

## Connecting Gendered Violence and Trafficking of Women

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### *Introduction*

Discussions of the push and pull factors behind trafficked women's decisions to migrate abroad for tenuous work opportunities tend to variously privilege poverty, familial obligations and, more recently, personal opportunism. This reinforces stereotypical understandings of "third world" women as, for example, trapped by a combination of economic marginalisation and familial obligations. Most women who are vulnerable to sex trafficking are indeed from poor backgrounds, and certainly some women are primarily concerned with remitting money to their families. Yet, these factors, while often important, can conceal a more complex picture that involves a deeper engagement with individual women's pre-migration experiences and lives as they are variously informed by gendered and sexual violence and norms – what Suzuki (2002: 100) calls "restrictive or distressing affective ties at home" <sup>1</sup>.

In this paper I examine how women describe their lives at home prior to being trafficked, focusing particularly on stories of violence and abuse they experience. Their decisions to migrate could be contained in a single, life changing event or episode of violence or the coalescence of repeated encounters over time, but the explanation for many women's decisions to migrate abroad can ultimately be traced to a position of vulnerability created by experiences of gendered violence. Such positions of vulnerability tend to be extremely well-understood by recruiters and agents who play on women's negative experiences at home in developing imaginaries of personal transformation abroad. It is possible that experiences such as those discussed in this paper have been neglected in most explanations of the trafficked women's migration decisions because of the practical difficulties associated with in-depth research with trafficked women

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<sup>1</sup> For Filipians who migrate to Japan as international marriage migrants (mail order brides), Suzuki (2002: 100) also suggests that, "...women who have variously been troubled by the gender and sexual norms of their society actively seek alternatives that will enable themselves to find better life chances than before".

(see Kelly 2002). A sense of shame or embarrassment can also mean that trafficked women do not often disclose these more intimate reasons for migrating in initial or one-off interactions with researchers, authorities or support workers.

The discussion and arguments presented in this paper are based on fieldwork with trafficked Filipinas (eighty-five participants) and Russian/ CIS women (eleven participants) in South Korea's entertainment/ prostitution sector. Virtually all these women entered Korea on "entertainers" (E-6) visas. According to National Statistics Office figures, in 2001 8,586 entertainers came to Korea, amongst which 6,971 (81 per cent) were female. These included 1,599 Filipinas and 3,518 Russian women, which together comprised approximately 60 per cent of the total entertainers coming to Korea that year. Others enter on E-6 visas and run away from their place of employment. They usually become illegal migrant factory workers or "GI brides" pursuing relationships with American military personnel they meet during their work at the clubs (see Yea 2004).

During a period of seventeen months (July 2002 - November 2003) I undertook a combination of ethnographic research, in-depth interviews and questionnaires with these women. All but one of the Russian participants worked in clubs oriented to Korean customers (hereafter, Korean clubs), while without exception all of the Filipinas worked in clubs catering to US military personnel (hereafter, GI clubs). These two sites represent the two major destinations of trafficked entertainers in Korea as well as the mainstays of Korea's multifarious sex/ entertainment sector (see Cheng 2000). The paper recounts stories of gendered violence experienced by three of the participants in this research (all Filipinas). For these three women the negative experiences discussed here proved instrumental in their decisions to abroad. Their stories are not exceptional and many other women interviewed in Korea narrated similar experiences to me and identified the importance of such experiences as motivations to go abroad.

### *Gendered and Sexual Violence in Trafficking Research*

Maltzahn (2004) identifies four ways in which the relationship between domestic violence and trafficking are expressed. These are: domestic violence as a push factor (as discussed in this paper); exposure of women to violence in recruitment and "breaking in" periods and ongoing violence in trafficking destinations to instil fear and intimidation in women; experiences of (lack of) support that are common to domestic violence and trafficking situations; and men's roles as perpetrators of domestic violence and sexual exploitation of women in trafficking and domestic situations. Each of these factors is worthy of far greater consideration than they currently assume in research on trafficking.

At present, when violence experienced by trafficked women is discussed at all, it tends to be limited to a focus on women's experiences *after* they leave home (for an exception see, CATW 2002). Yet, incipient research and statistical analyses of trafficked women's experiences point to the significance of gendered violence at all points in the trafficking process, particularly prior to migration. A recent study by Poppy Project in the United Kingdom<sup>2</sup>, found that of twenty-six women they surveyed, ten (38 per cent) disclosed having experienced multiple forms of violence before being trafficked, two disclosed witnessing political violence/family members being murdered during internal conflict/war, and twelve (46 per cent) had been sexually abused or raped before being trafficked (Poppy Project 2004: 1-2).

