



The Perfect Business? Anti-Trafficking and the Sex Trade along the Mekong (Southeast Asia: Politics, Meaning, and Memory)

By Sverre Molland

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For those at the high end of the trafficking chain, the sex trade is an alluring and lucrative business: the supply of girls is constant, the costs of operations are low, and interference from law enforcement is weak to non-existent. Anti-trafficking organizations and governments commonly appropriate such market metaphors of supply and demand as they struggle with the moral-political dimensions of a business involving trade, labor, prostitution, migration, and national borders. But how apt are they? Is the sex trade really the perfect business? This provocative new book examines the social worlds and interrelationships of traffickers, victims, and trafficking activists along the Thai-Lao border. It explores local efforts to reconcile international legal concepts, the bureaucratic prescriptions of aid organizations, and global development ideologies with on-the-ground realities of sexual commerce.

Author Sverre Molland provides an insider's view of recruitment and sex commerce gleaned from countless conversations and interviews in bars and brothels—a view that complicates popular stereotypes of women forced or duped into prostitution by organized crime. Molland's fine-grained ethnography shows a much more varied picture of friends recruiting friends, and families helping relatives. A recruiter rationalizes her act as a benefit or favor to a village friend; relationships between prostitutes and bar owners are cloaked in kin terms and familial metaphors. Sex work in the Mekong region follows patron-client cultural scripts about mutual help and obligation, which makes distinguishing the victims from the traffickers difficult. Molland's research illuminates the methods and motivations of recruiters as well as the economic incentives and predicaments of victims.

The Perfect Business? is the first book to go beyond the usual focus on migrants and sex commerce to explore the institutional context of anti-trafficking. Its author, himself a former advisor for a United Nations anti-trafficking project, raises crucial questions about how an increasingly globalized development aid sector responds to what might more accurately be described as an extraterritorial

development challenge of human mobility. His book will offer insights to students and scholars in anthropology, gender studies, and human geography, as well as anyone interested in one of the most controversial issues of development policy.

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About the Author

Sverre Molland is lecturer in anthropology (development studies) at The Australian National University.

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