad y flexibilidad. Hay varios procesos políticos y económicos que incitan a estos intercambios de trata de personas, lo que acrecienta la trata de mujeres en épocas de estrés, es decir, de hambruna, desempleo, transición económica, etc. Ello no obstante, la disparidad entre las operaciones mercantiles globales, que organizan la trata, y el sistema de bienestar social de finales del siglo XIX de lucha contra la trata, revela por qué este último no encara efectivamente los riesgos que corren las mujeres y puede exponerles incluso a mayor violencia y estrés. Basándose en narraciones históricas, en teorías antropológicas y en la labor etnográfica realizada en Viet Nam y en Bosnia y Herzegovina, este estudio examina cómo las prácticas culturalmente específicas arraigadas en la familia y en el parentesco alientan y racionalizan la trata sexual de muchachas y mujeres jóvenes en épocas de estrés y trastorno. Este estudio también analiza cómo las tecnologías de punta informan tanto sobre las operaciones de trata de las personas como sobre la lucha contra la trata en términos de controlar el cuerpo, la sexualidad, la salud, el trabajo y la migración de las mujeres. Al analizar la trata con fines de explotación sexual como un fenómeno cultural en su propio derecho, se informa y se abordan las situaciones específicas de muchachas y mujeres jóvenes que sufren enormemente de los actuales regímenes migratorios.