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Editorial

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EDITORIAL

Tiantian Zheng

This particular issue of *Wagadu, Journal of Transnational Women's and Gender Studies* aims to explore the life experiences, agency, and human rights of women, who are involved in a variety of activities that are characterized as “trafficked” terrains in a de-territorialized and re-territorialized world, in order to shed light on the complicated processes in which anti-trafficking, human rights and social justice are intersected. While previous studies have highlighted popular discourses, national and international policies, and the victimization and struggles of the trafficked women, few studies have centered on the stories of the migrant subjects themselves. The intent of these articles is to offer a critical reading of the recent competing definitions of trafficking and the complex ways in which the intertwined configurations of gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality complicate the contemporary hegemonic discourse on trafficking. This special issue fills this lacuna through theorizing and conceptualizing the intersecting discourses on anti-trafficking, human rights, and social justice from the perspectives of the transnational migrant populations. This issue specifically includes articles that rearticulate the trafficking discourses away from the state control of immigration and the global policing of borders, and reassert the social justice and the needs, agency, and human rights of migrant and working communities.

The articles collected in this edition cover a wide array of topics. The authors critically analyze not only the conflation of trafficking with sex work in international and national discourses and its effects on migrant women, but also the global anti-trafficking policy and the root causes for the undocumented migration and employment. In these articles, the authors address the debate between the recognition of women's human rights to migrate and work as sex workers and the anti-trafficking policy that classifies sex workers as trafficked victims and slaves. In the process, they stress the effects on the vulnerable population as a result of the anti-prostitution policy and a denial of human rights of sex workers and the socio-cultural effects on the migrant population as a result of the global and national laws against trafficking, immigration, and smuggling. The authors pinpoint the relationships between the human rights of the vulnerable population and the state approaches to trafficking. They also examine the effects upon the migrant population as a result of the ways in which the state and international policies define “trafficked persons” and “undocumented migrants,” and the complicated intersections of forced and voluntary labor and migrations at the national and international level. The authors in this edition suggest more effective anti-trafficking interventions, which will ameliorate social justice and human rights of the migrant populations.

In her article, Jennifer Musto argues that the anti-trafficking movement will not be successful unless we include the voices of the trafficked people,

and the government changes its position on trafficking. Musto contends that the U.S. government's position on trafficking directly influences the organization and leading ideology of NGOs. She explores how such policies have contributed to the asymmetrical power relations between NGO staff and the clients, and restrained the efficacy of the anti-trafficking movement.

Musto points out that because NGOs depend upon federal funding, organizations that accept sex work as a legitimate profession or argue against the conflation of voluntary prostitution with trafficking potentially run the risk of losing their funding. To ensure funding, NGOs must align their internal policies with the views of the U.S. government by claiming that all forms of prostitution are exploitative, equivalent of "sexual slavery," and are a "gateway" to trafficking. Musto contends that such a biased and narrow definition of trafficking influences their identification practices, as they provide shelters to the involuntary trafficked persons and arrest the voluntary migrants.

Through investigating the history, organizational structure, and program offerings of a local NGO in Los Angeles, Musto argues that the organization fails to include trafficked persons' participation in the anti-trafficking movement. Since NGOs cannot use the U.S. government funds to promote or advocate the legalization or regulation of prostitution as a legitimate form of work, it prevents the staff from having any dialogues or developing any programs with clients who have worked voluntarily in the sex industries. Within this funding culture of fear, the staff feels obligated to exclude clients who may voluntarily choose sex work for survival.

Musto further observes that there is a power hierarchy between the staff and the clients, as the staff has greater access to power and decision making, whereas the clients – the trafficked persons – are compelled to participate in programs where they are allowed little, if any, input. She concludes that the current funding pressures and power structure in NGOs have seriously curtailed the participation of trafficked persons in the anti-trafficking movement. She advocates that we should include the trafficked persons in the anti-trafficking movement, and rethink strategies and tactics that can help build upon trafficked persons' experiences and expertise.

Sholeh Shahrokhi's article focuses on the specific social/cultural conditions in which young Iranian women and children are transported into the underground prostitution circles of the Gulf-states. Her paper aims to draw scholarly attention to the cultural context surrounding sex trafficking in Iran.

Shahrokhi points out that despite the substantial role of poverty in the formation of sex-commerce and human-trafficking, the complexities of historical cultural values, attitudes, and practices towards sex deserve serious consideration. She explores how the history of polygamous practices, social construction of the Harem, and the sexual slave-markets in Iran have contributed to the formation of sexual meanings and the current attitudes toward bartering of the body.

