

Interview – Sharmila Parmanand

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.

Dr. Sharmila Parmanand is a Fellow in Gender and Human Rights at the London School of Economics and oversees research projects on women and migration for the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW). She has a PhD in Gender Studies from the University of Cambridge on a Gates Scholarship and a Masters' in Gender and Development from the University of Melbourne on an Australian Leadership Award Scholarship. She was a lecturer at the Department of Theater at the University of Vermont and the Department of English and Literature at the Ateneo de Manila University. She has also served as a debate trainer in on-site events for university and high school students in over 45 countries. Her work is published in journals such as the *Anti-Trafficking Review*, *Journal of International Women's Studies*, *Feminist Review* (forthcoming) and *European Journal of Women's Studies* (forthcoming).

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

I have always been interested in how the discourse and practice of human rights and development reflect and shape the lived realities of women in the Global South, especially in issues of trafficking, migration, sex work, and women's precarious labour. I used to work in a policy role in anti-trafficking. In the Philippines and globally, anti-trafficking laws are lauded as a human rights victory. Trafficking is defined by the UN Trafficking Protocol as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit. There is no doubt that protecting individuals from exploitation is important and necessary. In fact, even working conditions that don't meet the bar of "trafficking" need to be improved. In my non-profit role, I originally supported a strong focus on criminal justice to advance women's rights – this involved prioritising strategies such as prosecution, raids and rescue operations to "save" sex workers, and rehabilitation programs that redirected women to alternative income sources such as domestic work, factory work, sewing, handicrafts, and hairdressing, which were also gendered, precarious, and low-paying. I regularly interacted with women who were targets of these interventions and many of them did not feel that their lives were improved. They resented the academics, journalists, and women's groups who spoke on their behalf. I began to realise that "protection" is a complicated terrain: if we aren't reflexive, our feminist impulses for care can manifest as paternalism and control.

It became clearer to me that there is a mismatch between anti-trafficking measures identified by policy elites in the Philippines and what sex workers said they needed. I was curious: where are the sex workers in all these conversations? This is what led to my PhD dissertation – I wanted to compare dominant official representations of vulnerable populations such as migrants and sex workers with how these populations themselves made sense of their work. Furthermore, while millions of dollars are spent on anti-trafficking programs with the aim of protecting precarious individuals, these programs generally lack rigorous evaluation and are designed without the meaningful involvement of target populations. Therefore, I wanted to foreground sex workers' perspective on how they experienced common interventions and to propose alternative conceptions of agency in oppressive situations to replace unhelpful and misleading totalizing narratives of victimhood.

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I had a similar journey as a master's student at the University of Melbourne in 2012, when I looked into whether access to microcredit improved the well-being and household bargaining position of female microcredit borrowers in the Philippines. I noted a striking disparity between women's conceptions of their needs and how development experts have framed microcredit for two decades as the main strategy for improving poor women's lives. For example, women preferred cash transfers, food subsidies, cheaper water and electricity, subsidised housing, cheaper public transport, and shorter waiting times in public hospitals. They also wanted safe and decent regular work for themselves and their partners. Not one mentioned microcredit but they chose to access it because it was what was on offer, even if it meant longer working hours and having to borrow from other sources to pay back their loans.

These disparities reveal the epistemic injustice in conversations about human rights and development policies, which often exclude poor women and regard them as objects of intervention whose behaviours need correction, as though the inability to succeed as an entrepreneur is a personal failure (in the case of microcredit), or as though they need moral repair (in the case of sex work). One could say that my feminist training and background in development work has made me attentive to the politics of knowledge production: I am critical of canonical "success stories" in human rights and development and I usually end up doing work that examines "history from below" and stories from the margins that tend to unsettle dominant assumptions about women's agency and their relationships with the state and other "duty-bearers".

What is the existing scholarship on the gendered dynamics of human trafficking lacking in terms of research or policy discussions?

There is a gap between academic conversations and policy conversations in the context of anti-trafficking, and this is certainly the case in the Philippines. In academic conversations, it has been regularly observed that feminist entanglements with the state are tricky. When it comes to the lives of women and gender minorities: the state is part of the problem. The state does not have a good track record of enhancing women's freedom – generally, it is often a custodian of sexist laws, it does not properly acknowledge women's labour, and many of its institutions (such as the police) have a masculinist orientation and a violent relationship with marginalised groups. Nonetheless, we have no choice but to work with state institutions in finding solutions for women's oppression. Academic scholarship is increasingly critical of approaches to women's rights that end up reproducing forms of paternalism and control over women's sexuality and mobility – for example, increased policing or restrictions on migration in the name of "protection".

