

Globalization and the Trafficking and the Commodification

RICHARD POULIN

L'auteure avance que l'industrie du sexe considérée jadis comme marginale occupe maintenant une position stratégique et centrale dans le développement du capitalisme interna-

The industrialization of the sex trade and its globalization are fundamental factors that make contemporary prostitution qualitatively different from the prostitution of yesterday.

tional. Le commerce du sexe a donc pris l'allure d'un secteur ordinaire de l'économie. Cet article examine l'industrialisation du commerce du sexe et la production de masse des biens et service sexuels qui sont structurées autour de la division du travail au niveau régional et international, ce qui a ouvert la voie à la marchandisation des femmes et des enfants.

Capitalist globalization today involves an unprecedented “commodification” of human beings. In the last 30 years, the rapidly growing sex trade has been massively “industrialized” worldwide (Barry; Jeffreys). This process of industrialization, in both its legal and its illegal forms, generates profits amounting to billions of dollars.¹ It has created a market of sexual exchanges in which millions of women and children have been converted into sexual commodities. This sex market has been generated through the massive deployment of prostitution (one of the effects of the presence of military forces engaged in wars and/or territorial occupation (Strudevant and Stolfus) in particular in the emerging economies, the unprecedented expansion of the tourist industry (Truong), the growth and normalization of pornography (Poulin 2000), and the internationalization of arranged marriages (Hughes).

The sex industry, previously considered marginal, has come to occupy a strategic and central position in the development of international capitalism. For this reason it is increasingly taking on the guise of an ordinary sector of the economy. This particular aspect of globalization involves an entire range of issues crucial to understanding the world we live in. These include such processes as economic exploitation, sexual oppression, capital accumulation, international migration, and unequal development and such related conditions as racism and poverty.

The industrialization of the sex trade has involved the mass production of sexual goods and services structured around a regional and international division of labour. These “goods” are human beings who sell sexual services. The international market in these “goods” simultaneously encompasses local and regional levels, making its economic imperatives impossible to avoid.² Prostitution and related sexual industries—bars, dancing clubs, massage parlors, pornography producers etc.—depend on a massive subterranean economy controlled by pimps connected to organized crime. At the same time, businesses such as international hotel chains, airline companies, and the tourist industry benefit greatly from the sex industry. In Thailand, trafficking is a 500 billion Bahts annual business (equivalent to approximately 124 million U.S. dollars), which represents a value equal to around 60 per cent of the government budget (CATW). In 1998, the International Labor Organization (ILO) estimated that prostitution represented between two and 14 per cent of the economic activities of Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Philippines (Jeffreys). According to a study conducted by Ryan Bishop and Lilian Robinson, the tourist industry brings four billion dollars a year to Thailand. It is not without reason, then, that in 1987 the Thai government promoted sexual tourism through advertising “The one fruit of Thailand more delicious than durian [a local fruit], its young women” (Hechler).

The industrialization of the sex trade and its globalization are fundamental factors that make contemporary prostitution qualitatively different from the prostitution of yesterday. “Consumers” in the economic North now have access to “exotic” and young, very young bodies worldwide, notably in Brazil, Cuba, Russia, Kenya, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Vietnam, Nicaragua, and, given the trafficking of children, in their own countries. The sex industry is diversified, sophisticated, and specialized: it can meet all types of demands.

Another factor, which confers a qualitatively different character on the current sex trade, is the fact that prostitution has become a development strategy for some countries. Under obligations of debt repayment, numerous Asian, Latin American, and African States were encouraged by international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) to develop their tourism and entertainment industries. In each case, the development of these sectors inspired the

Sex Trade of Women and Children

development of the sex trade (Hechler). In certain cases, as in Nepal, women and children were put directly on regional or international markets (notably in India and in Hong-Kong) without the country experiencing a significant expansion of local prostitution. In other cases, as in Thailand, local, regional, and international markets developed simultaneously (Barry).

We can see that, in every case, the "goods" in this market move transcontinentally and transnationally from regions with weak concentrations of capital toward regions with stronger concentrations.