Most of the women who participated in my research experienced various forms and degrees of violence whilst abroad but what was initially surprising was the tendency of most of these women to downplay and trivialise these experiences. I interpret this as a reflection of the normalisation of abuse by many women because of other manifestations of gendered and sexual violence both at home and in the context of other migration/ trafficking experiences. The connections between the various manifestations of violence are thus multiple and complex. It is an examination of these that we now turn.

### *Experiences of Pre-Migration Violence for Trafficked Women in Korea*

Here I elaborate on violence as a factor in trafficked women's migration decisions, both because it can affect women's experiences whilst abroad (for example, by making them more vulnerable to similar forms of abuse) and because it is a crucial site through which women sense of self (and therefore what options they think are open to them, including migration) is constructed. Cheryl (Filipina, 24 years), Jenny (Filipina, 26 years) and Len Len's (28 years) experiences are discussed in detail here. While they derive from each woman's unique life history, they nonetheless reflect a theme that is common to many of the women in my research.

#### *Cheryl (Filipina, 24 years)*

Cheryl is from Manila, where her parents still live with her two younger sisters and her seven years old daughter. She came to Korea in April 2001 and worked in Club "M" in Tokore, Tongducheon<sup>3</sup> for fifteen months before she ran away with the assistance of her GI boyfriend and a Filipino Priest in Seoul. In the Philippines Cheryl was an erotic dancer and would regularly perform the "pussy

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<sup>2</sup> Poppy Project is an accommodation and support organisation for women trafficked for sexual exploitation in the United Kingdom.

<sup>3</sup> Tongducheon is 20 kms north of Seoul and 25 kms south of the North Korean border. It is home to several United States military bases in South Korea, including Camp Casey which is the largest base in the country.

smoking cigarette show". She did not engage in any type of prostitution related work in the Philippines and considered herself to be a professional dancer. Cheryl broke up with the father of her two children in 1999 because he was a drug addict and would physically abuse her regularly. He beat her so badly on one occasion just before they broke up that she phoned the police and had him arrested. Her son is still with her ex-partner, which means she is forced to maintain contact with him. Unfortunately for Cheryl she became involved with another Filipino man, a dentist, only a few weeks before she came to Korea. She revealed that he was also a drug addict and he beat her so badly that she still had deep bruises on her body a month later when she arrived in Korea. She recalled:

**He wrapped wire around my ankles so that I couldn't run away and you could still see the cuts on my ankles when I arrived in Korea. That was why I was so sick when I first came here. In the costumes I had to wear in the club you could see my arms and legs and so I couldn't hide the bruises... The guy (the dentist) put me in hospital because he beat me so badly. I remember lying on the bed in the hospital and all I wanted to do was just lie there because I was in so much pain. The only one who came to me help at that time was my manager in the club in the Philippines. I got so skinny because I just wanted to die. My life was useless and I didn't want to live anymore - that is why I stopped eating.**

Cheryl's immediate pre-migration experience of violence represented an extreme instance of a longer-term pattern of abuse she experienced with her two Filipino partners. Her decision to go abroad was driven by the wish to distance herself, physically and emotionally from these men. Cheryl was making good money as an erotic dancer in the Philippines and was only marginally influenced by the desire to earn more money by working abroad<sup>4</sup>.

*Jenny (Filipino, 26 years)*

Jenny is twenty-six years old and from Manila. She has one brother and one sister in the Philippines and one half-sister who works as a midwife in Japan. Her parents are separated but she maintains strong contact with her siblings and often sends money to them. Jenny's father and her half-sister in Japan supported

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<sup>4</sup> Other women whose partners were drug addicts or alcoholics tended to also reflect the patterns of abuse Cheryl described. Eva (Filipina, 26 years) has a seven years old daughter and a five years old son. She stated that she came to Korea to support her son and daughter, who live with her sister back in the Philippines. The Filipino father of her children is her real husband, but they separated because he became a drug addict. She described him this way: **"He's bad. All the guys are nice but after one year my boyfriend has more friends and they influenced him to use drugs. We were married in 1997 and broke up in 2000. He's beating me up. ... My mother in law need(s) my signature for my annulment and my parents want that too"**. Unfortunately Eva has to pay the cost of the attorney needed to process the annulment, which is around US\$600. Eva must try to save this money from her salary in Korea.