In terms of policy, however, anti-trafficking has become a popular framework through which many governments (and women's rights groups) address prostitution and the precarity of migrant workers. Some of the "solutions" that have been implemented prioritize policing and rescue (in the case of sex workers) or subject migrant workers to a complicated and bureaucratic process with many requirements. Many developing countries have placed restrictions on women's labour migration, without making any efforts to reduce women's care burdens and integrate women in the domestic labour market – especially for women whose ethnicity, caste, and class are already barriers to economic opportunities. These policies have the unintended consequence of further reducing sex workers' control over their working conditions by forcing them and their clients to transact in secret, and increasing the cost of migration and encouraging migration through unofficial channels. For anti-trafficking, the main metric of success has been prosecution and conviction rates of perpetrators. In reality, many of those prosecuted and convicted are themselves poor women. Many victims do not necessarily want to prosecute their perpetrators or see them as villains. However, based on my research and many other studies, victims are often told that financial assistance is conditional on their cooperation in prosecution. In some countries with huge migrant populations, "anti-trafficking" has become a justification for "anti-immigration", with migrant communities being surveilled and raided and undocumented workers deported. These approaches are regularly critiqued within feminist scholarship, and by organizations such as the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women and sex worker rights groups.

Across the board, two things can be done better: (a) a stronger focus on economic redistribution, social protection, and equitable migration policies (especially in wealthier nations) instead of individual prosecutions or approaches that entrench "border control"; and (b) building the political agency of marginalised groups such as sex workers,

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migrants, and other precarious workers to advocate for themselves.

In your article, you discuss the context of Filipino sex workers who struggle to organize and advocate for their rights. What are the implications of governments having no clear definition of sex work and human trafficking?

The UN Anti-Trafficking Protocol was a product of intense negotiations among state and NGO actors who had very different positions on sex work. As a result, the drafters left key aspects of the legal definition of trafficking intentionally vague, which has given rise to a definitional muddle over terms such as “sexual exploitation”. Where trafficking has been broadly defined, such as in the Philippines, there has been a risk of conflating all sex work with trafficking. The socio-legal history of the anti-trafficking law in the Philippines suggests that this conflation was intentional on the part of the Coalition Against Traffic in Women Asia Pacific, which led the lobbying efforts for the law. Unlike domestic work, or other forms of work, where only a subset of workers may be trafficked, the conflation of sex work with trafficking constructs all sex workers as victims instead of workers. At the same time, the Revised Penal Code criminalizes the sale of sex, while other provisions in the Labor Code and Sanitation Code suggest a tacit acceptance of sex work in establishments such as massage parlors and bars. This confusion trickles down to local government policies.

Sex workers have been excluded from all these policy-making conversations that construct them as victims, criminals, or economic assets, which I argue is a form of epistemic injustice. There are two important consequences. Firstly, for as long as they are regarded criminals or victims, they will struggle to organise and represent their interests, mobilise resources, and challenge police harassment. Where there are “victims” in the public imagination, there are also “rescuers” who are seen as knowing better than victims what is good for them. This gives rise to a self-fulfilling cycle whereby sex workers’ lack of agency is used to justify the need for saving them, eliminating their source of income, and denying them further agency. Secondly, legal confusion usually means more discretion for certain actors such as the police. In my work, I examine how members of the police force have systematically taken advantage of the legal ambiguity on sex work to extort money and sexual services from sex workers, or to conduct anti-prostitution raids masquerading as anti-trafficking efforts, which usually leads to sex workers being detained rather than “helped”.

How would you describe the transnational role of the female migrant, particularly from those countries wherein labor export is adopted as government policy?

Women’s labour is central to “global care chains,” originally described by Arlie Hochschild in 2000 as “personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring” (p.141). The traditional focus of this conversation has been on the responsibilities passed on from one woman to another. These “global care chains” reflect divisions of class, wealth, race, and ethnicity as richer households outsource their care labour requirements to members of poorer households from the same country or poorer countries. Poorer households, however, are unable to pay for care work, and thus rely on unpaid family (usually women’s) labour. In addition to paying attention to differences in wealth and place of origin, there have been important interventions in this conversation that problematise the absence of men in the discussion. By focusing mostly on women, we risk stabilising gendered divisions of labour in both receiving and sending countries by viewing only women as providers of care. It is not surprising that in their home countries, women migrants are simultaneously praised for being hardworking heroines whose remittances keep their families and the nation afloat and stigmatised as “bad mothers” for abrogating their cultural roles as mothers and wives.

In both their home and destination countries, women migrant workers are overrepresented in informal work and low-paid service jobs, such as domestic work, or low-level industrial or agricultural jobs, and often lack access to full social protection and other labour rights. Of course, these work categories are not monolithic, and in some cases women have good working relationships with their employers. Broadly, destination countries lack the political will to protect the rights of migrant workers, and employers are aware of the immense power they have over migrant workers, which increases the vulnerability of these workers. This is further heightened for undocumented migrant workers, or those who used irregular channels to migrate/secure work overseas.

