I Introduction

The Perfect Business?

First, we need to criminalize human trafficking. All countries must ratify the United Nations anti-trafficking Protocol. Second, we must prevent victimization by teaching people about their rights and protecting them. Third, we need to reduce demand. Fourth, there must be an end to impunity. . . Fifth and lastly, we must protect the victims. If we think about it, we understand that fighting human trafficking cuts across all fundamental issues. It is about human rights, peace and security, development and family health. In the most basic sense, it is about preserving the fabric of society. That is why, to succeed, we have to mainstream our fight against human trafficking into broader programmes. From poverty reduction to reducing gender discrimination.

—Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon’s remarks to the General Assembly New York, 13 May 2009

It is early morning. I am sitting with a group of project officers in a small office in Vientiane. All the participants work in aid programs that seek to combat trafficking in persons in the Lao Peoples’ Democratic Republic (PDR). I have previously proposed that one project manager, Tom,1 arrange an informal workshop where I could share some case studies from my own research. I explained that I was curious to learn how anti-trafficking program workers would perceive these cases. Tom was enthusiastic about the idea, suggesting not only that this could be an opportunity for me to obtain data for my research but also that we could treat the meeting as a training exercise for program officers. Hence the purpose of this meeting is twofold: to strengthen project staff’s skills
regarding victim identification and protection, and to allow me to gain
insight into how anti-trafficking programs implement their victim sup-
port plans. I have brought along nine case studies to the meeting. We
now read the fifth one:

A bar owner tells a girl called Nok, who has been a sex worker in the
bar for a while, that more girls are needed at the bar to sell sex. The
owner promises to give Nok 10,000 baht if she can bring a girl from her
village to sell sex. Nok goes back to her village, where she tells another
girl that she can offer her a good job, but Nok does not tell her what
the work is. When the new girl comes to the bar, the owner tells her
that she has to sell sex and that she owes the owner 10,000 baht for
the recruitment. The girl does not want to sell sex. The owner suggests
that she can work in the bar, selling drinks but not selling sex. The girl
agrees. After two months the girl sees how much money the other girls
earn when they sell sex, and she decides she will do this too.

Silence. Then one meeting participant says, “The owner knows that
with soft pressure she [the recruited girl] will do this.” Tom adds, “It
is trafficking because we have here displacement and indirect force,
or pushing.” Phetsamorn, a third participant, disagrees: she says this is
mere prostitution and not trafficking. Tom objects, pointing out that
this is trafficking for labor: “She arrives with debt. She has been dis-
placed, lured, and exploited—it’s trafficking.” Phetsamorn responds,
“But she can go home. Nothing holds her back!” Tom says, “No, she
has debt to the bar.”

So far a few participants have dominated the discussion, but now
others are becoming involved. There is disagreement about how to
“read” Nok. Is she a trafficker or not? And what should aid programs
and the police do about cases like this? One informant recommends
that we write down the “three elements of trafficking” on the white-
board: movement, deception/force, and exploitation. As in so many
other workshops, the definition from the United Nations protocol on
human trafficking (UN 2000) is referenced when analyzing trafficking
cases.

The discussion drifts into considerations of whether the girl in the
case study can in any meaningful way leave the premises and to what
extent the debt bonds her to the premises. And they discuss Nok. Is she a trafficker, given that she herself is subject to the same work conditions that might be seen as exploitative? In the end the discussion remains inconclusive, and most of the participants agree that “more information” is needed in order to judge whether this is a trafficking case.

Along the Mekong—Traffickers, Victims and Anti-traffickers

The preceding quotation from United Nations secretary-general Ban Ki-moon and account of the anti-trafficking group’s discussion of Nok’s case study foreshadow the three-layered composition of this book. Nok’s story depicts the local context of recruitment and sex work along the Thai-Lao border. Ban Ki-moon’s statement points to the international focus on human trafficking. And between the two are individuals like Tom and Phetsamorn, who work for anti-trafficking programs. Of course, trafficking activists—or anti-traffickers, as I refer to them in this book—are in many ways part of, and reproduce, conceptualizations of trafficking. Yet they also need to reconcile two worlds. They have to translate an international concern regarding human trafficking into programs and activities to be implemented on the ground. It is these three facets of trafficking—global trafficking discourse, anti-traffickers, and the local context of sex commerce—along the Thai-Lao border that this book seeks to illuminate.

The anti-traffickers’ responses in the account above indicate the ambiguities inherent in marrying a legalistic definition of trafficking with on-the-ground realities—a challenge I have personally experienced, having previously worked as a project adviser for the Lao office of the UN Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region (UNIAP). The hesitant responses also reflect the relative novelty of anti-trafficking programming. Far from being a well-established apparatus engaging in a straightforward combat against traffickers, such programming is precarious, as this book will elucidate.

It is only in the last few years that anti-trafficking has been on the agenda within the development aid industry in the Mekong region. I myself ended up working for UNIAP by happenstance. A friend of mine forwarded an advertisement from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website for a job with a regional anti-trafficking program
in the Lao PDR. This position, which was fully funded by the Norwegian government, was restricted to Norwegian citizens, thereby limiting the number of qualified applicants. I had no previous experience in combating trafficking, but I did have some background in project management and an interest in the Southeast Asian region. Although I did not think I had the remotest chance of getting the job, I applied. To my surprise, I was offered the position. When I started working for UNIAP, I soon expressed my concern about my lack of experience related to anti-trafficking. My boss at the time responded half-jokingly, “Don’t worry. In a few months everyone will see you as an expert.” In this sense, anti-traffickers are pioneers, social agents who need to make sense of a frontier with which they are not necessarily familiar. Hence this book, in a general sense, is about what happens when development agencies become involved in fighting trafficking, and in particular, it describes how that process may unfold in a small Southeast Asian country such as Laos.

Translating an international discourse of trafficking into operational anti-trafficking programming, as evidenced in the previous vignette, tends to evoke idealized forms of knowledge that produce particular, yet uneven, effects on how local anti-trafficking strategies are shaped. That being said, the local sex industries along the Thai-Lao border not only differ from these idealized depictions but also remain in many respects untouched by them.