For example, over ten years, 200,000 Bangladeshi women and girls were the object of trafficking to Pakistan (CATW), and we find that between 20,000 to 30,000 Thai prostitutes are from Burma (CATW). A good part of the migratory stream makes its way towards industrialized countries.³ Foreign women are generally at the bottom of the prostitution hierarchy, are socially and culturally isolated, and work in the worst possible conditions.

Any political economic analysis of prostitution and trafficking in women and children must take into account structural discrimination, uneven development, and the hierarchical relationships between imperialist and dependent countries and between men and women. In recent years under the impact of structural adjustment and economic liberalization policies in numerous countries of the Third World, as well as in the ex-USSR and Eastern Europe, women and children have become "new raw resources" within the framework of national and international business development. Capitalist globalization is more and more characterized by a feminization of migration (Santos). Women of ethnic minorities and other relatively powerless groups are particularly exploited. So, the internal traffic of Thai females consists mostly of 12-16 year olds from hill tribes of the North and the Northeast. In Taiwan, 40 per cent of young prostitutes in the main red light district are aboriginal girls (Barry 139). At the world level, the customers of the North abuse women of the South and of the East as well as local women from disadvantaged groups. From an economic point of view, these "goods" are doubly valuable because bodies are both a good and a service. More precisely, we have seen a commodification not only of the body, but also of women and children as human beings. This has led many to see this trafficking in women and children as a form of slavery (CATW).

Kidnapping, rape, and violence continue to act as midwives of this industry. They are fundamental not only for the development of markets, but also for the "manufactur-

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ing" of these "goods," as they contribute to making them "functional" for an industry that requires a constant supply of bodies. Research has shown that between 75 and 80 per cent of prostitutes were sexually abused in their childhood (Satterfield; Chaleil)⁴ More than 90 per cent of prostitutes are controlled by a pimp (Silbert and Pines 1982; Barry). A study of street prostitutes in England established that 87 per cent had been victims of violence during the last 12 months and 43 per cent suffered from grave physical consequences of abuse (Raymond). An American study showed that 78 per cent of prostitutes had been victims of rape by pimps and customers, on average 49 times a year; 49 per cent had been victims of removal and transported from one state to another and 27 per cent had been mutilated (Raymond). The average age of entrance into prostitution in the United States is 14 years (Silbert and Pines 1981; Giobbe).

Only 15 per cent of the prostitutes in the United States have never contracted a venereal disease (Leidholdt). Fifty-eight per cent of the prostitutes of Burkina Faso have AIDS, as have, 52 per cent in Kenya, about 50 per cent in Cambodia and 34 per cent in the North of Thailand. In Italy, in 1988, two per cent of the prostitutes had AIDS, compared to 16 per cent ten years later (Leidholdt). One of the reasons customers give for sexually exploiting children is to avoid sexually transmitted diseases. But the data show this is no protection. For example, in Cambodia there are between 50,000 and 70,000 prostitutes. More than a third of them are less than 18 years old and about 50 per cent of these young people are HIV positive (Véran). In the industrialized countries, 70 per cent of female infertility is caused by venereal diseases caught from husbands and partners (Raymond).

Given such conditions, it is hard to understand how some researchers can continue to treat "sex work" as a predominantly and simply a freely chosen occupation/activity.

Prostitution and Trafficking

Over the last three decades, most of the countries of the Southern Hemisphere have experienced a phenomenal growth of prostitution. For a decade, this has also been the case for the countries of the ex-USSR and Eastern Europe. Millions of women, teenagers, and children thus live in the red-light districts of the urban metropolises of their own countries or in those of the nearby countries. Two million women prostitute themselves in Thailand (Barry 122), 400,000 to 500,000 in the Philippines (CATW), 650,000 in Indonesia (CATW), about ten million in India (of whom 200,000 are Nepalese) (CATW), 142,000 in Malaysia (CATW), between 60,000 and 70,000 in Vietnam (CATW), one million in the United States, between 50,000 and 70,000 in Italy (of whom half are foreigners, most notably from Nigeria), 30,000 in the Netherlands (CATW), 200,000 in Poland (Opperman), and between 60,000 (Guéricolas) and, more credibly, 200,000 (Opperman) in Germany. German prostitutes sell sexual services to 1.2 million "customers" per day (Opperman; Ackermann and Filter).

