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Susanne Åsman



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Response to Brigitte Steinmann's review of *Bombay Going: Nepali migrant sex workers in an anti- trafficking era*, by Susanne Åsman. Lanham: Lexington Books. 2018

Susanne Åsman

- 1 Steinmann's thorough discussion and detailed review of my book highlights several interesting aspects in a variety of ways. However, broadly speaking, Steinmann's reading of the book is also coloured by ideologically based preconceptions that impede a more direct dialogue with its materials and arguments. Furthermore, Steinmann's reading and interpretation fails to recognise the most important purpose and objective of the book, namely, to go beyond the dominating discourses of sex trafficking and the polarised perspectives of the subject by way of a detailed ethnographic enquiry.
- 2 At one end of the spectrum of the dominant discourses about sex trafficking is the view that women are subject to prostitution, which here is equivalent to sex trafficking. From the neo-abolitionist perspective that guides such a reading, involvement in prostitution can never be connected to 'free will'. Rather, women are exclusively considered as being victimised and exploited subjects within a male-dominated gendered order. At the other end of the spectrum is a (socio-)liberal sex workers' rights perspective arguing that sex work must be seen as distinct from sex trafficking because sex/human trafficking involves some kind of force, coercion and/or deception, which is absent from sex work proper. This perspective tends to focus on the 'free will' or agency of individual actors. Consequently, not only women, but also men and LGBTQIA persons are considered to be able to sometimes choose sex work, regardless of whether it is legal or not. It is thus not a male-dominated gendered order that is underlined here, but a variety of relations and practices on different levels that involve power, particularly with regard to sex work as work associated with labour rights and human

rights. This does not mean a denial of the fact that sex/human trafficking exists and is a problem.

- 3 By analysing and presenting the empirical findings and ethnographic data that are often absent in these polarised discussions, *Bombay Going* seeks to highlight some of the complexities and nuances of this sensitive issue through the narratives and experiences of the women and men concerned, by particularly focusing on Sindupalchowk district in Nepal. It is the understanding of the process of migrating to Mumbai's red-light district or, in Tamang terms, 'Bombay going', 'doing that work' or 'doing easy work', as defined by both men and women, that is central to the book. It should be mentioned here that, despite the fact that the migratory process from this area to Mumbai has been going on since the late 1950s–60s, there are no specific Tamang terms for prostitution or sex work per se, and neither are any of the derogatory Hindi definitions of a prostitute, such as *randi* or *beisha*, used or associated with these women in the fieldwork area (even if other Hindi loanwords are used).
- 4 In regard to what has been mentioned in the above section, women's agency becomes central to the book. However, western feminists' different approaches, meanings and naturalised views of agency as being exclusively linked to resistance, either to a male-dominated gendered order or in general, are problematic as they are too narrow. These approaches solely emphasise *agency* as *resistance* to something, that is in its negative terms, not agency in its generative terms, that is *what agency generates and produces*. This is not to say that women's agency cannot be linked to resistance, but that the context and meaning attributed to agency in this case primarily focus on what agency means and generates from the women's point of view (Mahmood 2005; McNay 2004). The Tamang women's motivations and what they accomplished through the migratory process were not intended to fight a dominant male order or other acts of explicit resistance. Even so, their work has contributed to significant changes in their home area, in their own and their families' lives that should not be underestimated or dismissed just because this does not easily fit into a preconceived understanding of the subject or into a particular theoretical or ideological perspective that objectifies them as mere victims of the prevailing structural conditions in their society. But it is also important to underline the necessity to see women's agency as embedded (Ortner 2006) in the wider historical, sociocultural, economic and political context, and the Tamang as a marginalised group in Nepali society. In no way is this topic ignored in the book, either in Nepal or in India. Being a member of a society means living within certain accepted structural restrictions. Even so, these women are not without subjectivity and agency, under constant 'guardianship' of others, as Steinmann opines. We must be very careful not to dismiss these women's intentions, experiences, efforts and their contributions, in order to not reproduce a problematic patriarchal gendered order ourselves. We need to take these women seriously.
- 5 I respect the work that anti-trafficking organisations in Nepal do: their work is important. However, the 'moral untouchability' (Fassin 2010) of the humanitarian sector, that is the problem of discussing, critically scrutinising and analysing these organisations with regard to their intentions of 'doing good', is problematic. Surely it must be possible to critically scrutinise this sector amongst others, the many actors with different interests at stake and the implications of the work they do, its unintended consequences and what their work produces without being labelled 'anti-developmental' as Steinmann chose to define me in her review. In this way

