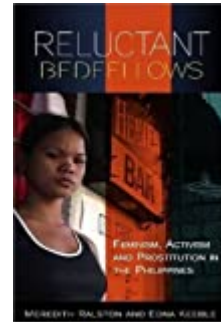


Meredith Ralston, Edna Keeble. *Reluctant Bedfellows: Feminism, Activism and Prostitution in the Philippines*. Sterling: Kumarian Press, 2009. xii + 229 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56549-269-1.



Reviewed by Helen Delfeld (College of Charleston)

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Commissioned by Rebecca K. Root (Ramapo College of New Jersey)

“You’ve Got To Do Something”? The Ethics of Feminist Engagement

Feminist political inquiry has two recurrent debates: one on the relationship between scholarship and activism, and one between a more liberal or poststructural theory. In *Reluctant Bedfellows*, Meredith Ralston and Edna Keeble ambitiously take on both in a brief book discussing the development project they direct, intended to help Philippine sex workers. The first two chapters cover Ralston and Keeble’s liberal critiques of postmodern or postcolonial scholarship. Chapters 3 and 4 lay out different feminist positions on prostitution, largely built on well-known work by Cynthia Enloe (*Bananas, Beaches, and Bases* [1989]) and Rene E. Ofreneo and Rosalind Pineda Ofreneo (“Prostitution in the Philippines,” published in Lin Lean Lim’s edited collection *The Sex Sector: The Economic and Social Bases of Prostitution in Southeast Asia* [1998]). Chapter 5 records community voices regarding Angeles City prostitution. Their conversations with men who visit the city as sex tourists are especially interesting, although at three pages the section that treats this is too abbreviated to be very useful. The last chapter and the conclusion provide reporting on the underlying

project. The multitude of different projects in one short book presents debates rather than fully engages them.

The overarching message is to urgently convince academic feminists to “do something,” a message driven by the authors’ claim that the feminist movement is moribund. Reports of the death of feminism are greatly exaggerated, in the opinion of this reviewer. There is considerable evidence that liberal feminism is being mainstreamed into standard development programs: from informal food distribution protocols favoring women in Haiti to the entire formal Women in Development platform, women are increasingly the focus of development—bringing a whole host of new concerns. Ralston and Keeble’s sense of extreme urgency permits them to argue that many ethical considerations are too constraining, leading to inaction. If one does not agree with the death-of-feminism premise on which this urgency is based, this conclusion is troubling, especially since there are a number of points when ethical and scholarly problems appear in their project. There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of the authors, but the urgency argument appears quite

useful to advancing their positions. The message slides imperceptibly from “do something” to “do anything you like,” regardless of ethical or critical engagement.

Neither author was deeply grounded in Philippine politics or culture when they secured 1.1 million Canadian dollars from the Canadian International Development Agency “to increase the ability of the Filipino partners to understand, and help to alleviate, the problem of prostitution in their city” (p. 6). This knowledge imparting model does not take into account the complexity of knowledge building that must precede effective activism. For example, they seemed unaware of the larger class politics surrounding the women’s organizations they recruited (the elite Soroptimists and the ultra-political grassroots WEDPRO) (p. 7). They therefore ignored the complex social milieu of the Philippines despite showing awareness of the importance of the politics of race and class in Canada (pp. 23-25).

Based on information in the appendix, WEDPRO, founded by former sex workers, appears to have withdrawn from the association in August 2002 after only a few sessions with their Canadian counterparts, leaving only elite participants. Yet Ralston and Keeble feature WEDPRO—no other group figures as prominently—as both the antagonist and the legitimating partner throughout the book, first mentioning WEDPRO’s departure in chapter 6, the last substantive chapter. The authors state that “we were not able to persuade WEDPRO that our similarities were more important than our differences, and our great failure was not convincing WEDPRO that it would benefit more from being in the coalition than from working alone outside it” (p. 149). Evidence mounts that WEDPRO calculated the costs and benefits of such a coalition, and chose exit advisedly. The section of the sixth chapter called “What Did We Accomplish?” features interviews with WEDPRO staff members, leading to the inference that they benefited from the association, even though they had in fact exited years before the conclusion of the project. This mistaken implication is reinforced by the authors’ omission of dates for any of the direct quotations.