UNICEF estimates that a million children are brought into the sex industry every year. The industry of child prostitution exploits 400,000 children in India (UNICEF 2003), 100,000 children in the Philippines (CATW), between 200,000 and 300,000 in Thailand (Oppermann), 100,000 in Taiwan (UNICEF 2001) and in Nepal (ECPAT), 500,000 children in Latin America, and from 244,000 to 325,000 children in the United States. If one includes children in all the sex industries, the U.S. figures climb to 2.4 millions (UNICEF 2001). In the People's Republic of China, there are between 200,000 and 500,000 prostituted children. In Brazil, estimates vary between 500,000 and two million (UNICEF 2001). About 35 per cent of the prostitutes of Cambodia are less than 17 years old (CATW). Certain studies estimate that during one year, the prostituted "sexual services" of one child are sold to 2,000 men (Robinson).

Just as the development of local prostitution is tied up with rural migration towards cities, hundreds of thousands of young women are moving internationally towards the urban areas of Japan, Western Europe, and North America. These rural migrations towards close or distant urban areas show no sign of slowing down (Santos). On the contrary, everything indicates that it is continuing and that traffic in women and children is widespread. The women and children of South and Southeast Asia constitute the most important group: 400,000 persons a year are objects of the aforementioned traffic. Russia and independent states from the ex-USSR constitute the second

most important group (175,000 persons a year) (UUSC) followed by Latin America and the Caribbean (about 100,000 persons) and Africa (50,000 persons).

The number of prostitutes from the Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand, and Russia installed in Japan is estimated at 150,000 (CATW). About 50,000 Dominicans prostitute themselves abroad, notably in the Netherlands, where they were found to make up 70 per cent of the occupants of 400 Amsterdam sex-shop "windows" (Guéricolas 31). About 500,000 women of Eastern Europe and between 150,000 and 200,000 women of the countries of the ex-USSR prostitute themselves in Western Europe. Of these, it is estimated that 150,000 are in the red-light districts of Germany—a country where 75 per cent of the prostitutes are foreign (Oppermann). About 40 per cent of Zurich's prostitutes are from a Third World country (Oppermann). About 50,000 foreigners arrive each year in the United States to supply the prostitution networks (O'Neill).

Every year, nearly a quarter million women and children of Southeast Asia (Burma, Yunnan province in China, Laos and Cambodia) are bought in Thailand, a transit country, for a price varying between 6,000 and 10,000 U.S. dollars (CATW). In Canada, the intermediaries pay 8,000 dollars for a young Asiatic from the Philippines, Thailand or Malaysia whom they resell for 15,000 dollars to a pimp (CATW). In Western Europe, the current price of a European woman from the former "socialist" countries is between 15,000 and 30,000 USD (CATW). On their arrival in Japan, Thai women have a debt of 25,000 USD (CATW). The bought women have to work for years to pay off "expenses" incurred by the pimps.

Sex tourists do not limit themselves to poor countries. Hamburg's Reeperbahn, Berlin's Kurfürstendamm and the red-light districts of Amsterdam and Rotterdam are well known destinations. In countries that have legalized prostitution or where it is tolerated, prostitution has become an important tourist draw. NGOs from these countries are actively lobbying at the European and international levels for the recognition of prostitution as simply "sex work," an occupation like any other.

