

*Selling Sex in Cape Town: Sex Work and Human Trafficking in a South African City.* By Chandre Gould. Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies. 2008. 216 pp. ISBN 978-1-920114-31-2.

*Sugargirls and Seamen.* By Henry Trotter. Johannesburg: Jacana Media. 2008. 232 pp. ISBN 978-177009-5755.

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The two books under review may be on the same topic, namely prostitution, but they are a study in the vagaries of interpretation. Where one titivates and tantalises with pages of lash-batting descriptions of women enmeshed in the world of prostitution, the other gives bluntly and without varnish a grim statistically-driven vision of sex selling. Where one attempts, apparently, to lather the miserable existences under description in a language of double entendres and racy descriptive passages, the other plods plainly through the painful first-hand accounts of the brutalisation and drug addiction experienced by most women selling sex in Cape Town. Indeed, Henry Trotter's *Sugar Girls and Seamen* (yes, given the density of double entendres lopped at us throughout the book, that title is undoubtedly meant to generate a titter) and Chandré Gould's (in collaboration with Nicolé Fick) *Selling Sex in Cape Town* make uneasy bed fellows in a review. Yet, arguably, their very contrariness helps to clarify their worth, for Gould's book demands serious reading whereas Trotter's book, to quote Barbara L. Sayers, 'is not a book to be put down lightly. It is one to be thrown across a room with great force.'

Whilst Trotter's book concerns itself with framing prostitution as a medium for spreading culture ('and legs' he wittily reminds us), the Gould book sets out to establish how extensively human trafficking feeds into the sex industry in Cape Town. This very illustrative distinction between the two books is an excellent departure point for understanding their frankly worryingly diverse interpretations of the same subject matter.

Let us begin by considering the serious case at hand as evidenced in the pages of *Selling Sex in Cape Town*. The book is a product of research undertaken by the Crime, Justice and Politics Programme of the Institute for Security Studies. Funded by the Belgium Development Agency, and in collaboration with SWEAT (Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Taskforce), the aim of the study was to establish the prevalence of trafficked women and children involved in the sex industry in Cape Town. The particular locale of Cape Town was chosen by the researchers in order that they could limit their geographical sweep and in so doing deepen and focus their enquiry. With SWEAT's close involvement in the sex industry in Cape Town, the authors had extensive access to a range of sex workers, both brothel- and street-based, throughout the Cape Town area. Furthermore, Cape Town and Durban are known destinations for trafficked sex workers, because of their positioning as popular tourist destinations and in Cape Town's case, its reputation as the 'sex capital of South Africa' (3). The authors sensibly recognised that simply trailing

after possible cases of trafficked sex workers would produce a lopsided study, and focused instead on conducting a coherent study of the sex industry in Cape Town as a whole, for 'it would not be possible to understand the conditions of trafficking victims if it did not contextualise them within the general working conditions across the industry'. (3)

The book reflects its origins as a formal research project, with a section mapping out its research methodology in detail. Chapters three and four, respectively 'Snapshots of the Industry' and 'Working Conditions', provide a kind of linguistic photo essay of the landscape of sex work in Cape Town and reflect the experiences of street-based workers, brothel workers, brothel owners and brothel managers through first-hand accounts. This panoptic view of the industry supplies a rich range of poignant personal narratives. Amidst these very human and individual voices are numerous graphs and statistical tables that generate a sense of scale and proportion in which to locate these narratives. So, for example, a table supplies us with the demographic breakdown of sex workers (Black 31%, White 14%, Coloured 54%, Indian 1%), another the demographic features of brothel-based sex workers (men, women, transgender, average age, average years in sex work, etc). Because these statistics are carefully interspersed between first-hand accounts of actual sex workers or auxiliaries involved in the industry, the humanity of the subjects is never forgotten, the brutality of these lives never lost in mere numbers. Chapters five and six cover the management and mismanagement of sex workers by the police and examine in detail the nature of clients including violence, vices and the demand for under-age girls. Chapters seven to ten investigate the role of trafficking in the Cape Town sex industry and the conclusions of the study.

The findings are interesting. The study reveals that in terms of the strict definition of trafficking, whereby the victim must be deceived as to his/her purpose, forced or induced into recruitment and then relocated for the purposes of sexual exploitation, there is almost no evidence of human trafficking in the Cape Town sex industry. However, the authors argue that within the vast and largely unregulated scope of the industry, there is much room for coercion, abuse and what they term 'an extreme form of labour exploitation'. That these practices fall outside the strict definition of the United Nation protocols defining human trafficking should not, they argue, mean that such exploitation goes unacknowledged. They conclude emphatically: sex workers need access to the law and its protection.

