

BOOK REVIEW

Sverre Molland. *Safe Migration and the Politics of Brokered Safety in Southeast Asia*. New York: Routledge, 2022.

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Safe Migration and the Politics of Brokered Safety in Southeast Asia by Sverre Molland offers a remarkable account of the multifaceted role of brokers in mediating safe migration. Embedding multi-level analysis with rich empirical data collected from fieldwork in the Mekong region, the book is commendable when considering the theoretical, empirical, and analytical contributions to the study of migration infrastructure. The involvement of brokers in migration infrastructure has been discussed by various scholars, such as Deshingkar (2019), Kern and Müller-Böker (2015), Lindquist et al. (2012), Shrestha and Yeoh (2018) as well as Xiang and Lindquist (2018). The research by Molland is unique as it attempts to make a meaningful connection between brokers and safe migration governance. It analyses how various agencies operationalise safe migration through programmes and practices. The book is timely in investigating safe migration discourses due to the long-standing battle against human trafficking, migrant smuggling, and forced labour at both the regional and global levels. Molland, the author, points out that safe migration intervention has emerged out of anti-trafficking programmes. His involvement with various anti-trafficking projects and extensive research experience in human trafficking, development and mobility in the Mekong region provides the rich context to investigate the topic. In contrast to the official stereotype of unscrupulous brokers, the book suggests that brokers contribute to the successful outcome of safe migration intervention and highlights the impact of brokerage in the middle space of safe migration.

The author takes a bottom-up perspective to investigate social practices and transformations, looking beyond the formal policy implementations. In investigating how safe migration comes into being, the author adopts an ethnographic approach, which involved extensive fieldwork in Thailand, Lao, and Myanmar between 2013 and 2019. The multi-sited ethnographic research with various social actors and migrant informal networks generates multi-level analysis of the intersections between broker, brokering practices, safe migration, and brokered safety. The author's extensive engagement with migrants, brokers, NGOs, migrant assistance groups, government bodies, and UN agencies provided a rich source of information in analysing the operational front of the safe migration policy. The Mekong region with a specific focus on Thailand, Lao, and Myanmar is the right one due to its attraction as a popular destination for labour migrants and its active development of safe migration policy intervention. The choice of Lao and Myanmar migrants by Molland is comprehensible as it helps close the research gap on Lao migrants. Research on Lao migrants is essential due to the lack of safe migration programme implementation by NGOs among Lao migrants, compared to Thai migrants. A noticeable inclination is that safe migration programmes have marginalised Lao migrants due to the difficulties of NGOs in accessing them and the smaller size of their population compared to the Myanmar migrant population (Chapter 3).

There are several takeaways from the research. First, safe migration is conceptualised as “brokered safety”. Brokers play an indispensable role in mediating migration assistance in legal, social, and humanitarian domains. Their role is pervasive across legal migration institutions, health services, informal social organisations, and social media connectivity. The book convincingly argues that brokerage and safe migration assistance are intertwined in that “safe migration assistance depends on and produce brokering practices” (Molland 2022: 165). In contrast with the official discourses, which view brokers or labour intermediaries with negative connotations, Molland's research illustrates how brokers can function as an effective mediator during dispute settlements outside formal channels and interventions in solving malpractice occurrences in migrant worker management. Molland goes beyond a narrow focus of “safe migration” by arguing that safe migration can be achieved in many forms other than the legal and state-centric system (Chapter 9). Brokers do not only consist of registered agents, but also widely include various informal actors such as students, health translators, and the monk community. The main argument

is that the concept of safe migration is practised (through brokering) and materialised through aid actors (including informal brokers). The notion is interesting as the official safe migration discourses seek to eliminate brokers from the migration industry as broker activities undermine safe migration. Chapter 1 highlights the importance of the migrant resource centre (MRC) which serves as a focal point for migrants, implements safe migration intervention and provides a redress mechanism. Using the example of the Myanmar Migration School, the author illustrates how the school functions as part of a safe migration interventionist programme in terms of awareness-raising programmes and language training. Language training provided by the MRC produces “safety” in the sense that it empowers migrants in seeking better employment opportunities. Awareness-raising programmes on safe migration, according to Molland, produces “informal brokers” when the students are well-equipped with knowledge on visa processing, labour laws, and navigation on the legal migration pathway (Chapter 1).

As Molland convincingly demonstrates in Chapter 5, brokers play a significant role in the legal migration regulatory efforts of the state. Making labour migration legal and safe for the state requires biometric documentation such as a passport, visa, work permit, re-entry permit, and others. The gap in the documentation industry between the state and the migrants is mediated by brokers, who provide and navigate document processing services. The state ensures safe migration by formalising labour migration based on legal documentation, which relies heavily on licensed recruitment agencies. Thus, the state produces brokering practices in the operationalisation of legal labour migration and creates broker-dependency among migrants. Molland suggests that brokering practices may not necessarily be an unpleasant experience for migrants. Brokering practices are helpful as assistance to migrants. Chapter 7 looks at the emergence of health translators as a form of safe migration assistance. It analyses the transformation in the aid sector in the health system of Thailand, which allows undocumented migrants to access health treatment without fearing the risk of deportation. Allowing access regardless of their legal status is in line with the public health priority of the state, especially when it comes to communicable diseases. This explains the increase of migrant translators provided by NGOs in the health sector, which is seen as a “humanitarian space”. The operational space provides the much needed migration assistance and engagement platform for migrants. The safe migration aids in the health sector and are in fact moving the safe migration intervention beyond the political and legal space to humanitarian and

moral space. Health care in Thailand illustrates the realisation of migration assistance work through health translators who become the contact point for further safe migration interventions. Through the contact point, aid organisations reach out to migrants on other issues related to workplace safety, sub-standard work conditions, mistreatment, legal rights, passports, and visa problems, widening the space for safe migration assistance (Chapter 7).

