

# FLIRTING FOR FOREIGN FUNDS

Rethinking Global Sex  
Work in the Asian Context

**WRITTEN BY**

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In 2004, the U.S. state department classified Filipina hostesses in Japan as the largest group of trafficked persons in the world, making up 10% of the supposed 800 000 people trafficked that year. Although this number of Filipina migrant workers has drastically declined, this isn't exactly a victory for the global anti-trafficking campaign, largely because these women were never trafficked in the first place. Anti-trafficking policy did not "save" them from work sex work, and at times restricted their mobility and access to job opportunities. *Illicit Flirtations: Labor, Migration, and Sex-Trafficking in Tokyo*, and *Dealing in Desire: Asian Ascendancy, Western Decline, and the Hidden Currencies of Global Sex Work*, authors Rhacel Salazar Parreñas and Kimberly Kay Hoang worked alongside hostesses in Japan and Vietnam to document the nuances of this form of sex work. Although Parreñas worked with Filipina migrant workers in Japan and Hoang worked with sex workers in Vietnam, both authors come to similar observations and even challenge their own assumptions as feminist scholars on the nature of sex work. Both authors implore readers to re-imagine sex work in Asia beyond human trafficking and view it instead as a reflection of global power structures in which sex workers are active participants. As a synthesis of these ethnographies, this paper outlines misconceptions

around global sex work and the economic conditions that push women to choose this career. Furthermore, the paper intergrates a sociological lense to describe the culture and the power dynamics both authors' witnessed between sex workers, customers, bar owners and madams.

First, a majority of people engaged in sex work are not trafficked persons. In both cases, neither of the authors worked with or encountered women who were trafficked and forced to work at the bars. The women all made the conscious decision to work as hostesses based on economic conditions. Many of the hostesses came from poor families and villages. They often had limited to no post-secondary education, and in the case of Filipina migrant workers, could not afford the fees recruiters charged for other foreign job markets. Furthermore, working as a hostess paid much better than other types of work. Not including money earned from actual sex acts, the women working at the cheapest bar in Hoang's study made an average of U.S.\$250-\$300 per month (Hoang, 2015, p.47). In comparison, one hostess attested that she could only make a maximum of U.S.\$50 a month while working as a maid in Saigon (Hoang, 2015, p.). In both studies, women frequently remarked that even when the opportunities were

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available to them, working as a maid or a factory worker left them susceptible to abuse and sexual assault. In regards to Western non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and rehabilitation centers, one hostess stated, “they should go save factory workers who are forced to work long hours for little pay, [are] beat by their bosses, and [who] sometimes have to offer sexual [favours] to get higher pay” (Hoang, 2015 p.108). Although hostess jobs were in high demand, anti-trafficking policies made it difficult for women to engage in this work. For example, Filipina migrant hostesses must obtain an entertainers visa to work in Japan and end up in debt to middlemen like talent agencies who facilitate the migration for them. Therefore, what is often identified as human trafficking is not a problem of sexual victimization, but of labour migration and labour market flexibility (Salazar, 2011, p.6). Subsequently, issues around sex work must be addressed as a macro-level issue, not as inconveniences that can be solved by an immigration officer on a case-by-case basis. Although economic conditions constrained their choices, working as a hostess was seen as a lucrative job opportunity that provided a level of autonomy and safety that other employment options did not.

Importantly, the hostesses do not explicitly have sex for money.

Instead, most of their work comes from a mix of entertainment and emotional labour that Salazar refers to as “commercial flirtation” (Salazar, 2011, p.5). This can include playful banter, seductive singing and dancing, drinking with customers, and entertaining men’s sexual advances. The hostesses developed these skills to create emotional capital with each customer: if the customer felt an emotional attachment to the hostess, they would tip better and keep coming back to the bar. If the hostess and customer had a good rapport, they would sometimes engage in extended relationships outside of the bar. Somewhat like an escort, the hostesses act like a girlfriend in exchange for larger sums of money or gifts. Gifts ranged from luxury perfume to plots of land or down payments for a small business. These long-term relationships did involve sex, however, both authors note the extent of a hostess’s relationship is up to them. The bar owners and madams in *Dealing in Desire* adhered to a strict moral code that prohibited them from forcing hostesses to have sex or from taking a cut of their earnings from paid sex (Hoang, 2015, p.17). In these settings, “acts of flirtation do not necessarily have any meaning outside the visceral pleasure they evoke at the moment. In [a hostess bar’s] moral world, one

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should not assume that acts of flirtation invite or suggest sex” (Salazar, 2011, p.121). This is notable as the U.S.-led anti-trafficking campaign is rooted in moral and paternalistic ideals against prostitution and sex work. Because this moral position on prostitution refuses to recognize sex work as viable employment, the policies divert our attention from solutions that target the regulation and protection of sex workers (Salazar, 2011). Hostesses do engage in paid sex exchanges if they wish, but more often than not performances of sexuality and affection were how hostesses made their money.

Thus, Salazar and Hoang argue that hostess bars are often less about the exchange of money for sex, and more about performances of gender and power. Male clients frequent these bars to bond with other men, while the hostess functions as objects to strengthen this bond. The hostesses often remarked that their job was to make the customer “feel like a man, even if they did not find them attractive. Just as the hostesses are well aware of the emotional labour that comes with their jobs, most male clients understand that the hostesses’ flirtation comes with a price. One male client describes his experience in a bar like a game:

‘You’ve got young attractive girls behind the bar and men vying for their attention. Everyone has a role they play. The women pretend like

all of us are interesting and attractive, and we pretend like it’s real. . . . It’s like a show. After a while, you become familiar with the script. It’s the same script every night.’ (Hoang, 2015, p.66)

Interestingly, these performances of gender and power are linked to global capital flows. Hostesses, especially Filipina migrant workers, send large portions of their pay back home to their families and could even convince men to send money directly to their village as a remittance. Male clients used the bars to bond, but also to assert their masculinity in accordance with global trends. By sexualizing Third World dependency and giving hostesses remittances as “philanthropy”, Western men negotiate perceptions of Western decline. As Asian countries have seen exponential growth in economic strength and cultural influence (ex. China and Korea), they have become less dependent on the Western exports, shrinking the sphere of influence for countries like the U.S. On the other hand, Asian businessmen and overseas Vietnamese used bars to display new wealth, thus claiming Asian ascendancy and contesting Western dominance (Hoang, 2015). Correspondingly, race and ethnicity were big parts of interactions between hostesses and customers. For example, many of the hostess bars in Japan were separated by ethnicity. Filipinas were stereotypically marketed as fun-loving

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and sweet, and the hostesses took on a carefree persona in front of clients. Adhering to this specific intersectional persona (ie. as a Filipino and a woman) could help a woman attract clients and even be tipped more than her peers. Parreñas and Hoang's research frames gender and power relationships in the context of globalization.

The purpose of this essay is not to say that human trafficking does not happen in Asia, or that living as a hostess is easy and completely free of exploitation. However, claiming that sex trafficking is the same as sex work, or that sex work is inherently degrading and demeaning to women worldwide ultimately denies women agency (Kamler, 2012). Furthermore, the issues around global sex work cannot be framed as a simple moral issue without reinforcing Western hegemony and ignoring the complex economic factors that push for this migration. Without taking these things into consideration, anti-trafficking and anti-prostitution policy homogenizes the experiences of women thereby disregarding their needs.



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