The growth of sexual tourism over the last 30 years has entailed the "prostitutionalization" of the societies involved. In Thailand, with 5.1 million sexual tourists a year, 450,000 local customers buy sex every day (Barry 60). The now massive South East Asian sex industry began with the Vietnam war. The U.S. government stationed servicemen not only in Vietnam, but also in Thailand and the Philippines (Jeffreys), these last two countries serving as rear bases in the fight against the Vietminh. The resulting increase in local prostitution established the infrastructure necessary for the development of sexual tourism. The presence of the military created an available work force. More importantly the military presence also provided opportunities for contact with foreigners and the social construction, through pornography, of an ex-

otic sexual image of young South Asian women. Government policies favourable to sex tourism contributed to the explosion of this industry. A decade ago there were 18,000 prostitutes in the service of the 43,000 U.S. servicemen stationed in South Korea (Barry 139). Between 1937 and 1945 the Japanese army of occupation exploited between 100,000 and 200,000 Korean women imprisoned in "comfort stations" (Barry 128). After the Japanese defeat, the Association for the Creation of Special Recreational Facilities, financed indirectly by the U.S. government, opened a first comfort station for U.S. soldiers. At its height this association exploited 70,000 Japanese prostitutes (Barry 129). Today these numbers have swelled and include women from the Philippines, Russia, and other countries in sex industries around the U.S. bases (Moon).

The Liberalization of the Sex Industry

In 1995 during the United Nation's Fourth World Women's Congress in Beijing the principle of "forced" prostitution appeared (UN). This was the first time the term "forced prostitution" was used in a UN document. This created a special (presumed minority) category of prostitution that could be opposed without opposing the sex industry as such. Constraint/force was identified as the problem rather than the sex trade itself. The way was opened for the normalization and legalization of the industry.

In 1997 at the Hague Ministerial Conference on Private International Law, when the European ministers attempted to draw up guidelines harmonizing the European Union's fight against trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation, their definition of trafficked women included only those women who were being trafficked against their will.

In 1998, the International Labour Organization (ILO) called for the economic recognition of the sex industry on the grounds that prostitutes would then benefit from workers' rights and protections and improved working conditions that it presumed would follow (Lim).⁵ In June 1999, the ILO adopted an agreement on unbearable working conditions for children, the Convention Concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour. The agreement provides a long list of the work children do, including prostitution. This is the first time in an international text that sex work is presented as simply a job. Countries, such as France, although ratifying this Convention, have underlined that their ratification in no way recognizes prostitution as work. The United Nations' *Special Rapporteur on Violence against women* was at pains in her report to the UN Human Rights Committee in April 2000 in Geneva, to distinguish trafficked women from "clandestine migrant sex professionals."

All these statements and agreements tend to undermine the struggle against the growing sex industry and the system of prostitution which is at its heart, for they shift

opposition from the system itself, to the use of force/constraint within the system. They aim to protect only women who have not agreed to their exploitation and *can prove this*, placing the burden of proof on already vulnerable women. In attempting to regulate this fast growing area of the economy these approaches are tending to regularize it. For instance, when the European Union declares its opposition to the illegal traffic in persons, it implies that there is a "legal" traffic. Thus, as Marie-Victoire Louis (131) has pointed out, such initiatives transform the struggle against the commodification of women and girls into its legitimization. She states:

[Toutes ces politiques entérinent] l'abandon de la lutte contre le système prostitutionnel [et] confirme[nt] la légitimation de la marchandisation du système prostitutionnel, au nom de la mise en oeuvre de certaines modalités de sa régulation. (131)

Conclusion

Over 30 years, we have seen an extremely profitable "sexualization" of many societies based on social domination. We have witnessed the industrialization of prostitution, of the traffic in women and children, of pornography, and of sexual tourism. This once marginal market is an increasingly central aspect of current capitalist globalization. Sex multinationals have become independent economic forces (Barry) quoted on the stock exchange.⁵ Sexual exploitation is more and more considered to be an entertainment industry (Oppermann), and prostitution a legitimate job (Kempadoo; Dorais).