*Selling Sex in Cape Town* is a serious study of prostitution and it includes an extensive section of recommendations for the South African Police, the National Prosecuting Authority, the Department of Health and the Department of Home Affairs. It is an invaluable handbook for NGOs working with vulnerable sectors of the population who are either actively involved in sex work, or dependent on people who are. It is also a policy document that should be recommended reading for lawmakers and law enforcers, as well as public health officials and practitioners. Students of social work, gender studies and medicine would also benefit from the book's insightful and sensitive handling of its material. As befits a book aimed at policy development, there are no literary flourishes or soaring narratives. It is focused and to the point, with unvarnished language structured to inform and not to judge, finesse or caricature its subject matter. This muted tone suits the subject

matter, as the alternative offered by Trotter's spiced-up narrative in *Sugar Girls and Seamen* so patently illustrates.

*Sugar Girls and Seamen* is not, to be fair, overtly offered as an academic study. However, the blurb and Trotter's own descriptions of his motives and methodology clearly make the connection between this book and his Ph.D. dissertation for Yale University. Such august academic connections cannot be lost on a readership who knows that Jacana is a serious publisher. Thus a thin academic varnish purports to lend credence to a narrative that then dissolves into a tawdry exercise in self-indulgence. Trotter's alleged aim is to illuminate the complex lives of sea-front prostitutes and recast them as 'sirens of globalisation, transient waifs into the global cultural intersection known as the dockside world' (6). This bloated academic language is used to describe what is essentially the same grim life of drug addiction and sexual exploitation that we encounter in *Selling Sex in Cape Town*. More disturbing are the alterations between Trotter's lofty linguistics and the more winking descriptions of the business at hand, such as 'after about eight minutes of rhythmic bucking, the officer reached the point of no return' (5), or 'As she laid herself down on the bed and parted her kimono, she sharpened a grin of satisfaction. She knew she would be well paid in the morning' (3) – this about 'Brandy the Geisha', whose mastery of Japanese seems a small reward for a life of repeated abuse and crushing poverty at home. It is this very 'flip', both in and between tones, that so befuddles a reader of *Sugar Girls and Seamen*. Whilst Trotter trawls through biography upon biography of woe, revealing women whose lives as sex workers are almost always a result of poverty and abuse at home, he tells his stories in the style of a pulp fiction. In the concluding pages of the book, Trotter declares 'My hope is that this ethnographic exploration of dockside prostitution offers a better understanding of sex workers and their clients that will allow us to discuss prostitution intelligently and responsibly, no matter how we may feel about commercial romance' (226).

What this book rightly is, when disabused of its academic and debate-inspiring pretensions, is a bundle of yarns collected and disseminated by an author who self-consciously positions himself as the confidante of his subjects. His 'insider' status is to be found in the fact that he 'lived in the townships' (where he learned Afrikaans) and is married to a South African woman. Armed almost talismanically with these attributes, he sits in bars and listens to the stories of various women, whilst rejecting their repeated sexual advances with humour and gusto. Many of his informants are (rightfully) mistrustful of his apparently non-carnal advances, and quiz him suspiciously. The results of these forays, evidenced in the narratives presented in the book, are at times moving and even amusing, at other times sad and disturbing, as the stories of the sex workers are revealed. Whilst Trotter attempts at times to point to the agency of women who choose prostitution because they make so much more money than they would in traditional employment, he concludes gloomily that most of this money is spent on drugs and dazzling lifestyles that end up in poverty and addiction (once the women are no longer attractive to prospective to clients, or too riddled with disease or drugs to function). Thus, Trotter's 'findings' are uniformly grim and his 'sirens of globalisation' emerge, in spite of his narrative flourishes, as the same exploited sex workers of *Selling Sex*

*in Cape Town*. Had Trotter left his book as a collection of narratives, with a muted thread connecting them, he might have had something important to contribute to the literature on sex workers in South Africa. Indeed, and despite the centrality of his positioning in the narrative, it is the stories of the sex workers themselves that do whatever saving is to be done of this book. If the cloying puns and witty asides can be ignored, if the author could be pretended away, then his informants have stories to tell that are worth hearing, and deserve the empathy that Trotter himself claims to be providing (226).

However convincing the academic language might be, a woman's mastery of Taiwanese does not necessarily qualify her as an exchange point of global culture if all the usual risks of sex work come with that exchange: disease, drug addiction, violence and death. Trotter, though never shying away from the misery of his subjects, seems too fond of his notions of cultural exchange. His outright statement that in this book he does not discuss policy (226) that might alleviate the plight of sex workers seems a poor pre-emptive apology, especially in a book marketed for a popular audience. In this, the praise lavished upon *Sugar Girls and Seamen* by the South African broadsheets at its time of publication is also mystifying: perhaps a case of commerce conquering conscience once again.

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