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Understanding Exploitation

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Photo Courtesy Reuters

Understanding Exploitation

Siddharth Kara writes a splendidly persuasive piece of activist journalism, using his deeply personal experiences from trawling the brothels and factories of distant lands to extrapolate global truths about contemporary forms of slavery. Kara's outrage may well be inspirational to the uninitiated, and it would be ungenerous to ignore his role in focusing public consciousness on the perennial problem of human exploitation. Unfortunately, unverifiable data, broad generalizations, and deep definitional confusions compromise the value of his work for those of us who are living a little closer to the legal and political front lines. The story of human exploitation is a complicated and contested one. We should not be afraid of acknowledging that reality. Nor should we be afraid of weakening our cause by admitting the huge gaps in understanding and knowledge that seriously undermine the credibility of historical analogies and call into question sweeping claims about victim numbers and profit levels.

The true importance of Kara's work lies in what it tells us about how our understanding of and tolerance for human exploitation have changed so dramatically and profoundly in recent times. When the international community came together in 2000 to draft a treaty on trafficking, attention was squarely on the "movement" aspect of the very narrow issue of cross-border sexual exploitation of women and girls. However, "trafficking" quickly and unexpectedly became an umbrella term for a wide range of forced and exploitative labor practices that had traditionally only been dealt with at the edges of international law and policy. Not every country is happy. I have no doubt that initial enthusiasm for a global agreement on trafficking would have been much less if states had fully understood that its tentacles would eventually reach directly into their factories, farms, fishing boats, and private households.

Thirteen years and hands-on experience in more than forty countries have made me wary of facile explanations, quick fixes, and simplistic solutions. A demand-supply analysis such as that proposed by Kara is interesting but very limited. Human trafficking networks and flows are still poorly understood, and the extent to which they mirror traditional economic exchanges is not yet clear. In addition, exploited human beings are not inanimate commodities: the element of personal agency that is present in all but the very worst cases of human exploitation complicates conventional economic analyses. Unfortunately, for many of the world's workers, exploitation is a reality that must be factored into the path toward a better life. Kara's analysis of criminal justice responses is similarly shallow: increasing the risk of prosecution and penalties seems sensible, but presupposes good laws, honest officials, and strong institutions. As the US State Department has learned, pressuring underdeveloped criminal justice systems to improve their prosecution rates contributes to unfair trials and other serious miscarriages of justice. Neighborhood watch committees sound great in theory, but the record of vigilante justice is as poor in this area as it is in every other.

Of course it is important to target consumers and corporations, but we should not be naïve about the scale of that challenge. Human exploitation has built our world and continues to drive global economic growth. Cheap labor, cheap sex, and cheap goods are woven into the fabric of our national economies, our

communities and our individual lives. The paradox between this reality and the global commitment to ending slavery-like practices must be confronted and addressed. Recent initiatives (such as the effort to promote awareness of one's individual "slavery footprint") may prompt a much overdue consideration of personal contributions to human exploitation. However, in targeting consumers, we should be careful not to let governments off the hook. Many countries derive great benefit from cheap foreign labor that, deliberately unprotected by law, can be criminalized or shoved aside when circumstances require. Some countries that maintain a strong policy position against prostitution are nevertheless comfortable with a marginalized and closeted sex industry comprised principally of exploited foreigners. Countries that rely heavily on the remittances of their overseas workers may be reluctant to interfere with a system that brings economic benefits—even if it is clear that some of their citizens are being harmed. These and other complexities might get in the way of a good story, but we ignore them at our peril. ■

ANNE GALLAGHER

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Family & Globalization

In her article "An Emerging Global Market," Sassen highlights both the growing segmentation of specialized labor markets and the increasing importance of employing local professionals as key changes in the parameters of the global labor market. I believe that Sassen's insights have important implications for the place of the family in the global labor market. The optimal job locations for married partners may not always coincide with each other—therefore, married households with dual careers are much less mobile than single individuals. The rise in the number of dual-career households may therefore exacerbate the difficulties a global firm faces in meeting its demand for skilled labor. One solution to the immobility of human capital caused by joint career concerns is hiring local professionals. In this way, rather than trying to mobilize a skilled individual and his or her spouse, the firm seeks and trains talent at the local level. This family perspective on migration further emphasizes the growing importance of employing local professionals by global firms, much as Sassen points to in her article.

The past four decades have seen a considerable rise in the number of dual-career households. Skilled professionals are increasingly paired up with partners who are equally skilled and have equal labor market opportunities. This rise is partly a result of the increased labor force participation rates and educational attainment rates of women. In the past, it was common for married couples to choose their geographic location according to the husband's job status, as men's labor market opportunities generally dominated those of women. The location choice for a married couple poses a much more complex problem now, as gender differentials have declined, and it is no longer the case that one partner's opportunities always dominate those of the other.

One important consequence of the expanding global labor market is that it leads to a greater diversity of geographic options that individuals face when searching for jobs. This makes it more difficult for spouses to be in the same location while both are pursuing their best job opportunities. Such new choices potentially lead to more severe location conflicts within dual-career households.

From the perspective of the global firms, spousal considerations will start to become increasingly binding in the relocations of employees. It is a well-documented empirical fact that dual-career households are much less mobile than traditional single-earner couples. Hence, the increase in the number of dual-career households will potentially translate into an impediment on the mobility of human capital. The hiring policies that global firms follow in their operations overseas will need to take into account the family dimension of potential moves. In other words, the previously dominant pattern of bringing home-country professionals to run a firm's overseas operations will not only be less effective in the future, but it will also become less feasible as spousal considerations increasingly complicate the labor market. Due to such complications, seeking and training talent at the local level should increasingly become the preferred alternative to attempting to mobilize a skilled individual and his or her spouse.

As Sassen describes, the current global labor market faces an important challenge arising from structural shifts in the demand for skilled labor. The difficulty of this challenge is exacerbated by considerable structural shifts in the supply of skilled labor. Sassen indicates the move toward negative population growth in the developed countries as an example of such supply shifts. I believe that the rise in the number of dual-career households is another example of a supply shift that will make it more difficult to accommodate the structural shifts in the demand for skilled labor. While negative population growth leads to a lower supply of human capital in the labor market, the rise in dual-career households separately leads to impediments on human capital mobility. These factors are the key challenges that global firms will face in meeting their demand for skilled workers in the rapidly expanding global labor market. ■

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CORRECTIONS

We would like to apologize to Andrei S. Markovits and our readers for the mistakes in his article, "Sports Fans Across Borders: America from Mars, Europe from Venus" (Vol. XXXIII, No.2). The subtitle of the article should read "**America from Venus, Europe from Mars,**" thus reflecting the overall argument of the article. The reference to the Red Sox's triumph in October 2004 mentioned on page 19 should have stated the American League Championship Series rather than the World Series. Lastly, on page 21, Orlando Patterson's article appeared in *The New York Times Book Review* and not in the *New York Review of Books*.