The increasing size and centrality of the global sex industry helps explain why so many groups and agencies are adopting normalizing regulatory approaches in their attempts to address its harms. However, this strategy is deeply flawed. The rapidly expanding international sex market exploits above all women and children, especially members of marginal and minority groups in the Third World and in the former "socialist" countries. This "leisure industry" is based on the systematic violation of human rights, for it requires a market in commodified human beings and the complicity of pimps and clients who are prepared to buy and sell women and children.

The commodification at the heart of the growing sex industry is only one among many varied instances of the commodification of all of life which is a defining characterization of current neo-liberalism. Patents are now issued on genetic life forms (including human genomes) and all forms of traditional knowledge (Shiva 1997, 2000). Water is being privatized (Barlow). In the name of environmental protection and sustainable development, markets are being created for trade in CO2 and emissions credits (the right to pollute) (Kyoto Protocol): The apparent "normalcy" of trade in human beings in this period has led to misguided regulatory approaches in some quarters.

Yet this very "normalcy" is what makes refusal of the sex industry as such, so essential. In this context, resisting or struggling against the commodification of women and children in the sex industry becomes a central element in the struggle against capitalist globalization. Anything less is complicity.

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¹According to Chulalongkorn Political Economy Center at the University of Thailand, in 1993 worldwide the sex industry generated incomes of between 20 and 23 billion USD (ECPAT Australia 29). Other estimates put incomes from the legal sex industry at 52 billion dollars (Leidholdt).

² Kathleen Barry reports that as a result of globalization, complete fishing villages in the Philippines and Thailand have been transformed into service providers (126).

³For example, the majority of New Zealand's prostitutes are from Asia (CATW).

⁴These data confirm the findings of my own research with escort dancers (Poulin 1994).

⁵The most important bordello in Melbourne, Australia, "The Daily Planet," is now quoted on the stock exchange (Jeffreys 185).

