

**Rhacel Parreñas**

Toward a Vision of Sexual and Economic Justice  
Thought Paper

“TOWARDS A VISION OF SEXUAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE”

Rhacel Parreñas

University of California, Davis

In addressing the intersections of sexual and economic justice, I find the issue of sex trafficking and the discourse on sex trafficking to be one of our most pressing issues for feminists. According to the United States Trafficking in Persons Report, approximately 800,000 women and children are trafficked in the sex industry. This claim is a contentious and divisive subject for feminists, splitting them into two camps between radical feminists and postmodern feminists. The former accepts the claims of the U.S. Department of State at face value and wholeheartedly support the call of the United States for the “rescue, rehabilitation, and reintegration” of trafficked persons. On the contrary, the latter group questions the discourse on trafficking and considers the current moral hysteria over trafficking to be a backlash against the independent migration of women.

I am currently conducting a research study on migrant Filipina hostesses in Japan, a group labeled by the U.S. Department of State as one of the largest groups of women trafficked into the sex industry. The United States has taken center stage in combating trafficking worldwide. The United States uses a 3 P’s strategy to combat human trafficking: they focus on the “prevention of trafficking, prosecution of traffickers, and protection (social services and other programs) for trafficking victims.” The United States also requires other countries to impose a 3Ps solution to the elimination of trafficking and

accordingly condemns countries that do not. Radical feminists, as I noted above, support the call of the United States for the elimination of trafficking and likewise supports the anti-prostitution stance of the U.S. government.

Due to the stronghold of the U.S. anti-trafficking campaign on our understanding of trafficking as a political issue, “postmodern” feminists such as Laura Agustin (2002) and Nandita Sharma (2003) have avoided the use of the category “trafficked persons” to describe subjugated women migrants. They equate the concept of anti-trafficking with the discouragement of women’s migration and sex work. They consider the construction of trafficking as a global feminist platform. I did likewise when first thinking about migrant hostesses in Japan. I faced a dilemma of whether to think of the current situation of Filipina entertainers as one of migrants or trafficked persons. I hesitated to call them trafficked persons because of the stronghold that the U.S. hegemonic construction has over our understanding of trafficked persons. Following the definition imposed by the United States, a trafficked person is one who is without agency and in need of rescue. Hence, in a public lecture that I delivered earlier in Ochanomizu University in Tokyo, I disagreed with the categorization of hostesses as trafficked persons and insisted on the construction of them as migrants with severe structural constraints. I had accepted without question the U.S. discourse on trafficking and assumed that labeling them as trafficked persons would unavoidably translate to my support for their rescue and return to the Philippines.

Yet, I could not feel completely satisfied with the term “migrant” when referring to the situation of the women who I met in Japan. The term “migrant” does not completely capture their experience of migration, specifically their position of indenture

including the long-term control of managers over their labor, the absence of a release clause in their contracts with managers and promotion agencies, and the heavy penalties that they are saddled with if they choose to terminate their job prior to the end of their contract. These subjections are not mirrored in most other labor migrant communities. As such, they pushed me towards reclaiming the term trafficked from the hegemonic control of the United States and use it to describe the current situation of migrant entertainers.

Without doubt the forced and coerced labor of women and children throughout the world exists and should accordingly be combated and abolished. It is also without doubt that women – who constitute 70 percent of the poorest individuals in the world – are vulnerable to trafficking. Trafficking is a term that feminists need to reclaim. We need to recognize that the multiple forms of trafficking in existence in the twenty-first century require multiple solutions to combat trafficking. Not all trafficked persons are in need of rescue, rehabilitation, and reintegration. Anti-trafficking campaigns should advocate for improving conditions of labor and migration. At the moment, the solution for the trafficking of migrant Filipino entertainers to Japan -- from their rescue to their curtailed entry -- is no more than a call for an end to their migration. But rather than being imposed with restrictions that discourage and make difficult their labor migration to Japan, trafficked persons such as the talents who I met in Japan need greater control of their migration and labor. The only way to successfully design policies to aid trafficked persons is to use a bottom to top approach that takes into account different groups' experiences of trafficking.

Economic justice for women can be achieved with a greater acceptance of the types of work that are acceptable for women to perform. In the Philippines, anti-

trafficking campaigns have led to a reduction on sex workers, specifically hostesses in Japan, but not so much domestic workers. As such, an inadvertent effect of the anti-trafficking campaign in the Philippines has been to further ghettoize migrant women in the low paying occupation of domestic work. With the elimination of hostess work as a viable employment for Filipina migrants, domestic work is now left as the only occupation possible occupation for prospective migrants without an education.

In summary, I am advocating for a middle ground in our discussion of sex trafficking, one that recognizes the reality in the trafficking of women – a reality caused by the fact that 70 percent of the world’s poor are women – but at the same time rejects the universal solutions to trafficking posed by the United States. First, we should reject the call of the US. Congressman Christopher Hill of anti-trafficking as an anti-prostitution campaign. Secondly, we should see trafficked persons as not without agency. Trafficking, as I noted earlier, calls for multiple solutions with our end goal being the need to ensure that women have control over their labor.

#### Sexual and Economic Justice Preparatory Questions

1. From your activist and/or academic position, what are the most pressing concerns surrounding the intersection of economic and sexual justice? With respect to which concrete issues does that intersection appear most relevant?
2. What are the possibilities for collaboration between and among social movements with respect to global economic and sexual justice?
3. How do we think through sexual justice in intersectional form – attentive to structurally produced differences of gender, race, class, and able to produce the political responses these differences require?
4. What are the obstacles, both in political activism and conceptual representations, to responding effectively to sexual and economic injustice? What keeps activists and scholars from approaching sexual and economic justice as co-constitutive?

5. What initiatives can we invoke that consider sex work from the interlinked perspectives of sexual and economic justice, and how can these help us re-think the broader debate between global markets and intimacies, love and sex?
6. How is the intersection between sexual and economic injustice shaped by war and militarization?
7. HIV/AIDS scholarship and activism is another privileged site within which to interrogate the connections between sexual and economic justice, structural inequality and intimate desire. What are the possibilities in *this* arena for forging a model of global justice in its full, sexual and economic, complexity? What are the limitations?
8. What scale is helpful to you as you approach these questions? The national? The global? The regional? The local? The South-South? Something else? To whom do you look for responses that will secure sexual and economic justice? The state? Transnational social movements? Bretton Woods institutions? Civil society organizations?
9. Finally, how do we develop effective rhetorics and practices of resistance in the present context, and how do we reimagine global justice as involving both sexual and economic components?