Jenny while she was studying a five years degree in physical therapy. However, in 1997 Jenny lost contact with her father and could not continue university without his financial support, forcing her to drop out after only two years of study. The incident that caused the rift in their relationship occurred when the son of a family friend raped Jenny. She recounted how the rapist had tied her to a bed for two days and raped her whenever he pleased. She told her father, who said that Jenny should not report the incident to the police. Jenny became pregnant to her rapist and, after much indecision, decided to proceed with the pregnancy. She said she thought her father was ashamed of her and the incident, including her pregnancy, ruined their relationship. Because Jenny could not continue her studies without the support of her father and because she was pregnant, she decided to come to Korea and work once her baby was born after seeing an advertisement in the local newspaper. She arrived in Korea on June 1 2001 and worked in Club "U" for just under 12 months before running away<sup>5</sup>.

Rather than eliciting support and sympathy from family members, especially her father, Jenny's rape was only met with a sense of shame by her family because she had transgressed accepted pre-marital sexual norms (albeit unwittingly) for young Filipino women. This rupture in her family situation was not only personal distressing; it also destroyed her financial security and therefore her ability to continue her physical therapy course at university. After having her baby Jenny was also faced what Suzuki has labelled "public surveillance" in Manila as a single mother. According to Bautista (1997 in Suzuki 2002: 102), "numerous young unmarried working-class mothers in Manila are subject to public surveillance of their female chastity and... often suffer severe ostracism, poverty and reduced chances of marriage while still in the Philippines". Jenny's situation, like that of a number of other Filipinas participating in this research, could be characterised this way. Half the Filipinas and three of the Russian women participating in this research were single mothers and many, like Eva and Cheryl, broke up with their partners because of drug habits or alcoholism leading to domestic violence or, like Jenny, conceived through forced or coercive sexual liaisons.

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<sup>5</sup> Jenny's rape and the rupture it cause in her family situation was an incident that she did not share with me immediately. In fact, I can clearly recall the evening Jenny disclosed this, and other details of her situation. I went to Jenny's Tongducheon apartment that she was sharing with her GI fiancé to have dinner. After dinner she sat on the couch and said, "**Okay Sallie. I'm going to tell you everything**". Although I had not raised the subject of my research that night, Jenny nonetheless proceeded to give a detailed account of several pre-migration experiences, including her rape, and experiences once in Korea, including a severe beating from the mamasan (Korean female club owner) a month before she ran away (September 2002) after which she lost the baby she was carrying to her GI fiancé. This information came seven months after I first met Jenny.

Jenny and Cheryl's experiences are extreme, but threads of their pre-migration histories are also sewn into the narratives of other women. Many endured physically and psychologically abusive relationships with their partners or other family members, including parents, prior to coming to Korea and more generally suffered from a distressing family situation. Many of the single mothers in this research were in fact at one time in relationships that involved legal marriage or a de facto arrangement with their ex-partners. Similarly, many of the women, such as Len Len (whose story is related below), experienced the dissolution of relationships with their natal families prior to migration. The lack of strong family anchoring at home – whether in their married lives or with their natal families – can compel women to look at the possibility of fulfilling these needs transnationally.

*Len Len (Filipino, 28 years)*

Len Len came to Korea on 31<sup>st</sup> January 2003. She has a ten years old son in the Philippines who lives with her sister. She is separated from her Filipino husband (40 years old) and has two brothers and one sister. Her mother died when she was one year old, so she never knew her mother, and her father died when she was 17. Len Len's personal history had a huge influence on her decision to come to Korea and continues to impact on her emotionally. These are the circumstances that lead to Len Len's decision to migrate to Korea as an entertainer:

**I was only 19 years old when I met my husband who is Visayan and he was 29. I find love because I don't taste the love of a mother – even though I have a father it's not the same. When I marry I have no friends and no relatives because my husband is a very jealous man. He never let's me go out anywhere and he just chooses for me my friends. My husband said to me, "If you leave me I'm going to kill you". I don't like my son seeing me crying. One day when he's only four years old he said, "You know mama, all you have to do is find another guy". You know I have no mum and no dad – my mum died when I was one year old and my dad cared for me till I was 17 and then he died. My husband is a jeepney driver. We are married 6 years and split when I come to Korea. Even though we were together, no respect. We just live together because of my son. All my family never like my husband – he never have fighting spirit like me. He always say, "You must follow me", and I have no choice. I don't want money from my boyfriend. I use my own money to send home to my son. I totally understand the situation of my boyfriend (divorced and supporting his daughter financially). In my family I have two brothers and one sister who is 45 – my son lives with my sister (in Mindanao)". [My husband] always correct me. Everything I do is wrong. He always say, "You must follow me – I'm older than you". My husband still wants me back – he called last night (19<sup>th</sup> June, 2003). I said, "Take your freedom and find another girl". All my friends say my husband is selfish. I'm young and he takes my**