Shahrokhi states that while the sex traffickers in the Persian Gulf area are beginning to receive some attention from the international human rights activists, there is little attempt to improve the attitudes and life-styles of the families where the flights begin. She contends that we have to pay heed to the socio-cultural context where it becomes plausible for sex-trafficking to thrive. She argues that although economic misfortune often determines the fate of young women, gender double standards cut across social classes in Iran and the tradition of sex-slavery has endured since an antiquated era. As she observes, within Shiite Islam and the Iranian adaptation of the faith, the institutionalism of temporary marriages or *sigheh* has legitimized marketing and bartering of the body. Prior to marriage and especially among crowded families, daughters assume their domestic role in cooking and caring for the family at a very young age.

Shahrokhi asserts that new trends of sex-trade in the Gulf region have emerged out of an accelerating poor economy for a majority of people in Iran, impoverished living situations, and a failure to educate the public about the value and rights of women. In addition, mass-migrations caused by a constellation of political revolutions and war, resurgence of religious fundamentalism, and the return of traditional cultural values towards gender provide a new niche for sex-trade to go underground and for new money to be poured into its industry.

Shahrokhi concludes that, to confront the growth of sex-trade, we have to increase our awareness and possible collaborations with the powerful industry that responds to this market, and, at the same time, contest the local traditions and sexually violent views of women that persist in the region as a breeding ground for human trafficking and underground sex trade endeavors.

Sine Plambech's article is based upon the ethnographic fieldwork conducted with a group of Thai women and Danish men in northwest rural Denmark. By placing these women's own perspectives at the centre of the analysis, Plambech's article seeks to debunk the victim-script of the mail order bride discourse on transnational marriages between Thai women and European men.

Plambech uses the ethnographic accounts to critique the existing discourse that categorizes mail order brides as victims of illegal trafficking and violence. While the anti-trafficking organizations often cite mail order brides as a target group, Plambech points out that the Thai brides are neither commodities nor victims. Their individual motives for transnational marriage include freedom from harsh working conditions, freedom from Thai gender roles, and their preconceived ideas about Danish men. According to Plambech, these women, are far from victims, and are independent and resourceful. As she demonstrates, instead of being trafficked into Denmark, the Thai women met their husbands via local women and men who were already married to a Danish husband or Thai woman, and they communicated prior to meeting through letters.

Plambech observes that anti-trafficking organizations do not distinguish between groups of migrant women, prostitutes, sex slaves, housekeepers, and mail order brides, and lump them all together as victims of trafficking. She points out that the uncritical linking of mail order brides to trafficking ignores the women's participation in the transnational migration, their contribution to a global remittance and care economy, and the women's ability to make rational decisions.

In contrast to the existing discourse that represents the mail order brides as a vulnerable group without a social network in Denmark or ties to their country of origin, Plambech argues that the Thai women in her study have both a social network and connections with their families in Thailand. As she illustrates, through migrating and regularly remitting money to Thailand, these brides become part of "an alternative global circuit," connecting their country of origin with their country of residence.

Leah Briones' article also critiques the anti-trafficking discourse that revolves around victimisation, agency, and rights. She argues that these concepts help legitimize receiving countries' border control, rather than protecting the livelihood of migrant workers. Drawing on the experiences of Filipina domestic workers in Paris and Hong Kong, Briones uses Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach to debunk the current anti-trafficking discourse.

Briones' research on domestic workers from the Philippines in Paris and Hong Kong shows that it is the question of capability (what she is actually able to do and be) rather than rights (what she is entitled to do and be) with which these workers are most immediately concerned. She concludes that the rights-based initiatives should foreground capability as the political goal. Briones criticizes the feminists' "victim/agent" script, and argues that having rights is not necessarily conducive to practices of agency when the agent is constrained. Briones interviewed twenty-four migrant workers to study the nature of these constraints, and discovered that the workers believed that the abuse and violence in the work are "natural to making money." Briones argues that their belief arises from the structural constraints, i.e., their material conditions and survival needs of their families back home. She observes that access to livelihood resources is an important measure of the capability of their agency. Briones argues that we should not frame their situation in the anti-trafficking discourse of victim vs. agents. Protecting their human rights does not guarantee them livelihood, yet protecting their livelihood creates the opportunity to secure their human rights.

Tiantian Zheng's paper is based upon over twenty months of fieldwork between 1999 and 2002 in Dalian. Zheng discusses the adverse effect upon sex workers of China's abolitionist policy that focuses on forced prostitution and launches anti-trafficking campaigns. As she demonstrates, the state's anti-trafficking campaigns lead to a violent working environment for the karaoke bar hostesses, as the hostesses are more exposed to violence by clients, policemen, madams, government officials, and bar waiters. Zheng also

provides an account of how, unlike the government's perception of forced prostitution, hostesses voluntarily choose their profession and actively seek sex work in countries such as Japan and Singapore.

In a nutshell, the authors in this journal issue have successfully employed their ethnographical research to demystify the anti-trafficking discourse, rearticulate the trafficking discourses, and reassert the social justice and the needs, agency, and human rights of migrant and working communities.