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In what ways has the feminization of migration strengthened international policies meant to combat human trafficking?

I am not sure that it has. Economic need is the biggest driver for women's labour migration and is also a significant factor in their hesitation to report abuse (which could get them repatriated back to the same grim economic situation they came from, if not worse). While governments are developing legal frameworks regulating migration, this needs to be matched by systematic efforts to provide social protection and sustainable livelihood in home countries. It is not just the governments of these countries that are failing women. The dependence on migrant remittances and reduced social spending by some governments in the Global South are at least indirectly tied to demands for structural adjustment imposed by international creditors and the increased precarisation of labour under global economic capital.

There are, of course, some promising developments: The 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, for example, has as one of its targets the protection of labour rights and a safe and secure working environment for all workers, including migrants, and in particular, women migrants. The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants paved the way for the global compact for safe, orderly, and regular migration which is the first intergovernmentally negotiated agreement covering international migration. It is, unfortunately, not legally binding.

It is important to emphasize that while the life choices of women migrant workers are circumscribed by structural factors such as poverty and a gendered division of labour (locally and globally), they do engage in actions to challenge the systems of constraints they face and regularly make careful and considered decisions about how to protect themselves and their income best. Ultimately, the woman migrant should not be seen as someone to be "saved" by external actors, but as someone who should be equipped with tools to renegotiate the power dynamics between them and their recruitment agents and employers. Strict migration requirements and mandatory repatriation mechanisms make it harder for migrants to report, reduce, and remove themselves from situations of violence. Exorbitant direct and indirect recruitment and placement fees need to be removed because these saddle migrants with debt even before they start working overseas, which makes it harder for them to leave abusive workplaces. Another problematic example is the Convention of the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Recommendation No. 38 on Trafficking in Women and Girls, which does recognize globally dominant economic policies as the cause of large-scale economic inequalities that manifest as labour exploitation, but once again conflates sex work with trafficking, which justifies the partial criminalisation of sex work and ignores demands from sex worker organisations for labour rights. Criminalisation leads to riskier working conditions and reduced leverage in relation to clients and employers (especially for migrant workers who become targets of surveillance and do not have the same right as citizens) and shifts the focus away from socio-economic justice and labour rights.

What are you currently working on?

In addition to teaching at the Department of Gender Studies at the London School of Economics, I am converting my PhD dissertation into a book. In this book, I examine the dominant representations of sex workers as victims in need of rescuing and compare this with sex workers' own reflections on their work. Furthermore, I discuss the harmful effects on sex workers of common "protective measures" such as raids, rescue, and mandatory rehabilitation.

I am also studying the connections between gender and populism—in particular, how the performance of masculinity is a crucial part in some leaders' responses to the pandemic, and how Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte deploys gendered tropes to construct human rights as weak and "feminine" in contrast to his strong and "masculine" violent war on drugs.

Finally, I oversee research projects on women and migration for the Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women (GAATW) which focus on the social and economic inclusion of returning women migrant workers in South and Southeast Asia. These projects map the impacts of the pandemic on women migrant workers using feminist participatory action research. Conducting social research in the context of pandemic restrictions is significantly harder, and I have been thinking carefully about how to combine on-site interactions with virtual and mobile technologies.

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What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

We've all heard the phrase "knowledge is power". What are the implications of this for academic scholarship? It means that the production of knowledge is not a neutral process even if it appears to be. It is a process that is embedded in power relations. Who become scholars and who are excluded determine what gets studied and how it is studied and who are eventually seen as "experts". For example, for the longest time, the "gendered" distinction between paid and unpaid work was not questioned in traditional economics. It was assumed that domestic work was "unproductive". In the 1960s, women scholars challenged this flawed understanding of economic life and exposed the systematic undervaluation of women's labour. Feminist economics is now recognized as an established sub-field within the discipline. Challenge epistemic inequalities when you see them.

Furthermore, those of us who have access to resources to pursue scholarship are in a privileged position to shape society's understandings of problems and solutions. We should do so with accountability. For example, research is an extractive process—we often draw on people's experiences and emotions to generate academic work that advances our careers. There is no way to fully avoid this, but there are ways to create more reciprocity in our research relationships. If we have platforms that can amplify our work, we should share them with those who don't. We should think very carefully about how we represent the communities we are trying to learn about and learn from. Throughout history, scholars have contributed to legitimising violence against certain groups by portraying them as backward savages or passive ignorant victims who need to be enlightened or saved.

Finally, try to build a well-rounded academic profile: look for opportunities to grow as a teacher and researcher; present at conferences to get feedback on your work and build your network; collaborate with other scholars where possible; contribute to the intellectual life of your university or institution by helping to convene lectures, and panel discussions or even more informal workshops and brainstorming sessions with other young scholars.