money (for her son when he stays with the father). I tell my husband that I have a GI boyfriend and I want to build a happy family and change my life because since I was born I never felt happiness. Because you know in my teenage life no one combs my hair and buy me a nice dress. My father treats me like a tomboy. When I'm grade 2 (8 years old) it's Mothers Day. The teacher said, "What are you all going to prepare for your mothers?" I run away and cry. My husband had two opportunities to go abroad for work to Taiwan and Saudi but he wouldn't go. He says, "You are a lucky woman. If I go away you make happy happy (with another guy)". I was pregnant before we were married and my husband said it was my fault (that I got pregnant). I have no shoulder to cry on. Nobody helps me so I get married. I agree to marry because I don't want my son illegitimate<sup>6</sup>.

In Len Len's case a combination of her unhappy family situation when she was a child and the early death of her mother and father, as well as her pregnancy compelled her to an early marriage with a man she admitted she didn't really love. The relationship deteriorated to the point where she experienced continual psychological abuse from her husband and so made the decision to split with him, thus making her the sole breadwinner for her child. All these family circumstances influenced Len Len's decision to go abroad - a decision she reflected she would not have made otherwise: **"If my ex-husband (did) not abuse me I never work in a club. If my ex-husband treat(ed) me good I never choose this for my life"**.

### *Conclusion*

This paper has sought to explore some of the circumstances and events in trafficked women's pre-migration experiences that propel them to transnational destinations such as Korea. Specifically drawing on the narratives of three Filipinas participants in my research, I have suggested that whilst these women identify poverty, family obligations and individual desires as important elements in their decisions to migrate, they often conceal other factors. I have attempted here to draw particular attention to gendered, sexual and psychological violence, especially with ex-partners and family dissolution that figure in women's transnational migration decisions. Such experiences negatively affect women's self-understandings as well as the view's others (both immediate family and friends, and society in general) come to hold of them. A fertile ground is, in other words, laid in the broader context of women's lives prior to migration

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<sup>6</sup> Len Len discussed her failed marriage and lack of affective ties in the Philippines on our first meeting, but it was only later that I began to appreciate her strong Catholic sensibilities. These beliefs were important in allowing me to read her decision to migrate to Korea as tied to her failed relationship with her husband in the Philippines and her marriage as "forced" by a concern for the legitimacy of her unborn son.

which can be easily nurtured by promotion and talent agencies positive constructions of life abroad as “entertainers”.

Women such as Jenny and Cheryl, who had profoundly violent and intensely negative experiences are driven to migrate to escape further abuse and, in Jenny’s case, the feelings of shame engendered by rape and single motherhood. Cheryl, Eva and Len Len also discuss the importance of longer term patterns of physical and psychological abuse at the hands of partners in their decisions to go abroad. Also common to the women whose experiences figure in this paper is the coalescence of a combination of factors propelling their migration. While women like Jenny and Cheryl were pushed to migrate because of a single negative event of experience at home and also pulled by vague and idealised constructions of employment by recruiters, returnees and promotion agents, all these women were *already* vulnerable to trafficking. Longer term patterns of abuse or lack of family anchoring and ties, or boredom and lack of alternatives for work or relationships helped crystallise women’s decisions when the opportunity or circumstance arose. In this sense, these women’s decisions to migrate cannot necessarily be reduced to one or another factor and what women conceal about their migration decisions may be as important as the clichéd renderings of poverty and family they often openly and freely cite.

Prior to their first experiences abroad many women construct idealised images of their futures as migrants, often discounting the possibility of physical danger and sexual and financial exploitation, even when these have been presented to women as very real possibilities. Women are still willing to take their chances despite considerable anecdotal and factual (media, governmental, NGO) evidence of possible exploitation and danger. In exploring reasons why women are exposed to these situations despite the risks attached to migration decisions involving tenuous destinations such as Korea the texture of women’s lives at home are important to consider. In existing research on trafficking it is often assumed that if women are fully aware of the potential dangers of trafficking and risks associated with migration to a particular destination they will chose not to migrate. This is a rather simplistic construction of women’s choice and knowledge and does not allow for any consideration of the broader circumstances and events in women’s lives that instil in women a particularly low sense of self esteem and self worth. Recognising that women will remain exposed to trafficking situations despite various levels of knowledge about their destination allows for a far more productive engagement with women’s thinking, imaginings and sense of selfhood.

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