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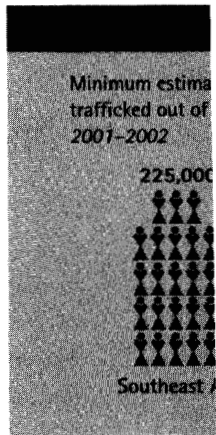
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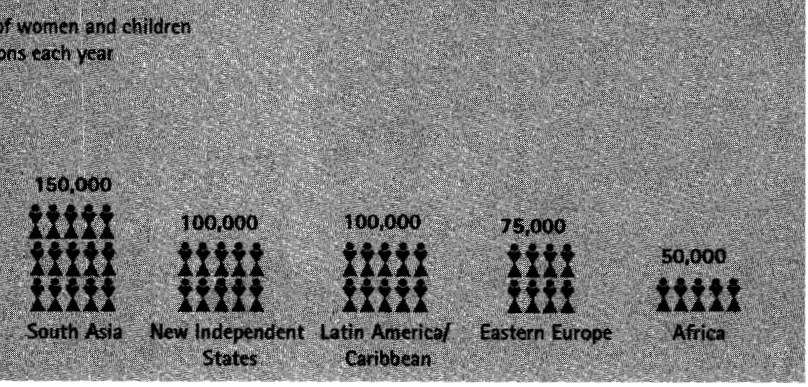
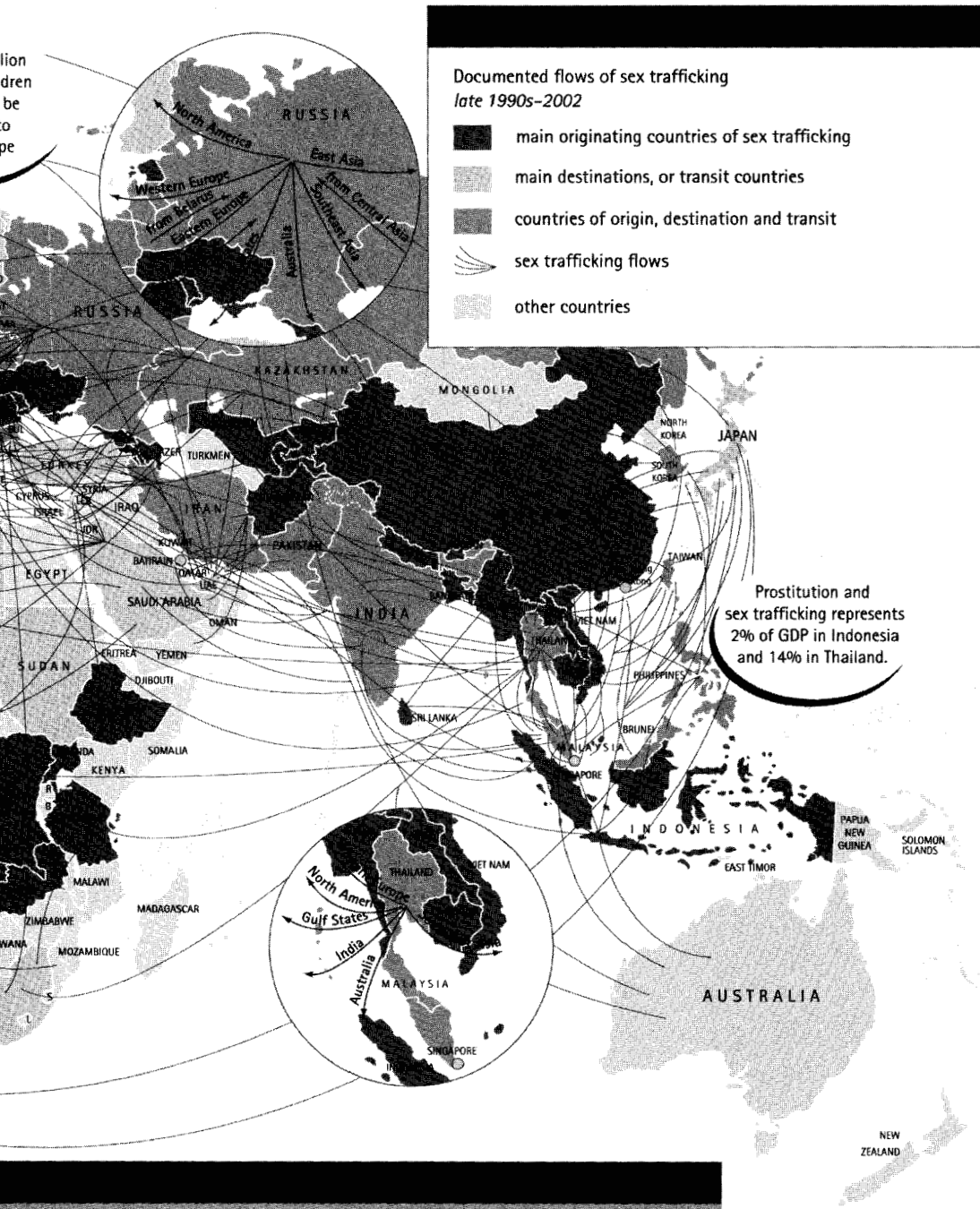
The Global Sex Trade



<p>An estimated 150,000 women are advertised each year through marriage bureaus and catalogs as being available for international marriage. There are 250 mail-order bride companies in the USA alone.</p>	<p>Main sending countries</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> China Indonesia Malaysia Philippines Russia S Korea Thailand Ukraine Vietnam 	<p>Main receiving countries</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Germany Japan Taiwan Thailand USA
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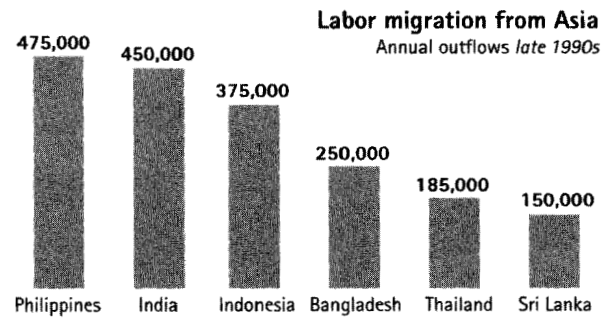