Steinmann reproduces a 'moral untouchability', silencing a much-needed discussion on the subject. The problem with dominant simplified discourses related to sex/human trafficking, reproduced by the state, media and anti- trafficking organisations and others, is the legitimisation of paternalistic emotive moral politics in regard to women's mobility and migration for work in general. Due to this and the fear of sex/human trafficking, the consequences are restrictive regulations, policies and from time to time a complete ban on women's migration for work purposes and what follows such as women's irregular, illegal and unsafe migration for foreign employment where they end up in a vulnerable situation with an increased risk of being subject to sex/human trafficking. Recently, in a move that was strongly criticised by women's organisations, the Nepali government advanced a series of proposals regarding 'gendered vulnerability' that will, in addition to other measures, strongly restrict women's mobility. Based primarily on gendered values of high-caste Hindus, this proposal suggests a minimal age of 40(!) years for women intending to work abroad.

- 6 'Bombay Wealth' is a Tamang concept used among Tamang women and men in connection with work and with the wealth that can be acquired through sex work and/or managing or owning a brothel in Mumbai and must be understood within this context, not from a European middle-class perspective. Wealth in this regard is usually associated with and defined as a pair of gold earrings and/or thin gold necklaces. Jewellery is used as insurance coverage for any potential problem (financial or otherwise) that the women and/or their families may face in the future. In such cases, with the help of a jeweller, the women melt down and sell a small piece of gold from the earrings and, when possible, restore the earrings to their original size and weight. 'Bombay Wealth' also relates to the savings the women have managed to put away after years of sex work abroad. This is, relatively speaking, usually quite a modest amount of money but for the women it constitutes substantial economic capital that gives them a sense of security in daily life on their return home. But what many of these women mentioned as being even more important is the feeling of confidence these savings create regarding their ability to finance their own funerary ritual and mortuary feasts.
- 7 In Tamang social and religious life, this is the most important life cycle ritual for Tibetan Buddhists, which is of great import for their current and subsequent incarnations. A prestigious mortuary ritual with several lamas reciting and performing the rituals and assisting the dead person's soul through *bardo* and a generous mortuary feast attended by many guests guarantee status and merit. This balances negative *karma* and contributes to good rebirth. Saving money for the mortuary ritual is usually a lifelong project which 'Bombay Wealth' helps expedite. In addition, some of the women used their savings to set up a small business in or around their place of residence: a store usually consisting of one small room, a small teashop or lodge with a few guest rooms. Even if this is in no way a life of luxury, the earnings from Mumbai or 'Bombay Wealth' have been extremely important to these women and to their financial security, and have created a safer and comfortable life for them. Even if some of the women working in Mumbai, like the brothel owners, have managed to earn a considerable amount of money, they have usually invested these earnings in a small business or house in Kathmandu, or in Mumbai if married to an Indian. The meaning of 'Bombay Wealth' is therefore far removed from consumerism: the association Steinmann makes with it is problematic. Her associating it with consumerism is somewhat similar to a common discourse expressed by the urban middle class and/or high-caste Hindu groups in Kathmandu in for example the humanitarian and migratory

sector.¹ In such a discourse there is a paternalistic and presupposed assumption about indigenous and low-caste groups, particularly women, and their use of the remittances and economic capital they and their families produce by working abroad. It is often stated that they do not use these sums in a 'proper way' and, instead, indulge in 'unnecessary consumption' rather than make future investments. Even if they would prefer to indulge in 'unnecessary consumption', who, particularly from a European perspective, could blame them?

- 8 Yet even though work in Mumbai has enabled women to secure their own earnings and savings, both sex workers and brothel owners have contributed, through their work during their years away, to a significant part of their families' and to other relatives' wellbeing in their home region in Nepal. This highly important aspect is heavily emphasised in the book but unfortunately overlooked by Steinmann. In other words, work in Mumbai is not only 'for their own benefit' or for the 'greatest individual success' as Steinmann puts it, but is also to a large extent for the benefit of the house and family back in Nepal. Women's agency, motivations and more pronounced subjectivity in this regard do not necessarily rule out the sense of importance these women attribute to the community and the family.
- 9 As demonstrated in the book, the women living and working in Mumbai have a strong sense of relatedness and belonging to the home region, to the house and to the family in Nepal, which is attested to on lively social networks and in activities in social spheres between the brothels in Mumbai and homes in Nepal. Even if the women stayed far from home, they in no way abandoned their families or relatives in Nepal. Family members visited their daughters, sisters and wives (among others) in the red-light district and stayed with them in the brothels during the visit. The women working in Mumbai returned home for visits and, indeed, already had the intention of returning home when they first left for 'Bombay going'. Other persons from back home such as religious specialists and healers were invited by the women to Mumbai for different purposes. Consequently, maintaining their sense of belonging to the house and their relationship with the family and home area in Nepal during their absence was regarded as self-evident even though they had created a separate life for themselves in Mumbai.
- 10 A central part of the strategies to return to Nepal, which are implemented by Tamang women in Mumbai, is their continued efforts to make different kinds of financial, social and religious contributions to their house and family in Nepal. Financial contributions have been mainly used for repairs to the house, to rebuild it, for buying land or for paying off debts. In an area that for a very long time has been totally neglected when it comes to the most basic infrastructure, investments have helped improve material conditions in various ways. For example, the installation of solar energy panels on the roof for running small-scale power generators that produce electricity for the family home. Investments in woodburning iron stoves, sometimes equipped with a chimney, have replaced the hearth that traditionally occupies a submerged area in the floor and which is now maintained as an open fire. The children of family relatives have been provided with schooling at private boarding schools in Mumbai and relatives' mortuary rituals have been financed partly or fully by earnings from sex work. Far from being 'outward signs of a true rural middle class', these investments in material and cultural capital are among the main incentives for Tamang women's 'Bombay going'. That these investments are 'outward signs of a true rural middle class' is one of Steinmann's somewhat sarcastic definitions, not mine.