Although human trafficking has a long history and is often referred to as a “slave trade” (Bales 2005; Miller 2005), it nevertheless constitutes something new in contemporary globalized moral politics. Over the last few years, the world has witnessed a proliferation of media articles, international and national legislation, government action plans, and international aid programs, as well as action television series and movies, that in various ways address “trafficking in persons.” As Ban Ki-moon’s statement suggests, today human trafficking is not merely seen as a crime but is also caught up in notions of our global destiny. The phenomenon depicts struggles of life and death and speaks to what it means to be human, and the increasing use of the term “trafficking survivors” to refer to its victims is no coincidence (US State Department 2006, 2007). It is not only survival of victims but survival of a global morality that makes trafficking such a powerful trope. The
increasing attention to trafficking raises questions of ontology: Does it reflect a real increase in global trafficking? Or are there other forces at play? It is not possible to separate these questions. The meaning of the term “human trafficking” is not self-evident. On the contrary, the term can take on a range of different meanings and can shape actions in various ways. Therefore it is crucial to explore both trafficking itself and the institutions and actors that use this concept in their everyday practice. Any meaningful study of trafficking must examine the interconnections between mobility and labor practices, on the one hand, and the organizations and actors that seek to combat trafficking, on the other.

There is an almost knee-jerk tendency to associate trafficking with commercial sex. This is particularly evident in the way the media report on the topic and, more recently, in how the film industry portrays the subject in movies and television shows on “sex trafficking.” This book is limited to exploring the commercial sex industry along the Thai-Lao border, with a specific focus on the border towns of Vientiane and Nong Kai, and hence might be guilty of reinforcing stereotypical images of sex trafficking. The decision to take this approach was primarily a methodological one.

Clearly, trafficking may include forms of exploitation other than those related to sex. The existence of sweatshops and deplorable working conditions for migrant workers is well known in many parts of the world. In both Thailand and Laos, anti-trafficking programs have pointed to trafficking for domestic, factory, and construction work, as well as alleged trafficking of men and boys onto fishing boats (Pongkhai 2007; UNIAP et al. 2004). In fact, some of the best-known alleged cases of trafficking are unrelated to sex trafficking. In 2000 several Chinese labor migrants were found suffocated inside a container on a port in Dover, England, sparking considerable media attention (Pieke and Biao 2007). Eight years later, a chilling replay of those events unfolded in Thailand when fifty-four Burmese labor migrants suffocated in a truck heading for Phuket (Kongrut and Nukaew 2008). The Thai government was quick to discredit the idea that the incident constituted trafficking. A senior Thai police officer stated: “This initial finding may run counter to general sentiment and reports which labelled this as a case of human trafficking. But there is a difference between human smuggling and trafficking, it’s a matter of degree” (ibid.). The Thai government
argued that because both Thai and international law define trafficking as having the purpose of placing a migrant in an exploitative labor situation, this case should be treated as “people smuggling” because labor exploitation had not yet taken place, thereby justifying deportation (as opposed to legal protection) of the migrants. This claim was, however, a point of considerable contention. At around the same time, Chulalongkorn University professor, Supang Chantavanich (2008) wrote in the Bangkok Post:

The anti–human trafficking law states clearly that migrants who have been cheated to come to work in Thailand and are being exploited, are victims of trafficking. The 67 survivors who paid 5,000 baht to brokers to come to Thailand are clearly those who have been exploited by illegal recruiters. Even though they have not started working yet, they must be considered victims and placed under custody at shelter homes, not in prisons.

That the transportation of the Burmese migrants in itself was exploitative—indeed fatal—undoubtedly blurred the boundaries between legislative definitions of people smuggling and human trafficking. At the same time, the incident highlights how the labeling of migrants can be used strategically. Such ambiguities become particularly pronounced when a government, academics, international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) contest a dramatic case like this in the media. But the implications here are far wider. Migration trajectories do not come neatly prepackaged for anti-traffickers to respond to; each carries its own particularities and ambiguities, that must be dealt with on the microsocial level of anti-trafficking program activities. This raises a larger question of how anti-trafficking programs deal with a social reality that might not fit their own models and definitions. Such ambiguities are further reinforced when it comes to sex commerce, since the question of consent is subject to considerable contestation.

Hence the point of departure for this book consists of straightforward questions: Who is a victim and who is a trafficker? And according to whom? How does recruitment into the sex industry in Laos and Thailand unfold? And how does it compare with representations in aid
reports? What is the relationship between life experience within an oscillatory sex industry along the Thai-Lao border and aid programs that combat trafficking? What does it mean to assert that trafficking in persons is demand driven? How does such a proposition reflect on how both mobility and sex commerce unfold? What makes it possible to ask such questions, and what effects does asking them produce? And how do such questions frame how anti-traffickers understand their subject matter?

In 2000 the first international legal definition of trafficking emerged in the United Nations’ Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (2000, 2). Article 3 of the protocol states:

(a) “Trafficking in persons” shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs;

(b) The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article shall be irrelevant where any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) have been used;

(c) The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation shall be considered “trafficking in persons” even if this does not involve any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article;

(d) “Child” shall mean any person under eighteen years of age.

At this stage, I will address only four aspects of this definition. First, the definition is made up of (1) movement of a migrant, (2) facilitated by certain means (threats, coercion, deception, etc.), for (3) a specific
purpose—that is, exploitation. These are “the three elements of trafficking” to which Tom, Phetsamorn, and the other anti-traffickers referred in the story recounted above. Second, the definition makes a distinction in cases of children, where the “means” is deemed irrelevant. Thus any movement of a person under the age of eighteen for the purpose of exploitation is defined as a case of trafficking, regardless of that person’s consent. Third, focusing on the prelude to labor exploitation (i.e., the nonconsensual recruitment and transport of migrants) allows considerable leverage for governments (and others) to selectively emphasize migration rather than labor exploitation. Fourth, agency is doubly enacted as a yardstick for determining a trafficking case, as the definition refers both to various means of manipulating consent and to the ability to place a person into what is deemed an exploitative situation. Consequently the trafficking definition evokes a dyadic conception of agency. By this I mean that the definition focuses on whether a third party (an individual or a group) deceives or coerces a migrant into an exploitative labor situation. The determination of trafficking becomes primarily a question of a relationship between a deemed victim and a deemed trafficker or traffickers and ignores circumstantial reasons as to why a migrant ends up in a given labor situation.

The UN trafficking protocol has become immensely influential. It has been ratified by many countries and affected national legislation, and it is widely used by anti-trafficking programs. As will become clear, however, the protocol’s definition contains a range of contradictions and ambiguities that have multiple effects.

