

Commentary on Hughes, Chon, and Ellerman

Concerns about trafficking arise at the turn of the 21st century in the context of burgeoning migration. Generated by increasing economic inequalities in a neoliberal global economy, the legal and illegal flows of people across borders pose both symbolic and material threats to national borders and security. Simultaneously, the abuses to which mobile populations are subjected challenge the human rights ideals pledged by the global community. Human trafficking involves the movement of people, often by illegal means, for the purpose of forced labor. The undocumented and underground natures of these activities and the lack of accurate data give much leeway to assumptions, conjectures, and generalizations. The abundance of writing on human trafficking in the past decade does not mean that these tendencies have abated. Four problems are particularly detrimental to the well-being of the populations vulnerable to the abuses that take place in human trafficking: (a) conflation of human trafficking with trafficking into forced prostitution, (b) haphazard use of questionable statistics and secondary sources, (c) deployment of sensational rhetoric that obscures the complex reality on the ground, and (d) emphasis on human trafficking as a consequence of transnational organized crime and thus the need for a law enforcement approach. They are harmful because they give a skewed representation of the situation, leading to falsely premised but emotionally appealing solutions.

All of these problems, unfortunately, are evident in the article “Modern-Day Comfort Women: The U.S. Military, Transnational Crime, and the Trafficking of Women,” by Donna M. Hughes, Katherine Y. Chon, and Derek P. Ellerman, in the September 2007 issue of *Violence Against Women*. The authors argue that the U.S. military bases in the Republic of Korea (South Korea) form an international hub for trafficking of women for prostitution and related forms of sexual exploitation in Korea and the United States. According to them, the military presence produces victims including migrant women and Korean women recruited into U.S. military camp towns, Korean women marrying GIs and migrating to the United States, and Korean women who work in massage parlors in the United States. One must realize that the vulnerabilities of these different groups of women are contextually generated—depending on their nationality and immigration status, their living and working conditions, and their feelings of empowerment and knowledge of channels of redress. It is, therefore, not my contestation that the U.S. military plays no part in facilitating the many human rights abuses of migrant women possible or that the institution of the military inflicts no harm on the many people whose livelihoods

have come to depend on it. However, attributing to the U.S. military the sole responsibility for such a range of vulnerabilities prevents a comprehensive understanding of the global and local contexts that facilitate labor abuses, unsafe migration, and exploitation of unfree labor.

As an anthropologist, I began researching the experiences of women who worked in the clubs around U.S. military camp towns in South Korea in 1998. I spent 2 years in Korea conducting fieldwork. My focus was on migrant Filipina entertainers who came to be a visible presence in the late 1990s. I also worked with local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) concerned about the problems faced by these migrant women. Together with a Korean researcher, I conducted research for the Young Women's Christian Association (Korea) and the Korea Church Women United (KCWU), both of which published research reports on the trafficking of migrant women into the sex trade in Korea.

First, it should be pointed out that the authors incorrectly characterized the state of the field, claiming that no previous "studies on the trafficking of women to Korea had been conducted or completed" (p. 902) and that "Korean and other Asian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have documented the transnational and domestic trafficking of women associated with U.S. military personnel, *but they were not research reports* [italics added]." Such erroneous claims erase a whole body of work by Korean researchers, NGOs, and journalists on the subject of the trafficking of women into U.S. military camp towns—based on actual visits to camp towns and meetings with both Korean and migrant women working in the clubs, club owners, managers, police, and government officials (Back, 1999; Cheng, 2002, 2004; Oh, 1997; Seol, 2005; Yea, 2004, 2005). In particular, the report by Seol and colleagues (2003) commissioned by the Ministry of Gender Equality, and the two fieldwork reports published by the KCWU (1999, 2002), involved both Korean and non-Korean academic researchers in developing research designs and multisited fieldwork to investigate the conditions of migrant women in U.S. military camp towns. This body of work in both Korean and English involved research efforts much more comprehensive and extensive than the telephone interviews that Hughes et al. conducted mainly with service providers and law enforcement officers as their only source of information. The authors' failure to acknowledge and reference this significant body of research, and their claim to produce groundbreaking research, bespeaks either their unawareness of or their lack of regard for existing research mostly done by Korean researchers and NGOs.

My second criticism of the article is that its definition of trafficking is highly circumscribed and reproduces a common slippage between *trafficking in persons* and *sex trafficking*. Although the authors specify that for the purpose of the article, the definition of *sex trafficking* is based on the U.S. Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000, they do not mention that sex trafficking was just one form of trafficking and that trafficking in persons could also take place for the purpose of other forms of labor or services such as farm work, factory work, and domestic work. The

authors' conflation of human trafficking with trafficking into forced prostitution has prevented them from making the important connection between migrant entertainers' situations and the general vulnerabilities of migrants, especially those who travel and work illegally. According to an Amnesty International (2006) report, at least 360,000 migrant workers were believed to be working in Korea in June 2006, some 1.5% of the total workforce. Of this total, 189,000, or 52.0%, were "irregular" migrant workers, most of whom suffer a range of financial and physical coercion. The similar structural vulnerabilities of migrant workers in the entertainment industry, factories, and domestic work have made it possible for employers to withhold salaries, impose arbitrary fines, deductions, and long working hours, and threaten or employ the use of violence. All migrant workers are exposed to the potential of sexual violence.

