

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Research

July 30, 2004

Working in the Sex Trade to Escape Poverty

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In Sosúa, an aging town in the Dominican Republic, the goal of many residents is to escape by any means necessary. So it is no accident, says Denise Brennan, an assistant professor of anthropology at Georgetown University, that Sosúa's economy rests on the thousands of men who flock there every year and fuel its rampant sex trade. In *What's Love Got to Do With It? Transnational Desires and Sex Tourism in the Dominican Republic* (Duke University Press), Ms. Brennan tracks 50 of the town's female sex workers, observing their struggles and their goals over a decade.

Q. Many of the women you studied are practicing Roman Catholics. What contradictions does such work pose for them?

A. Economics are the heart of all of this. These are women who live in a country where they have very few educational opportunities. They have very little prospect of getting job training that could help them map out a progression in a career. ... So this is definitely a story of the feminization of poverty, and one way to strategize out of it. I have had many a conversation with folks who are from the Dominican Republic or have lived in the Dominican Republic, and they say, "Well, you know, there are many poor women, and they don't go into the sex work." And there's almost this implicit moralizing. ... I think women who, in a globalized economy, are trying to make ends meet, particularly without any other income streams in the household, ... should have their stories told.

Q. Was it difficult to watch women sacrifice romance for money?

A. Anthropologists try not to make judgments, and I write about marriage as having a different meaning in this particular setting than it would in comfortable middle-class life in the United States.

The women I spend time with -- of course they want love, of course they want romance -- but with marriage and the papers that come with it is the opportunity to get a legal means of migrating. So, in fact, one of the women I spent time with might have been in love with a Dominican man, but was planning to marry a foreign man. So, in some ways, marriage and love were two things apart.

Q. What did you learn from these women?

A. I guess the first word that comes to mind is just how generous they are -- generous to one another, generous to their children, and generous to me, and very patient. They might hope for all this personal transformation that I write about, economic transformation, but they know that not every woman gets chosen to migrate overseas. In some ways it is like playing the lottery. But I feel very fortunate to have been able to live in a place where women are coming from home villages that are bereft of economic opportunity, and to have witnessed their courage and their savvy to create opportunities for themselves.

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