Perfections and Imperfections

For those who stand to benefit from this crime, human trafficking remains almost the perfect business. Supply is constant, with large numbers of people crossing countries and borders in search of better opportunities, and intermediaries along the way willing to deliver them to factories, brothels, fishing boats and private homes, or onto the streets to beg. Costs are low, and mostly include an initial one-off investment to “buy” the victim, or a loan to pay back the debt they have incurred in transit, to be recovered at extortionist rates—plus perhaps a small, regular “tax” to law enforcement authorities. For those
at the end of the trafficking chain, human trafficking is almost the perfect business. (UNIAP 2006)

To date the academic literature on human trafficking is limited, and most discussions have focused on questions of migrants’ agency with reference to social control and human rights concerns. Such endeavors are welcome and have underscored much commentary within the global prostitution debate (Doezema 2000; Kempadoo 2005) and in critiques of various governments’ migration regimes (Berman 2003; Shangera 2005). Anti-trafficking programs themselves have also come under scrutiny, with some people viewing them as contributing to the betterment of humankind (Bales 2005), while others take a far more skeptical stance (Agustín 2007). However, the trafficking literature to date has tended to confine its discussion to debates regarding prostitution policy and migration control. What has thus far been almost totally overlooked is the simple fact that in regions where trafficking is deemed rife—such as the Mekong region—anti-trafficking activities are usually implemented by development aid programs, often in collaboration with government and local partners.

To suggest that trafficking is primarily a Trojan horse of anti-immigration and anti-prostitution agendas is too simplistic and misses the important point that individuals and organizations that take part in combating human trafficking straddle moral-political controversies over border control and prostitution. Hence, this book offers an analysis of the interrelation between global attention to trafficking, localized unfolding of labor migration, and anti-trafficking programming. Whereas much research has explored how both immigration and prostitution policy intersect with public concerns regarding human trafficking, few studies have provided a detailed account of how the anti-trafficking sector makes tacit assumptions regarding where and how trafficking takes place, who is trafficked, and by whom. The quotation above highlights this trend, by portraying trafficking as a “perfect business” governed by the laws of supply and demand and operating as a seamless organic whole. This book is concerned with operationalization. It considers the way anti-traffickers imagine trafficking to “function” and how these ideas compare with recruitment practices within the sex industry along the Thai-Lao border, as well as how anti-traffick-
ers’ own programmatic activities shape these same notions. Hence, a central argument of this book is that, rather than being a “perfect business,” human trafficking is characterized by imperfections that are not easily grasped through policy directives and bureaucratic maneuvers.

Ideal forms of knowledge are often espoused by trafficking reports, media, legislation, UN agencies, NGOs, and governments. Allow me to foreshadow this imagery in the form of three concentric circles. At the center, we have the victim and the trafficker, an asymmetrical dyad with an imagined clear-cut boundary between them. Surrounding this dyad, we have the all-knowing gaze of organized crime. Traffickers and their entourages are commonly imagined to be the most extreme expression of contemporary forms of global capitalism gone wrong—a kind of hedonistic and dark maximizing agent, gone off the rails. In turn, the traffickers and victims who are embedded in organized crime networks are imagined to act in a marketplace that straddles international borders and operates according to the mechanical laws of supply and demand. There is one underlying common denominator among these concentric circles: perfections. The victim is the perfect pawn representing total innocence and a total deprivation of agency. The traffickers are perfect villains, a pure form of evil with total control and the ability to adapt to market opportunities. And the marketplace where all this takes place is perfect—a classical liberal economic marketplace subject to only a handful of simple and predictable laws of cause and effect. It is this formulaic and quintessential imagery that this book critiques. That being said, the anti-trafficking sector is far from being a homogenous group. There is a great deal of variety in the way trafficking is understood among aid programs, government officials, and NGOs. Yet the somewhat burlesque depiction of ideal types I give here is commonplace, and it has real consequences for how human trafficking is dealt with in practice. International trafficking discourse and the move toward perfections in the form of a market metaphor constitute Part I of this book.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, migration and the commercial sex industry in the Mekong towns of Vientiane and Nong Kai are rather different from the idealized depiction of trafficking. Sex commerce and recruitment along the Thai-Lao border are characterized by paradox and contradiction, and Part II therefore explores these imperfections. It
critiques the assumption that there are neat distinctions between victim and perpetrator, underpinned by organized crime, which in turn is taking place in a mechanical cross-border marketplace. Part II points to differences between the map (trafficking discourse) and the terrain (commercial sex and recruitment along the Thai-Lao border), raising the question of how anti-traffickers along the Thai-Lao border navigate between these two poles of perfections and imperfections.

Indeed, anti-traffickers are unable to reconcile the disjuncture between imperfections and perfections. They are, as elaborated in Part III, “betwixt and between” (Turner 1967). More often than not, simplistic models of trafficking take precedence over the imperfect realities. In fact, anti-traffickers depend in several ways on such models in their everyday work as they become meaning-making entities. The effect is that human trafficking discourse reproduces atomized and decontextualized imageries of migration and sex commerce within the local trafficking sector. This diverts attention away from what is essential to understanding migration and sex commerce along the Lao-Thai border—that is, careful attention to social relationships. But trafficking discourse is not reproduced in a straightforward manner. Although trafficking discourse shapes (but does not determine) the practices of anti-traffickers, the local sex industry itself remains remarkably detached. In several respects the social worlds of victims and traffickers on the one hand, and anti-traffickers on the other, pushes and pulls in many directions, making them strangely separate, yet interconnected in subtle and surprising ways. In fact, traffickers and anti-traffickers are in some ways similar, as they both externalize their complicity in events through plays of selective ignorance and willed forgetting.

Laos and Thailand

Trafficking in persons is commonly embedded in understandings of modernization and development, particularly the way trafficking is parasitic on labor migration, which is understood to flow from poorer areas to destination points that promise opportunity and income. Thailand and Laos reflect this view. Laos is categorized as a least developed country by the United Nations (UNDP and NSC 2006) and has only recently opened its borders after several years of isolationist socialist
policies (Evans 1998). By international and even regional standards, Laos is characterized as a landlocked boondocks that is making careful and anxious steps into the “dangerous adventure” (Giddens 1994, 59) of modernity. The Lao population of only 5.6 million is primarily agrarian (UNDP and NSC 2006). It is governed by the Pathet Lao, a one-party authoritarian regime that came to power in 1975 after the turmoil of the Vietnam War. Like its political mentors—Vietnam and (increasingly) China—the Lao People’s Democratic Republic maintains a nominal status as a communist country despite significant changes in its economic sphere. Since the late 1980s, market reforms have been introduced, and there has been a halting liberalization of social controls. Although Laos has had strong political ties with Vietnam, economic liberalization since 1975 has resulted in increasing interactions with some of its neighbors, particularly Thailand. Laos joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the early 1990s within the rubric of regional market integration (Rigg 2005; Walker 1999). In policy terms, the Lao government sees itself as transforming from landlocked to land-linked, as exemplified by numerous road projects and border crossings. However, this regional reengagement has made socioeconomic disparities across its border more apparent, particularly in comparison with Thailand.