Third, I find the authors' use of secondary material such as NGO and media reports careless, conflating situations across contexts and time and homogenizing women's diverse experiences. For example, the authors use a report by Yu to support their claim that Korean women were domestically trafficked into U.S. military camp towns (p. 905). I was the person who translated the research by Yu from Korean to English in 1999, and I can attest that Yu was specifically writing about the debt-bondage system experienced by Korean women working in venues catering to a Korean clientele—not the U.S. military. Similarly, the five women killed in a brothel fire in Gunsan were Korean women, not foreign women, as the authors claim. Pointing out these factual mistakes is a call to academic professionalism. It does not mean that the abuses and deaths were in any way less significant because they were not migrant women or that they did not take place around U.S. military camp towns. Rather, it means that the conditions that allowed the exploitation and tragedies to take place are different in context from what Hughes et al. claim, and these diverse contexts need to be examined in a careful manner, not carelessly drawn into some other argument to make a powerful rhetorical point. It is important to note that although no migrant female entertainer has been killed in a brothel fire, a large-scale fire in the foreigner detention center in Yeosu, South Korea, on February 11, 2007, killed and injured many of the 55 migrant workers who could not escape (Asian Human Rights Commission, Urgent Appeals Program, 2007). In addition, several migrant workers in factories have committed suicide since the Korean government started cracking down on illegal migrant workers in 2004. These tragedies mark the poignant need to examine how migrant labor and immigration policies in Korea have undermined the basic human rights of migrants.

This brings me to my last and most important contestation with the article. With its title, "Modern-Day Comfort Women," the authors seem to suggest that there are overarching similarities between the systematic enslavement of women by the Japanese military during the Asia-Pacific War and what the authors argue is the U.S. military's involvement in the trafficking of women into prostitution in both Korea and the United States in the postwar era. The authors never developed this argument. In fact, the term *modern-day comfort women* never appeared in the article. In other words, the authors use the term *comfort women* only to invoke a relationship

between female sexual enslavement and the military, this time holding the U.S. military guilty of all the human rights violations experienced by women in diverse situations: Korean and migrant women in the clubs in U.S. military camp towns and immigrant Korean women who married American servicemen and those who work in massage parlors in the United States. Other than the anti-U.S. imperialist sentiments that a focus on the U.S. military conveniently elicits and the immediate emotional appeal and outrage that the term *comfort women* provokes, this overarching idea is grossly inadequate in understanding the multiple and intersecting structures that make these women vulnerable to abuse and violence.

In understanding trafficking and crafting remedies, it is ineffective to focus on finding a single culprit and advocating a “law-and-order” approach. Rather, we need to understand what kinds of global, regional, and local structures generate the flow of people who brave the mounting barriers of national borders. Their mobility is an expression of their need but also their agency, albeit constrained. We also need to understand the diverse experiences and goals of vulnerable populations to develop remedies that are responsive to their needs. My own research of Filipina entertainers in U.S. military camp towns in Korea has shown that return migration is common and that exploitative labor practices and racial discrimination by employers and government officials, rather than forced prostitution, are their main complaints. Recent federal investigations into Korean massage parlors in the United States, such as the well-known Operation Gilded Cage, which began in 2005, have found that most Korean women have come in not as wives of U.S. military personnel but by paying managers who helped them cross the borders from such entry points as Mexico and Canada. Their illegal entry and their dependence on their employers for everyday needs, and not their engagement in prostitution per se, have made them vulnerable to abuses. Furthermore, it has been reported that Korean women are leaving to engage in sex work overseas in greater numbers because the implementation of the new antiprostitution laws have cracked down on their means of livelihood at home (e.g., Reuters, 2006). The situations of immigrant Korean wives of GIs, divorced or otherwise, needs to be considered within the context of immigrant women and domestic violence, a subject that academics and activists have long tried to contextualize within restrictive immigration policies and the lack of social services support for immigrant women (Bhattacharjee, 1997). This is just a sample of the complex vulnerabilities of women who are differently situated, well beyond the scope of the U.S. military and transnational organized crime, which Hughes et al. prescribe. Grounded research is key to understanding these diverse experiences and to identifying the different factors that contribute to labor abuse and exploitation. In any event, these women certainly deserve better than the careless and haphazard scholarship offered by Hughes et al.

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