- 11 In contrast to many groups in Nepal, indigenous communities of Tibeto- Burman origin, such as the Tamang, generally speaking enjoy largely equal gendered relationships. That being said, the right to inherit land and a house runs through the male line, while movable goods are passed down through the female line. Marriage is important even if wedding rituals are largely downplayed in the area, and there is no problem for women or men to file for divorce and to remarry. Women's right to mobility (migration) for work purposes is not questioned. Women have important, recognised public roles and functions in different social and religious activities and rituals. Their roles in everyday practices are to a large extent regarded as complementary. However, besides these aspects that might be said to be common to many other Tamang communities (March 2002), the women who had worked in Mumbai contributed to structural changes on different levels in society. To name just a few, some of the women chose not to marry or to remarry on their return, even if they were divorced or widowed, an option that would not have been possible without the savings accumulated in Mumbai or the small business they had set up with their earnings. They had, in other words, the option of living a more independent life as single women without being stigmatised. They married across indigenous, caste and religious boundaries with Hindu Nepali or Indian men, and also with Indian Muslim men, and were accepted by their natal society despite the general perception of such marriages as problematical. When it comes to mortuary rituals and feastings, as Steinmann rightly suggests, women play important roles and functions. Yet what was significant was the fact that women, thanks to the money from Mumbai, had the possibility of fully sponsoring these events and then, at least theoretically, the right to fully inherit from the deceased. Some of the women who had returned from Mumbai attended training courses run by lamas in order to seriously improve their knowledge of the philosophy and practices of Tibetan Buddhism.
- 12 While a discussion of 'the house' is beyond the scope of this response, note that the ideas of Lévi-Strauss on the topic are not central to the book but instead mentioned in a general discussion and overview of his major contribution to the establishment of 'the house' and how it has developed as a key concept in anthropology by other researchers. Furthermore, brothels in Mumbai are houses and homes to the women while living and working in Mumbai. The living conditions in the rooms that seem to fill Steinmann, from her standpoint, with horror are very much like the living conditions of so many other Nepalese in Kathmandu and Indians in Mumbai: one or two small rooms, a small kerosene or gas stove in one corner and several beds in the room/s for family members to share. As expressed in the book, women living and working in brothels form units in which boyfriends or husbands are sometimes also included. These units cook together, sleep together, perform their daily tasks together, support each other in difficult times and, if they have children, assist each other by bringing the children to school and so on. That is not to say that there are no conflicts or serious problems in the red-light district or, as mentioned in the book, hierarchical relations between different categories of sex workers and erotic entertainers. These units constitute somewhat different kinds of social or family units when compared to the rural area in Nepal. Nevertheless, while in Mumbai, brothels are the Tamang women's house and home at one and the same time.

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NOTES

1. This became clear during another more recent project based on fieldwork in Kathmandu in regard to the humanitarian sector and anti-trafficking organisations' rehabilitation practices (*Humanitarianism and the Moral Politics of Sex-trafficking and Rehabilitation in Nepal*, forthcoming) as well as during my present project related to the in/formal labour recruitment sector in Nepal.

AUTHOR

SUSANNE ÅSMAN

Susanne Åsman is a researcher and lecturer at the School of Global Studies, at Gothenburg University. Between 2017–2019 she was guest researcher in the Department of Anthropology at Cornell University and affiliated with the Department of International Relations at Tribhuvan University. She is the author of *Bombay Going: Nepali migrant sex workers in an anti-trafficking era and Humanitarianism and the Moral Politics of Sex-trafficking and Rehabilitation in Nepal* (forthcoming).