Thailand and Laos are culturally, socially, and linguistically very close, and although cross-border movement has a long history, outmigration from Laos to Thailand appears to have increased considerably since the early 1990s. In contrast to Laos, Thailand is in many respects a regional vanguard, with a population of 64 million, developed export industries, and superior economic opportunities and standards of living. Thailand also provides public spaces and infrastructure (such as shopping malls) that enable modern forms of leisure experiences. Data on migration remain scarce, but several aid reports, the majority produced by anti-trafficking programs in Laos and Thailand, draw attention to considerable cross-border migration to Thailand (UNDP and NSC 2006). Recent data (UNIAP 2008a) point to there being almost two hundred thousand registered Lao migrants in Thailand, and the actual number is likely to be much higher than this, considering that many migrants cross the border without official papers. Several studies document Lao villages in which migration to Thailand appears to be institu-
Migration to Thailand for work is a fact of life in many Lao villages, especially those close to the border. . . . In Nong Snow, a village bordering the Mekong in Lakhonepheng District, Salavan Province, villagers seem to not even make a distinction between the two sides of the border, going back and forth as if it did not exist, for example to buy goods in Thailand every Saturday at the Pakseng village Flea Market. Villagers here migrate in great numbers: in 2003, 15% of all Nong Snow inhabitants migrated for work in Thailand at one point or another. . . . In Xox (Kanthabouri District, Savannakhet Province) researchers struggled to find a single household without a member working in Thailand. (UNIAP et al. 2004, 23–24)

It is noteworthy that United Nations Development Programme’s national human development report on Laos for 2006 estimates that the total amount of remittances from Lao migrants in Thailand might exceed US$100 million, making migrant labor one of the largest export industries of Laos (UNDP and NSC 2006).

Thailand and Laos also contrast with regard to commercial sex. Thailand’s sex industry is sizeable and well known internationally. In contrast, few would associate Laos with commercial sex. Although rarely reported in the media, Laos, with its limited population and widespread poverty, has a growing sex industry within its borders (Lyttleton 1999a; UNICEF and Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare 2001). Furthermore, both Thailand and Laos are associated with “hot spots” of human trafficking. In 2006 the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime ranked Thailand in the top ten worst countries where twenty-first-century slavery occurs (UNODC 2006c), and the US State Department in its controversial annual Trafficking in Persons Report (2006) ranked Laos in its tier three, which in principle can result in bilateral sanctions and unfavorable voting in bodies such as the World Bank. Simultaneously, and partly in response, both the Thai and Lao governments (as well as organizations and development projects) have paid considerable attention to efforts to combat human trafficking, as evident in a
steady increase in trafficking projects as well as bilateral and multilateral agreements.

**Human Trafficking and the Question of Power**

Human trafficking ultimately raises questions of power and agency. On the one hand, we have a dyad of traffickers and victims in the former controls the latter—a question of domination. On the other, we have anti-traffickers who attempt to alter this very same dyad of victims and traffickers—a question of transformation. Thus we are dealing with interpersonal relationships, but at the same time we must also examine how institutions shape practices and vice versa. Throughout this book, I explore traffickers, victims, and anti-traffickers in light of three theoretical approaches to power. First, a focus on discourse brings to light how institutional practices do not merely respond to an external world but also take part in shaping it. Second, practice theory allows us to consider how individuals and groups employ a range of strategies and maneuvers to achieve certain ends but, in doing so, internalize these very same ends. Third, Jean-Paul Sartre’s (1957) analysis of bad faith brings to light how individuals who in principle can pursue different courses of action come to terms with their own conduct by attempting to distance themselves from their complicity in events. These three echelons of power are useful to contemplate when analyzing human trafficking, for they allow us to appreciate both limits and excesses of power in terms of interpersonal relationships as well as interactions between institutions, the individuals who occupy positions within them, and the peoples presumably touched by them.

“Discourse analysis” draws its legacy from the works of Foucault, which examine the ways in which complex relations of institutions, practices, and technologies shape individuals’ perceptions of themselves and their surroundings.² A particular focus is placed on how issues related to government increasingly involve techniques for the optimization of life (such as health and productivity) where individuals internalize discursive knowledge through modes of self-regulation (“the conduct of conduct”). A key question is how these techniques shape populations in ways that allow for their easier control and regulation. Foucault has called this type of power “governmentality.”
This view of power has been influential in anthropological analyses of development aid, as reflected in the writings of Arturo Escobar (1994) and James Ferguson (1990). Both scholars draw explicitly from Foucault’s concept of discourse and governmentality, arguing that although development aid does not necessarily result in intended outcomes, it does produce certain, often unintended, effects. They both argue that in the postwar years poverty and “the poor” have been increasingly perceived as a problem that requires legitimate intervention by development institutions. Escobar (1994) argues that developmental discourse enables new ways of both acting and being, where most people of the third world come to define themselves by what they lack, thus paving the way for a range of normalizing interventions (such as health care, sanitation, and nutrition). Similarly, James Ferguson in his Anti-Politics Machine (1990) shows that although development institutions tend to be technocratic in character, they may have political effects. Focusing on Lesotho, Ferguson demonstrates that development programs are always apolitical in the sense that they perpetually articulate development in managerial terms as opposed to recognizing local political asymmetries. Because of this discrepancy between local realities and instrumental (and apolitical) depictions by aid programs, development projects rarely succeed, according to Ferguson. Yet the failure to achieve intended results does not equate to benign results. Pointing to the side effects of development practice, Ferguson asserts that the machinery of development results in increased (yet unintended) bureaucratic power and control. Hence one of the essential points of both Ferguson's and Escobar’s arguments is that development discourse enables an aid apparatus that exercises increasing control and regulation of the third world.

