

Annual Gender and Sexuality Studies Lecture

How Victims Come to Be: Human Trafficking and the Law

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 18 – 5 PM

Pembroke Hall, 172 Meeting Street, Room 305



Professor Kay B. Warren
Pembroke Center Director
Professor of Anthropology



Recently the question has been raised about the high personal cost for young people of having to identify as “victims” in order to receive protection from bullying in American schools. A similar question can be raised for women who are subject to transnational human trafficking. This lecture examines how the human trafficking “victim paradigm” targets certain individuals as uniquely vulnerable by gender and/or age. This way of thinking has become central to the international legal struggle to criminalize human trafficking and to the self-conception of social service providers (NGOs) in many countries that rally to the rescue of these victims. In turn, labor migrants are pressured to accept powerfully stigmatizing and marginalizing stereotypes as victims in order to receive travel subsidies, short term social services, and very limited protection from police who want to arrest them abroad and organized crime that seeks them out in their home countries. In fact while many transnational labor migrants bitterly resent their treatment abroad, they often do not really see themselves in terms of the victim paradigm that many others around them embrace. Rather, bad experiences have taught them the necessity of making better job choices the next time around. In critically analyzing the victim paradigm along the labor migration route from Colombia to East Asia, this lecture also asks if there are better ways for governments and social service providers to deal with limited educational opportunities, illegal forms of labor recruitment, and highly exploitative and demeaning work conditions at home and abroad.

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