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UCSB Feminist Studies Scholar Examines Care Work and Other Forms of Intimate Labor

When a mother devotes her life to caring for her children, her labors of love are celebrated and venerated. If she hires a nanny to do the same job, however, the work takes on an entirely different sensibility. It is dismissed as low-skilled, and much of its perceived value is lost.

In her new book, "Intimate Labors -- Culture, Technologies, and the Politics of Care," Eileen Boris, the Hull Professor and Chair of Feminist Studies at UC Santa Barbara, takes a close look at care work, domestic work, and sex work in everyday life, and shines a light on the juncture where money and intimacy meet.

Boris and her co-editor, Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, a professor of sociology at the University of Southern California, present a comprehensive investigation into gender, race, class, and other power relations in the context of global economic transformations. They chronicle the history of intimate labor in light of the rise and devolution of welfare states, women's workforce participation, family formation, the expansion of sex work into new industries, and the development of institutions for dependent people.

"When labors of love become connected to cash, they're disdained," said Boris. "It's thought that anyone could do that work. The devaluing of mother work, of labor that

is associated with family, is seen in the low wages of domestic labor -- housekeeping, childcare, eldercare, domestic care, and even sex work. We wanted to look at that from an interdisciplinary perspective, and also from the perspective of current globalization."

Boris and Parreñas pulled together the scattered research on domestic, care, and sex work and looked at what they have in common. They wanted to cast a wide net, however, and pay attention to the concept of intimacy and expand it in some ways that might not be obvious. "One component shared by these forms of gendered labors -- mostly women's labors -- is the state of intimacy," said Boris. "That includes intimacy through touch, closeness, or knowledge of the details of the client or the person on the receiving end of the interaction."

Among the topics explored by the contributors to the collection are call centers in India, where bill collectors have access to tremendous amounts of personal financial information; the relationship between customers and operators in nail salons; and transnational adoption, egg and sperm donors, and the crisis of reproduction among professionals in the United States who start careers before families and then face issues related to infertility.

"Those are all forms of intimate labor," Boris noted. "Much of this work cannot be off-shored -- although call-center work and some forms of reproduction can. In the U.S., these jobs quite often go to immigrants, who are willing to work for a lower wage."

Another point Boris makes involves what she calls the hostile worlds of love and money. "The fact that someone is paid for their work doesn't mean the work can't be done with concern or care, or that it is somehow devalued or becomes dirty," she said. "We value the mother who tends to her sick child, but the nanny is low-paid. We value the self-sacrificing daughter who cares for her disabled elderly parent, but the immigrant care worker who comes in for the end of life, and who can create an incredibly spiritual bond, is equally low-paid."

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