Such arguments have been influential and deserve attention in this study of trafficking, because they deal directly with power relations between development aid institutions, the practices that unfold from them, and the social arena in which aid programs seek to intervene. However, discourse analysis has become subject to considerable criticisms, including the charge that it implies a monolithic and deterministic view of power (Brigg 2002; Mosse 2005). Consequently, this form of analysis has a tendency to come uncomfortably close to presuming that discourse is what creates and causes social action. Although development programs may be driven by their internal bureaucratic logics as
opposed to the social arena in which they seek to develop (Ferguson 1990), how discourse translates into social practice—whether it produces “docile” self-governing subjects, is reappropriated, is resisted, or something else—cannot be axiomatically presumed. Rather, it must be subject to careful study of social actors, which is to say that it must explore both the social world of sex work, migration, and recruitment on one hand, and the everyday life practices of individuals who work for anti-trafficking programs on the other.

Trafficking raises questions of the intentional subject. As we will see in later chapters, agency is commonly understood in a utilitarian fashion. The notion of maximization of profit is strong in trafficking literature, not only in its conception of “traffickers” but also in the way the larger “trafficking economy” functions where rational choice models are ubiquitously implied. An obvious problem with a utilitarian view of agency is that it tends to treat agents in a mechanistic fashion, portraying reason as being outside, and prior to, social interaction (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). In contrast, praxis theory has drawn attention to the embodied social agent, where practical, as opposed to discursive, knowledge is emphasized (Bourdieu 1977 [1972]; Giddens 1984; Ortner 1984). Similarly to utilitarianism, praxis theory stresses that practice is always in part governed by agency. Social agents are capable of comprehending their own actions and adopting a range of strategies in their lives to achieve certain ends. That is, they seek to acquire different forms of capital. Simultaneously, such strategies are shaped by social, political, and cultural structures, or fields (Bourdieu 1977 [1972]). Through the course of life, social actors internalize such fields as sets of dispositions, which Bourdieu calls the habitus (ibid.). Consequently, social actors seek to gain forms of capital that are valued within a given field. Hence praxis theory is what we might call “an economy of the proper place” (de Certeau 1988, 55), which draws attention to the interrelation of how social actors strategically seek resources and positions (capital) yet by doing so internalize dispositions (the habitus) that shape (but do not determine) action (practice). Praxis theory thus allows us to illuminate ways in which traffickers, victims, and anti-traffickers seek various ends (i.e., capital) but at the same time are influenced by the surroundings of these pursuits (the habitus).

Such processes raise a broader question of the relationship between
agency and structure. As will become evident, trafficking literature sees agency not with reference to structure but primarily in terms of a dyad—that is, whether a third party has actively manipulated a migrant’s consent for the purpose of labor exploitation. In this way agency is understood neither as embedded in the subject nor in relation to a constellation of structural forces. Trafficking discourse perceives agency primarily in intersubjective terms, privileging a focus on the relationship between a trafficker and a victim. Yet it sees this relationship as resembling a zero-sum game. Traffickers and exploiters have a totalized form of agency. Victims have none. Paradoxically, although trafficking definitions presume a dyadic conception of agency, trafficking discourse has in fact a tendency to draw attention away from social relationships. This has in part to do with its insistence on ideal models, which has the effect of producing totalizing caricatures.

Intention and agency lead us back to the question of power and domination. Trafficking literature has a tendency to compartmentalize certain “yardsticks” to determine what may or may not compromise agency; as a result certain forms of domination are privileged while others are ignored. In contrast, academic literature relating to agency is full of examples where social agents do not overtly resist but internalize and participate in their own domination. Drawing on Sartre’s existential analysis of bad faith, Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992a) has shown in her study of hunger among squatters in Brazil that social actors—the poor and medical practitioners alike—act in an economy of bad faith. That is, they deny themselves as subjects by externalizing their own complicity in events. This does not mean that the unconscious, or a highly calculating purposive form of consciousness, governs social action. As Sartre himself pointed out, bad faith is still faith (Sartre 1957, 67). It is a process through which social agents are able to engage in an act of self-deception by externalizing their own complicity. Whereas discourse analysis places emphasis on what limits and enables agency, an analysis of bad faith considers agency itself a problem. Hence bad faith is particularly useful in coming to terms with individuals who have the upper hand in asymmetrical relations of power. Yet the way individuals come to terms with their own conduct does not take place in a vacuum. As Arthur Kleinman and Erin Fitz-Henry (2007) have pointed out, acts of bad faith must be understood in their social, economic, and political
context. Even in the case where social agents are authors of extreme violence, “our affect is always both internal and external to us—located as much within the contours of our bodies as within the shifting parameters of our sociopolitical worlds” (ibid., 64).

In contrast to the anti-trafficking community’s portrayal of trafficking as a highly conscious coercive or deceptive process, the deceptive recruitment that at times takes place along the Thai-Lao border can best be understood as a form of bad faith on the part of both recruiters and recruits, as it (for reasons to be explored) takes on a trope of helping, which allows subjective actions to be externalized and complicity thereby denied. Furthermore, I suggest that to understand how one individual comes to take an active part in placing another person in a situation against his or her will, one needs to emphasize “the shifting parameters of our sociopolitical worlds.” As we will see, at play is a range of processes that allow social actors to rationalize their actions, and the social environment in which social agents find themselves is a key to this.

When I draw attention to bad faith, I am referring not only to victims and traffickers but also to anti-traffickers. Just as Derrida (2001), with reference to contemporary immigration policies in Europe, has demonstrated the simultaneous universal yet conditional imperative of hospitality within the concept of cosmopolitanism, human trafficking produces a peculiarly inherent polarity. Trafficking appears to enable, protect, and advocate for marginalized migrants’ agency, yet by doing so, it constrains what it attempts to enable by projecting a particular framework onto this effect. Both a technocratic developmental apparatus and a legalistic framework regarding trafficking in persons shape development programs that combat trafficking, thereby projecting certain parameters for how categorization of victimhood is understood by development practitioners.

However, formulaic views within the anti-trafficking sector do not necessarily fit neatly with the social world of migration and sex commerce. We must take note that the relationship between traffickers, victims, and anti-traffickers is a two-way street. Without denying that many anti-trafficking programs provide real and meaningful support for individuals who have been subject to deplorable treatment, we must also note that, as Montgomery (2001b) has pointed out in regard to
the iconic nature of “child prostitution,” anti-traffickers depend on the imagery of the trafficked victim to give legitimacy to the very existence of anti-trafficking programs. Hence it is perfectly reasonable to ask who needs whom.

Trafficking discourse tacitly distinguishes between overt and covert forms of domination, with human trafficking programs focusing on the latter and tending to either ignore or be at the very least ambivalent about the former. When domination is discursively framed using overt and covert categories, it becomes notoriously difficult to apply such frameworks to the social field of recruitment within the Thai and Lao sex industries. The important point is that anti-trafficking programs find themselves in a process whereby they attempt to make a fluid, contradictory, and ambivalent social reality fit ideal types of knowledge in order to make it legible (Scott 1998b) and receptive to anti-trafficking interventions. This raises a broader question of how this process is negotiated, and we will later see that this negotiation allows for deliberate ignorance—that is, bad faith.