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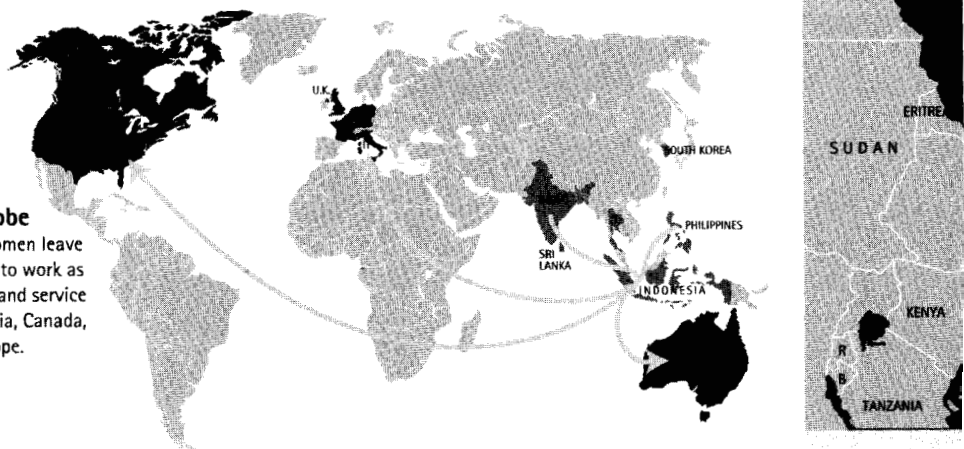
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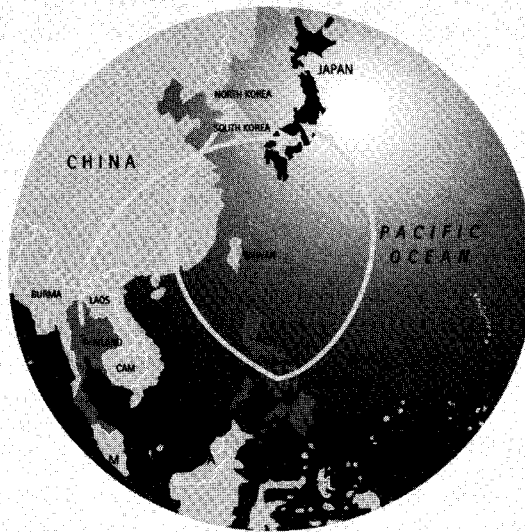
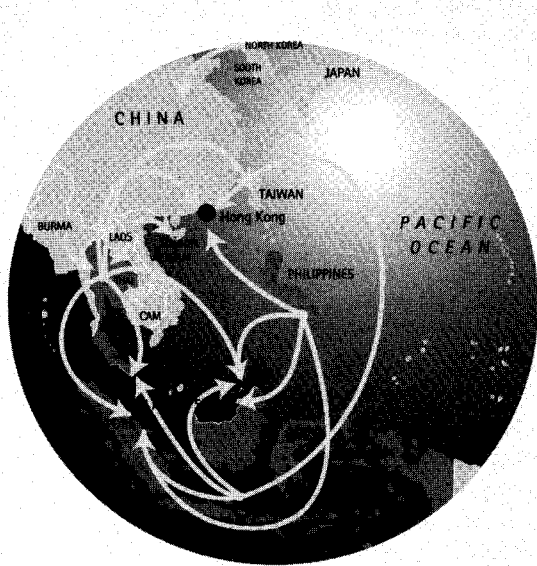
Labor to the Middle East
Between 30,000 and 50,000 nurses and teachers a year leave India, South Korea, Sri Lanka and Philippines to work in the Middle East.



Labor around the globe
Each year about 75,000 women leave South and South East Asia to work as domestic servants, nurses, and service industry workers in Australia, Canada, the USA, and Western Europe.

