

Book Review

The Sex Sector: The economic and social bases of prostitution in Southeast Asia; ed. by Lin Lean Lim, Geneva : ILO 1998. ISBN 92-2-109522-3. Price 35 Swiss Francs.

In 1985 the First World Whores' Congress, held at Amsterdam, demanded that prostitution be recognised as a standard business activity in the service sector. In 1998 the International Labour Office published the book under review, which studied prostitution in Southeast Asia, as an economic activity. On 10th October 1998, this book has been awarded the International Nike Award – a prestigious publishing award – at the Frankfurt Book Fair. At the other end of the spectrum of response, the Norwegian Trade Union and the Women's Front of Norway have launched a campaign against this ILO study, in 1999.

What does this study contain? Why one kind of establishment hails it and another kind condemns? These are the questions that aroused our interest.

In any sector of the modern world economy – be it industrial, agricultural, or educational, health, transport or the sexual services sector – we witness a tug-of-war between capital and labour, within the boundaries of some state, or inside a market involving more than one state. If there is no profit or if profit does not increase – capital is not invested or the investment does not increase. If there is no wage or if the wage is comparatively low, then labour does not come forward or the labour input does not grow. This home truth is valid for the market of sexual services too. In the volume under review, the history of evolution and the present condition of the market of sexual services in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand has been studied to some extent; but regrettably there is hardly any analysis of the corresponding capital market. Here the market of the consumers of the sexual services has been mentioned only obliquely – not directly. What are the sources of these limitations?

We think there are two possible sources. First, the pressure of the bureaucracy and diplomatic constraints of the International Labour Office, which sponsored and organised this study. Second, the general shortcomings of Political Economy and Economic Sociology as disciplines – when applied to the study of sexual services.

The International Labour Office operates among all the member states of the UNO, and that is why, in their publications, the truth of life, remains submerged under the routines of inter-state bureaucracy and, the need to balance between the desirable and the protocols of international diplomacy.

The study of human sexual services in economics, sociology and anthropology is yet to attain adulthood. Reason: these disciplines have emerged and developed within the cultural environ of different civil societies of the world, permeated with multi-layered hypocrisy. For this culture, patriarchy is an article of “faith” for the last eight/ten thousand years. But it does not wish to recognise its complementary reality – the existence of a commercial sex sector. One cannot analyse that, which one does not wish to recognise.

The editor and the authors of the various chapters of the volume under review have worked within the bounds of both the constraints. But in spite of that it is a remarkable book. If only for the singular articulation of the fact that, even to-day the rulers and policy makers of different states of the world are unwilling to consider the sexual services sector – as a sector of the economy of their respective countries and of the world.

The volume contains a rich bibliography. It will be of help to all concerned persons.

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