Approaches to Research

A central approach in this book is the drifting between me as an anthropologist investigating sex work and recruitment along the Thai-Lao border and my own previous status as a project adviser for an anti-trafficking program. My own movement between the worlds of traffickers, victims, and anti-traffickers means that this study is of necessity multisited both socially and spatially. George Marcus has pointed out that one of the strengths of multisited research is its “capacity to make connections through translations and tracings among distinctive discourses from site to site” (1995, 100–101). The concept of trafficking is so closely linked with the spatial imagery of borders that it became somewhat of an imperative to research both sides of the Thai-Lao border. This aspect of the research implies not only making comparisons of the two sides but also exploring translocal linkages (Hannerz 2003).

More specifically, this book places its main focus on a border zone between Laos and Thailand where Vientiane and Nong Kai are located. Vientiane is the Lao capital and is situated on the northeastern side of the Mekong River. Nong Kai is a Thai town located approximately
forty kilometers downstream from Vientiane. Although the total population of Vientiane Province is approximately 700,000, the urban population is less than 300,000 (State Planning Committee 1997; Vallee et al. 2007). Conversely, the population of Nong Khai Province is approximately 800,000, with 20 percent living in Nong Khai municipality (UNESCAP 2001). The two cities are physically proximate and are connected by the Friendship Bridge, which is the main land crossing between Thailand and Laos.

There are several reasons why this book places its focus on this border zone. During my time working for the UN anti-trafficking project in Laos, I saw the limitations of conducting research in village communities where migrants come from. In trying to understand not only migratory practices but also the nature of migrants’ labor situations, being in a village community carries with it a challenge: one finds oneself in the village, yet the object of research remains far away. This is precisely the problem with many of the “rapid assessment” studies on trafficking in Laos that are carried out among aid organizations; they are all attempts to understand outcomes of migration trajectories through after-the-fact interviews with returning migrants and family members (Dous santousse and Keovonghit 2006; Phetsiriseng 2001). This approach is taken partly because of the political constraints faced by anti-trafficking programs, as well as the familiarity of development aid programs with rural development in specific geographic areas (a development project always has a project site). Governments are far more accommodating when research can serve socioeconomic development in rural village communities, rather than having aid organizations uncover abuse and exploitation within various labor sectors. This is partly why anti-trafficking programs attempt to emphasize the “demand” side of trafficking, which shifts focus from source communities toward where the “exploitative situation” is taking place. Hence, I decided to carry out research, not where migrants come from, but where they end up. And for pragmatic reasons, I decided to focus solely on the commercial sex industry. Although prostitution is surrounded by much sensationalism and is commonly associated with “clandestine economies,” it is nonetheless easier for a male researcher to access establishments that cater to sex commerce than to access private households (to research domestic labor), factories, or fishing boats. Of all semilegal segments of labor
markets, commercial sex is after all one of the very few in which work is conducted in a semipublic space, depending as it does on customers’ transitory visits.

So where are Lao women trafficked into the sex industry? Ironically, even after working with anti-trafficking in Laos for about three years, I was incapable of accounting for any specific places where Lao women were trafficked, let alone voluntarily migrated into the sex industry. Within the Lao anti-trafficking sector it is fairly well documented that migrants—whether trafficked or voluntary—go to Thailand, and some attention has also been paid to internal trafficking (UNICEF and Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare 2004). However, when it comes to more specific data, the picture is contradictory and sketchy. To date, few of the identified victims who have come through the official repatriation program between Laos and Thailand are known to have worked in the sex industry (IOM 2004a). Some reports note the presence of Lao women and girls working in the commercial sex industry in various places in Thailand, including Nong Kai, but are silent on more specific whereabouts (UNICEF and Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare 2004; Wille 2001).

Furthermore, a report by UNIAP et al. (2004), which is to date the most detailed and in-depth study on Lao trafficking, did not encounter clear evidence of Lao women being trafficked into the sex industry, although there were signs of women working voluntarily in the “entertainment” sector. This contrasts with the aforementioned UNICEF report, which claims that 35 percent of trafficking victims from Laos are delivered into the sex industry (UNICEF and Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare 2004). However, despite claims of considerable amounts of “sex trafficking,” the UNICEF report offers little detail as to where this form of exploitation is taking place. Provinces and sometimes cities (such as Bangkok) are mentioned, but to conduct my research, I needed to know the names of streets and venues so that I could identify specific locales where trafficking was assumed to be taking place. Before commencing my research in 2005, I discussed possible research sites with colleagues and individuals from other anti-trafficking programs. I soon came to realize that nobody had specific knowledge of the whereabouts of Lao trafficked victims. Nor was anyone capable of suggesting actual places where Lao women worked in the Thai sex industry voluntarily.
I would get responses such as “Perhaps somewhere in Bangkok” or “I think you should look along the border.” The fact that, despite the presence of twelve anti-trafficking programs in Laos, nobody had clear and specific information of the whereabouts of Lao women who worked in the sex industry is intriguing. This lack of information is partly due to the difficulties of researching trafficking from a source community.8

For this reason I carried out initial research in four sites, all differing as gravity points for migration: Bangkok, Houaxay (northwestern Laos), Vientiane, and Nong Kai. In Vientiane and Nong Kai, I had the most success making logistical arrangements (research assistance, access to sites, etc.), and because of the proximity of the cities, they proved the most promising for comparative and analytical purposes. Although I will make some reference to both Bangkok and Houaxay, the crux of this research concerns the border zone of Nong Kai and Vientiane: its traffickers, its victims, and the local anti-trafficking community. It is important to emphasize that my focus on Vientiane and Nong Kai does not mean that the anti-trafficking community had singled out these localities as hot spots, and neither do I intend to. As has already been noted, the anti-trafficking community has great difficulty in pinpointing exactly where trafficking is taking place.