Chapter 8 contains the essence of the main argument in the book that safe migration is “in practice depended on informal intermediaries and practices” (Molland 2022: 150). This research by Molland sheds light on the importance of brokering practices in migrant assistance: “migration assistance and brokering are two sides of the same coin” (2022: 150). Using the case study of Thailand, Chapter 8 investigates the phenomenon of labour brokers becoming migrant assistance outreach workers and vice versa. Many health translators gradually take on various forms of migrant assistance and pick up the role of work-permit brokers due to the perplexed bureaucratic process relating to employment. These migrants-turn-translators eventually acquire knowledge of immigration and labour regulations, and of the mechanisms relating to health and work conditions in connection to various government bodies and the Thai NGO sector. The social capital acquired would allow the migrant-turn-translator to become a successful labour broker. In a similar vein, there are also cases in which labour brokers become NGO outreach workers. Aid agencies employ former brokers because of their skillset and their trust in migrant communities. One common view among those having double roles of labour brokers and outreach workers is that they “self-identify as brokers in relation to their role in migration assistance” (Molland 2022: 160).

Second, safe migration is increasingly linked to de-territorialised features. The use of digital technologies, social media, and hotlines is considered as a de-territorial intervention of aid programme activities. The development of various social media apps by UN agencies and several NGOs is encouraging due to the high accessibility of smartphones among migrant workers by UN agencies and NGOs. Migrants and aid agencies in Mekong countries engage in social media such as Facebook, Viber, and Line. For the migrants, the use of social media and smartphones is important as a claim-making tool, in solving labour dispute cases, seeking financial support for hospital bills or addressing various forms of malpractice. Hotlines as a de-territorial mode of assistance for labour migrants and trafficked victims have been widely used by the Thai government and NGOs

in the Mekong region. Migrant hotlines have been a key safe migration activity with their function as a surveillance tool on the migrant populations and work conditions. Migrant hotlines enhance cross-border connectivity while allowing the NGO and the government to collect data on abuse and exploitation within supply chains. The production of videos by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) based on safe migration awareness-raising material is an interesting example of de-territorial intervention. These awareness-raising videos are used widely by other aid agencies and government departments to reach migrants in the stages of pre-decision, pre-departure, and post-arrival training (Chapters 4, 6, and 9).

Third, safe migration campaigns are conducted at deportation centres, where undocumented migrants await their deportation to their home country, Lao. At the border checkpoint along the Lao-Thai border, migrants attend information sessions necessary to arrange for a legal migration process in their next job-seeking journey in Thailand. It is at the final migratory stage (deportation) when the NGOs provide information on safe migration, rather than at the pre-departure stage in the source country. The “spatio-temporal reversal of the process” is prominent in places with prominent levels of circular migration (Molland 2022: 61). Safe migration awareness-raising campaigns in the form of pre-departure training take place during the repatriation process because it is highly likely that the deported migrants would be re-entering Thailand. The rationale for the Trafficking Prevention and Safe Migration Consortium (TPSMC) in targeting deported migrants for its awareness campaigns is that the deportation centre in Thailand provides a readily available source of potential return migrants. Meanwhile, the Labour Migration Consortium (LMC) safe migration intervention takes place in the source country, targeting aspiring migrants prior to departure (Chapter 4).

Additionally, safe migration campaigns are grounded within the cultural and religious background of the region. In Thailand, migrants actively engage with emigrant Myanmar monks in mobilising support for the Migrant Assistance Monk organisation. The organisation is one of the informal social organisations that assist migrant plights in Thailand. Through religious ceremonies, it provides a platform for mobilising financial resources and improving migrant welfare. The community of monks presents an ideal non-state actor representing Myanmar migrants during negotiations with Thai authorities and Thai employers due to the symbolic capital of monks. Informal migration assistance occurs in various forms such

as negotiating work accidents, underpayment dismissal cases, compensation claims, road accidents, and hospital admissions. The social statuses of monks enable the religious community to be effectual mediators or brokers connecting between formal authority and migrants. Often, the connectivity is achieved through various religious ceremonies and advisory sessions. The success of the Migrant Assistance Monk in mediating safe migration among migrant workers is supported by a conducive environment in Thailand (being a Buddhist country) and active social media use (Chapter 9).

The importance of safe migration agenda in the region is evident from various initiatives undertaken by the TRIANGLE in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) programme as part of the ILO initiative to promote fair migration. In 2018, ASEAN launched the ASEAN Safe Migration Campaign to protect the rights of migrant workers. The Campaign reiterates the regional commitment to implement the 2017 ASEAN Consensus on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers (ASEAN Secretariat 2018). Safe migration has become a global agenda as reflected in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration. The observation of “brokered safety” by Molland contributes to contemporary labour migration discourses in Southeast Asia at a time of growing regional and international interest in promoting ethical or fair migration among vulnerable low-skilled migrants.

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