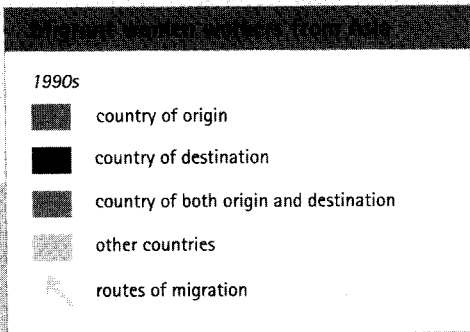


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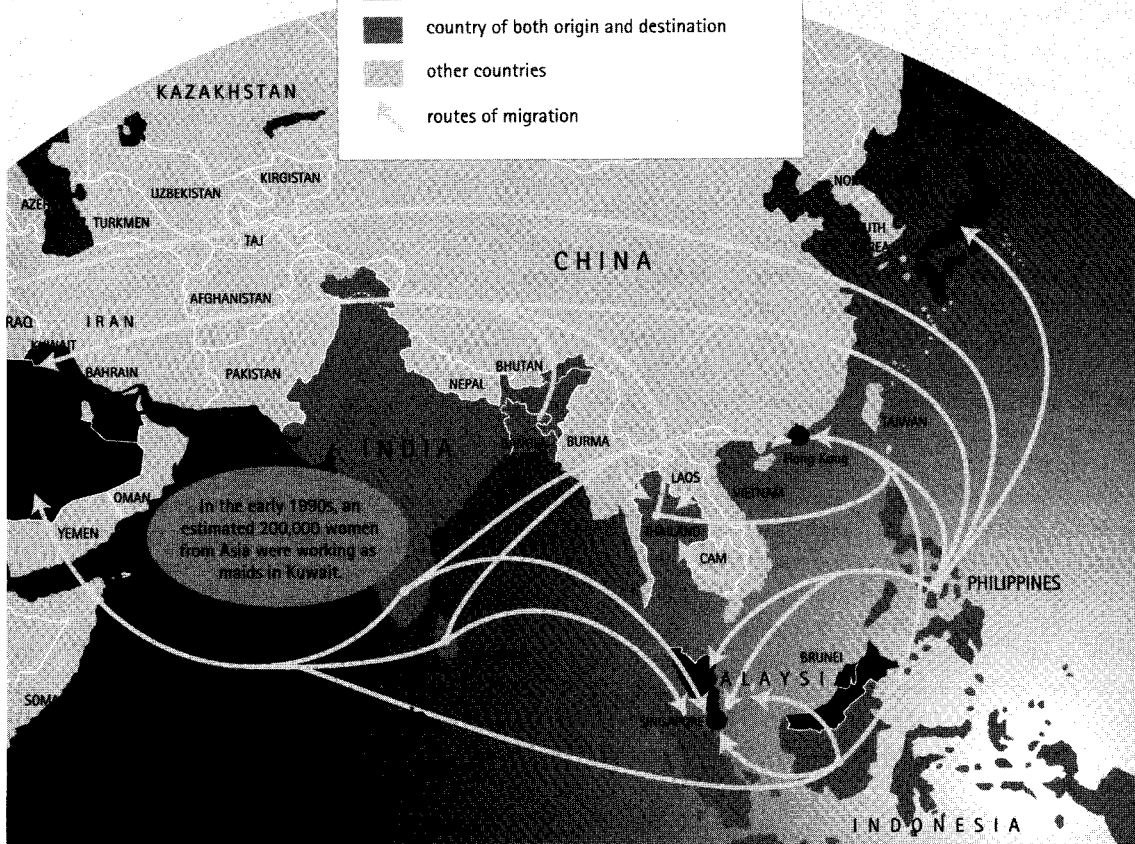
Asia to Asia labor

Each year about 100,000 women leave Asia's developing economies to work in domestic service, hotels or factories in the older industrial economies of the region.



East Asia entertainers' trade

Each year about 50,000 women leave the Philippines and Thailand to work in the entertainment and prostitution industries in Japan and, most recently, in South Korea.



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