The main reason for including different types of venues where sex commerce is obtainable has to do with assumptions within the anti-trafficking sector, where attention is sometimes paid to different segments of the sex industry. Data on a sensitive topic such as the organization of sex commerce (and the recruitment within it) are not easily captured by survey methods, because the researcher must make a substantial investment in building rapport with informants. Hence this research used the method of participant observation, which requires the researcher to spend considerable time within the social world studied in order to develop relationships and trust. A crucial aspect of participant observation—in addition to interviews, informal conversations, and observations—is interaction with informants over time, as it allows dissonances between what people say, do, and believe to come to light. Furthermore, it enables an approximation of how informants themselves understand their own life worlds. The way individuals within the local sex industry perceive recruitment is very different from what is assumed by anti-trafficking programs. In both Vientiane
and Nong Kai, I built relationships with informants by visiting the same venues repeatedly throughout the duration of research. Although I visited a range of venues, the Vientiane research focused in particular on three beer shops and two high-end venues, whereas research in Nong Kai primarily explored three restaurant/karaoke venues and a handful of brothels and escort-style venues. On both sides of the border, informants included sex workers, recruiters, venue managers, and, to a lesser extent, clients.9

My own position as a Western male researcher obviously affects my interactions with informants. It is not uncommon for individuals who are associated with the sex industry to present different identities and narratives, as do people in any walk of life. This raises a question of the credibility of informants. The way my informants perceived me varied throughout the course of my research but can be summed up as “potential patron.” On initial visits, informants not surprisingly perceived me as a client seeking remunerated sex. However, after I had visited these venues repeatedly and introduced myself as a student (and not a customer) who was researching such venues on both sides of the border, my identity as a “client” gradually faded and changed. It was commonplace for informants to associate me with health programs, and I often experienced both venue owners and sex workers initiating discussions regarding health checks and condom use. The reason for this, no doubt, is that many entertainment venues have regular contact with health programs. Hence “client” and “health worker” share one thing in common in the Thai-Lao context; they are both potential sources of material support. It was therefore not uncommon for informants to stress their poverty, understate their income, and posture “newness” to the industry. These identity formations and nuances of interactions can be difficult to grasp in short visits. By revisiting the same venues and becoming acquainted with several informants over long periods, it became possible to double-check information, at times cross-check claims with other informants, and observe social interactions in these venues over time.

In many respects my interactions with anti-trafficking informants were similar to those within the sex industry: sitting around a table and sharing a few drinks (beers in entertainment venues, coffee in anti-traffickers’ offices) while discussing the mysterious workings of migra-
tion and sex commerce. Because I had previously worked for a UN anti-trafficking program, I knew most of my anti-trafficking informants in this context, many of them being friends and colleagues. I was also able to attend some workshops and meetings with organizations that combat trafficking. Anti-traffickers are peculiar informants, as they are “subject-object” informants. I was interested not merely in understanding them but also in knowing how they understood my other set of informants—traffickers, victims, and venue managers.

I conducted fieldwork from August 2005 to October 2006, with the help of a research assistant. Three individuals assisted in this capacity. Two of the research assistants were male and one female, and all had previous and/or current experience working for development programs, including anti-trafficking and health projects involved with the entertainment industry. There were several reasons for hiring a research assistant. I was operating in a bilingual environment (Thai and Lao), and with my limited language abilities it was unrealistic to carry out this research without local research assistance. All of the research assistants were trilingual (speaking Thai, Lao, and English) and knew the research sites very well. Their knowledge of the area helped me identify venues to visit and aided tremendously in developing rapport with informants. I carried out all research among anti-traffickers myself, however, as all of them were competent in English.

Researching human trafficking evokes several connotations in terms of risk. The methodology for this research was approved by my university’s ethics committee, thus allowing me to contextualize specific problems in terms of both ethics and access. Many anti-trafficking organizations associate trafficking with the “low end” of the sex industry, and one UN official told me when I was planning my research that such venues were out of bounds for Western researchers. “Farangs [Westerners] will not be allowed in!” he said. Contrary to this assertion, I was able to access a range of venue types, from high-end venues to low-end ones in the slums of Bangkok, including brothels, escort networks, restaurants, karaoke clubs, and bars of various sorts. Generally, I found that commercial sex venues, whether I went with a male or female research assistant, were remarkably accommodating in both Laos and Thailand. My presence was rarely questioned, and I was even able to live for a while in one brothel masquerading as a hotel, which
was the closest I got to the classical anthropological achievement of “when the natives build you a hut.” This is not to say that access was a smooth process. For instance, in some venues in Nong Kai, sex workers were subject to partial confinement. It would have been possible to access sex workers in these places by “buying their time” and exchanging money for conversation (and not sex) in the bedroom. I am aware that both investigative journalists and some anti-trafficking projects have done this, but I chose not to do so, as I believed this would cross the boundary of informed consent. I do not think a sex worker can meaningfully consent to a conversation after the manager has been paid for the worker’s time under such restrictive conditions. Instead, in these venues I was able—through informal friendships and connections—to gain access to the individuals who operate these venues.

The venues I researched were all in contact with health programs. Hence my research sites were in this sense not different from those of studies focusing on HIV/AIDS. Although prostitution is nominally illegal in both Thailand and Laos, it operates in a social and cultural environment where commercial sex does not receive strong moral sanctioning (Lyttleton 1994; Van Esterik 2000), and venues are generally allowed to operate undisturbed, despite official policy. What I wish to emphasize is that when the word “trafficking” is used, a particular sordid and mythical image is evoked that does not necessarily reflect field realities.

Another serious consideration is maintaining informants’ anonymity and obtaining informed consent. In most venues, socializing and drinking commonly precede commercial sex. Indeed, conversation is an essential part of this form of interaction. In most settings sex workers have a fair amount of autonomy regarding the types of interactions and conversations they have with customers. From the point of view of research, this means that it is possible, with some skill, to engage in discreet conversation with women who work there, as well as managers and customers, without compromising their anonymity. At times informants were reluctant to engage in conversation, but in most cases this had more to do with the realization by the potential informant that little economic benefit would follow, as our intention was not to purchase sex. Discussing the ways sex workers debut in the industry can be difficult. Throughout the research such information usually came indi-
rectly, either through women who knew of others, or informants who had been subject to such recruitment in the past but had since adapted to working in the sex industry and did so without the direct coercion of third parties. I observed the arrival of newcomers to venues but was always careful when choosing conversation topics in such situations. A typical “trafficker” is often herself a sex worker, so identities such as “sex worker,” “victim,” and “trafficker” are fluid. Although some informants happily admit to “helping” others, no informants admitted to deceptive recruitment tactics. However, information is more forthcoming when talking about others, and here revisiting the same venue repeatedly was a fruitful way of unraveling these complexities.