Despite the repeated call for academics to “do something,” WEDPRO (the only activist organization of the coalition) is depicted as *too* mobilized, even full of “rage” (p. 139). However, the single quotation presented as evidence of this rage appears to have been misinterpreted. Even more troubling is the authors’ positioning of themselves as rational and neutral in opposition to the irrational and ideologically compromised WEDPRO. Many

such sweeping statements are made with similarly insufficient support, such as a single quotation open to alternative interpretations.

Additionally, Ralston and Keeble attack straw figures representing postmodern and postcolonial theory, claiming that this work forecloses political action. Judith Butler, for example, is accused of “moral passivity,” mostly because her reluctance to give policy recommendations produces “very confused students and even colleagues” (pp. 42, 34). The basis of this argument is largely drawn from Martha Nussbaum’s well-known essay, “The Professor of Parody,” published in the *New Republic* in 1999, in which Nussbaum critiques Butler for lack of clarity and lack of politics. This is old territory; to see this fight unproductively resurrected ten years on is discouraging. Butler’s contention is merely that theory cannot be tied too closely to practice without losing the value of theory, an interesting and disputable position, generally left on the table by the authors in favor of criticizing the confusion Butler “causes.” Ralston and Keeble’s frustration seems to be with the project of scholarship itself, as they also critique Linda Alcoff for being too confusing even though she explicitly addresses the nexus of theory meeting practice (p. 28). The absence of confusion the authors desire can only be assured by reducing the power of scholarly dialogue itself, in which dialogue partners open themselves to change, even transformation.

The authors’ critique of Gayatri Spivak’s postcolonialism similarly does not deeply engage the central argument that development is more about the “helper’s” needs or desires (financial, professional, or emotional) than about the needs of the people being “helped.” Local, knowledgeable actors are more than mere legitimators of Northern-driven projects; not dealing with this critique head on hurts their own project. WEDPRO raises specific critiques similar to Spivak’s; they note both racialized privilege in extending Western knowledge to “needy” others, and the Western domination of development agendas (p. 8). The authors defend their project against WEDPRO’s critiques by arguing that Canadian dollars funded the project and thus should determine the scope of activity (which of course is the substance of WEDPRO’s complaint), and that WEDPRO’s critique was “reflective of current academic feminist theorizing in the West about the neo-colonial aspects of development projects” (p. 8). This last defense, that WEDPRO is merely reflecting Western theorists, implies that they are incapable of articulating their own interests.

Project results are largely reported by a single partici-

pant, a policewoman, who claims a change in the way the town elites, especially the police, treat women from the worst brothels, affecting at least twenty-nine sex workers. If the social and legal situation for sex workers altered for the better, that is a result worth reporting, but we do not hear from sex workers themselves at all in this section. The only concrete result reported is that “several girls ... did go back to their families in the provinces” (p. 152). This is troubling as a success indicator, since the authors explained in an earlier chapter that most sex workers were abused by their families, making them particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

The fundamental challenge of feminist activism is marrying ethical and political engagement. Do outsiders have a right to “do something”—even over the objections of engaged local activists? Ralston and Keeble believe WEDPRO is crippled by “a very strong ideological com-

ponent” (p. 8); in fact, the authors can only be positioned as “neutral” because their position is camouflaged in a quite dominant stream of thinking. Despite their call for increased dialogue in chapter 2, the authors react negatively every time they are presented with the opportunity to engage with someone outside their own ideological perspective.

The idea that drives this book is a good one, but this book is plagued with oversimplification and misreadings, some of which are quite harmful to people with minimal voice, especially compared to the bullhorn of Western publishing to which the authors had access. If you want a book that better explores the connection between activism and scholarship, see Dana Franks’s *Bananera: Women Transforming the Banana Unions of Latin America* (2005).

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