

***Reluctant Bedfellows: Feminism, Activism, and Prostitution in the Philippines.* 2009.**

Meredith Ralston and Edna Keeble. Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press. 229 pages.

No illustrations or photographs. References, appendix, and index included.

\$27.95 (Paperback).

Reviewed by Traci Yoder<sup>1</sup>

*Reluctant Bedfellows* is both an analysis of the authors' development project on sex tourism in the Philippines as well as an intervention into theoretical debates in feminism influenced by poststructuralist and postcolonial literatures. Drawing on their experiences with development work as well as their encounters with other feminists in the academy and in the Philippines, Ralston and Keeble present three central arguments: 1) change necessarily occurs incrementally, 2) both "insiders" and "outsiders" have useful perspectives to offer, and 3) development work is a viable strategy for creating global social change. Using a combination of participant observation and interviews with Filipino bar girls, sex tourists, and members of their partner organizations, the authors explore the practical aspects of development projects and transnational feminist work.

The book is organized into three sections. Part One describes the theoretical challenges of doing development work while still attending to the critiques of poststructuralist and postcolonial perspectives. Chapter 2 examines the problem of "analysis paralysis," which occurs when the desire to avoid co-opting or "othering" people's experiences leads to a failure to act at all. Ralston and Keeble argue that the valuable insights provided by poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and feminist analyses of difference should not cause scholars to become immobilized by the fear of being labeled ethnocentric and neo-colonialist. They ask, "What are the possibilities for political action and coalition building when feminists become more concerned with silos of difference than with similarities and common political concerns?" (10) This chapter is one of the strongest in the book, and provides a much needed counter-point to the theoretical perspectives that currently dominate feminist thinking about transnational development work and activism.

Part Two deals with practical challenges that emerge when addressing a topic as divisive and controversial as prostitution and the global sex industry. Chapter 3 discusses philosophical issues related to prostitution, specifically the various ways that feminists have theorized prostitution. Ralston and Keeble identify four main perspectives through which prostitution has been discussed: as a social ill to be eradicated, as work like any other job, as a moral or criminal issue, or as a social welfare problem. The authors describe these different frameworks as a way to elucidate the complexity of the topic of prostitution as well as the resulting difficulty of partnering with organizations and people who hold conflicting positions. Chapter 4 situates these conversations about prostitution within the specific historical, cultural, and colonial context of the Philippines. Chapter 5 describes sex work and tourism within the Philippines, specifically the influence of the former U.S. military base at Angeles City. Chapter 6 outlines the five-year development plan the authors implemented in Angeles City, including descriptions of their partners, programs, obstacles, and successes. The basic aim of the project was not to eliminate

---

<sup>1</sup> Traci Yoder has a M.A. in Anthropology from the University of Florida and a M.S. in Library and Information Studies from Florida State University.

prostitution in Angeles City (which the authors point out is impossible and therefore not a useful goal), but rather to improve the lives of women working in the sex industry through gender sensitivity training for relevant community members. Working with five Filipino partner organizations, the authors spent five years attempting to alleviate the social, financial, and legal problems of bar girls in Angeles City by sensitizing police and judges to the hardships of prostitutes, raising sympathy and understanding amongst the community, and directing negative attention away from the women to their clients and bar owners. This chapter also describes the difficulties of working with multiple feminist organizations in the Philippines, particularly the problems that arise when groups hold different ideas of change and strategies for success.

Finally, in Part Three, Ralston and Keeble return to their call for engaged scholarship based on thoughtful critique. They argue that social change not only can, but absolutely must happen incrementally and through individual action. The authors also defend the role of “outsiders” in transnational work, arguing that all members of a project have valuable perspectives on a situation. They contend that the focus on defining who is or is not an “insider” or an “outsider” has the effect of critiquing feminist inquiry rather than the problem itself. The authors also use the last chapter to point to a direction for the global feminist movement based on acknowledgement and transcendence of individual identities and differences. They tentatively propose a “feminist cosmopolitanism” or a “global human feminism” as a more practical form of transnational feminism. This last chapter has a somewhat defensive tone, most likely because the authors anticipate the strong reaction this analysis may receive from feminist theorists.

One of the strengths of the book is the authors’ willingness to address the unintended outcome of recent theoretical perspectives in feminist theorizing: the paralysis that emerges from fear of being negatively labeled as neo-colonial and ethnocentric. They argue, “we need to be able to carve a space that recognizes the contributions of feminist critical theorists, particularly from poststructuralist and postcolonial perspectives, while also demanding that academics themselves be engaged, particularly because their theorizing points to global and social inequalities and injustices” (26). Ralston and Keeble urge scholars to rethink the role of service in the academy, and call on researchers and teachers to actively address the crippling inequalities caused by colonialism, capitalism, and the global sex industry. While there are moments in the book when the authors seem to speak too broadly about “poststructuralism” and “postcolonialism,” they do not hesitate to engage with the work of some of the most influential and well-known feminist theorists of these perspectives, including Judith Butler, Gayatri Spivak, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty.

Scholars and researchers interested in feminist theory, development work, international relations, sex tourism, globalization, and the Philippines will find this book useful. This study should also be read with and against transnational feminist literature, for it provides a much-needed practical intervention into debates that tend to become overly theoretical. *Reluctant Bedfellows* is designed for a wide audience and the accessible language makes it a good choice for undergraduate classes. The book will work particularly well in the classroom because it accompanies a video made by Ralston called “Hope in Heaven,” which provides a visual representation of the global sex trade and its effect on the lives of women in the Philippines.