Throughout my research, I never directly observed anyone being physically abused or arrested. Several informants had experienced very difficult situations, however, including health problems, theft, and violent customers. From the outset I decided to be very careful about attempting to assist anyone. I had three reasons for this. First, there is always the risk of giving unrealistic impressions of what one could realistically do. Second, attempting to help could compromise my position as a researcher in the field. Third, there may be a very short step from “helping” to perpetuating, and even worsening, conditions of abuse. Ethics committees in Western countries might require researchers to report to the police when they encounter illegal activities and abuse, particularly of children. However, such an ethical guideline can have its own mixed ethical implications. It presumes an unquestioned and positive view of law enforcement authorities. When it comes to commercial sex and migration, the police in most parts of the world take an active part in maintaining the sex industry, and their attitudes toward migrants—as marginal groups—are usually negative and can be punitive. Indeed, as Julia O’Connell Davidson (2003, 61) has noted:

Another reason to question the idea that governments will prove useful allies in any struggle to protect women from sexual exploitation concerns the fact that the civil and human rights of females who work in prostitution in the contemporary world are routinely, and often grossly, violated by state actors. Prostitutes variously face arbitrary detention, deportation, forcible eviction from their dwellings, enforced health checks—including HIV testing—forcible “rehabilitation,” corporal
punishment, even execution; few states offer prostitutes adequate protection from violent crime or abusive employers, and prostitutes are often victims of crimes perpetrated by corrupt law enforcement agents, including rape, beatings and extortion.

When I worked for UNIAP and during my fieldwork, a continuous problem was that officially identified Lao trafficked victims were being held in shelters in Thailand for very long periods, in some cases more than one year (Huguet and Ramangkura 2007; Gallagher and Pearson 2010). I cannot recall many trafficking cases from Laos where a trafficker confined an individual for so long. It is therefore not unreasonable to speculate on the possibility that actions of governments and organizations to “help” sex workers have done more damage to, and violation of, their human rights than the misdeeds of traffickers (Davidson 2004). In the context of Laos and Thailand, any researcher worth his or her grant money would know that unconditionally committing oneself to reporting, say, the presence of underage girls in a brothel to the police would most likely result in entrenchment of exploitation (“rehabilitation,” deportation, imprisonment, abuse, confiscation of earnings, and so on) of the girls themselves and not many consequences for those who operate such establishments.

A Note on Terminology and Disclaimers

I have already used various terms that require explanation. Thus far I have only briefly commented on the terms “human trafficking” and “trafficking in persons,” and I will return to these. Throughout this book I will primarily refer to the United Nations’ Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (also known as the Palermo Protocol) (UN 2000), but I will also make reference to Thai and Lao legislation. My use of the terms “human trafficking” and “trafficking in persons” does not imply that they carry particularly illuminating analytical properties or that these concepts are devoid of contradictions and ambiguities. I use these terms because most organizations and individuals who work to combat trafficking use these definitions.

Throughout this book I offer a critique of how trafficking is articu-
lated, and several times I question how categories, such as “victim” and “trafficker,” are used. This does not mean that I am trying to trivialize the abuse and exploitation of women and girls. Similarly, when I draw attention to the discursive and constructed nature of trafficking, this does not imply that I am advocating postmodern nihilism or that trafficking is merely a fantasy of cynical governments and UN bureaucrats. Conversely, neither am I suggesting an essentialist reading of trafficking in persons. As will become apparent, some young Lao women in the sex industry end up in very difficult circumstances, and at the same time there are certain ways in which trafficking tends to be articulated among development programs and governments, and it is with regard to these two processes that I seek to engage in analysis. I do argue that the forms of exploitation and domination that are taking place do not fit neatly with discursive models produced by anti-trafficking programs. This does not mean that I seek to trivialize darker aspects of the sex industry. On the contrary, I am attempting to identify blind spots.

I use the term “anti-traffickers” to refer to individuals, institutions, and groups who are in one way or another involved in combating trafficking in persons. Although I point to similarities among anti-traffickers, it is important to note that this is a highly varied cohort of people. It includes government officials, police officers, aid workers, lawyers, journalists, UN agency staff, bilateral aid donors, and community group members who might all differ in their moral-political views of both migration and prostitution. I specifically reference groups, individuals, and organizations when this is necessary in the text.

In terms of scale, I might thus far seem to imply that I am talking about neatly separated universes of global trafficking discourse and a subordinate group of local anti-traffickers who merely adopt a discourse from above. Although that does take place in some cases, it is of course a simplification. To give one example, two senior management consultants for two regional anti-trafficking projects in the Mekong region have done extensive work in Laos (trainings, workshops, negotiations, meetings, research, village consultations) and are in regular formal and informal contact with other anti-trafficking experts in South Asia, Europe, and elsewhere. Regionally, they have been central to the development of bilateral and multilateral governmental agreements on trafficking among the Mekong countries. They also take part in shaping
trafficking response globally. One of them was a central person (in a technical capacity) in the development of the UN trafficking protocol, and both were key in the development of arguably the best-known text (after the protocol itself) on trafficking: the United Nations’ Recommended Principles and Guidelines on Human Rights and Human Trafficking (ECOSOC 2002). So when I make distinctions between a global discourse of trafficking and local anti-traffickers, this is merely a heuristic device to discuss different aspects of how anti-traffickers engage in the practice of articulating trafficking and implementing programs.

When discussing individuals who work in the sex industry, I use various words and phrases, such as “prostitute,” “sex worker,” “woman,” “young woman,” and “girl.” Legal age does not translate easily from Lao and Thai. The commonly used word is phusaw, which translates roughly as “young unmarried lady” or “female coming of age.” Indeed, sometimes venue owners use the English word “lady.” I am explicit, however, when I discuss cases of underage prostitution. I also use the politically sanctioned term sao borigan, which directly translates as “service woman” and is a euphemism for a woman working in the sex industry.

This book points to shortcomings of development programs. I do not, however, intend ridicule aid workers. On the contrary, I seek to illuminate the extremely difficult work they confront in their everyday assignments. Finally, this book points to the lack of the empirical data that could demonstrate the claim that human trafficking is a problem of massive proportions, underpinned by transnational organized crime and adapted to the laws of a globalized marketplace. Let me make it clear that this book does not suggest that the ethnographic material it presents falsifies such claims, even though the material might question some of the underlying assumptions. What I seek to do is to point out (1) moral-political reasons why trafficking in persons takes on a certain formulaic character; (2) how such fashioning of categories intersects with local realities of sex commerce and migration along the Thai-Lao border; and (3) what effects these processes have on local anti-trafficking programming.