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Migrants in the Mistress's House: Other Voices in the "Trafficking" Debate

The debate over "prostitution" in Western feminism has been going on for many years,¹ but recent demographic developments in Europe, notably the increase in migrant women from outside Europe, have led to its intensification, giving rise to an enormous production of writings, conferences, demonstrations, and policy recommendations. The situation being complex, the "debate" form is no longer adequate. On one hand, advocates emphasize the violence and danger to women who sell sex, reject the idea that it can ever be a "job," and deny that migrant women may sometimes be independent agents who decide to use commercial sex for instrumental ends. On the other hand, advocates who wish to recognize migrant women's agency attempt to normalize "sex work" to make this employment less risky and more socially acceptable but ignore the particular obstacles to agency posed by the illegality of most migrations. The first side tends to rely on feminist concepts, especially that of "violence against women," whereas the second tends to take pragmatic, "harm-reduction" stances. Discussions focus on abstract questions, such as the degree of consent, obligation, or force experienced by migrant women, the "systems to control prostitution," and the normalization of "sex work" as a whole, rather than on the practical issues of survival and success that women migrants negotiate. Because migrants are now the majority of those selling sex in Europe, the failure to represent their issues seriously compromises this debate. Instead, much energy goes

into attempting to prove that one or the other of these visions is “truer.”

Neither of these visions addresses or sufficiently describes the situation as articulated by migrants themselves, despite the fact that their voices are available through myriad research projects. In these testimonies, women describe how they make decisions to change their lives by traveling abroad to work, weighing their options, talking with friends and family, taking advantage of opportunities offered, and continuing to exercise judgment along the way. The range of experiences, both good and bad, is wider than the two-sided debate expresses. Understanding the status of women in Europe demands consideration of the perspectives of these typically illegal workers.

My perspective comes from data I have collected since 1994 in several Latin American countries and from migrants in Europe, including men, transsexuals, and women who are paid for domestic, “caring,” and sexual services. Because migrants often move between these sectors or work in two at once, and because a separation into two groups reproduces a scheme of “good” versus “bad” girls, I do not divide them into “domestic workers” versus “sex workers.” Since 1997 I also have studied social agents who try to assist these migrants (governmental, nongovernmental, academic, religious, and medical individuals and groups) (Agustín 2005). At the local level, I focus on Spain (Agustín 2001), but the migrant subjects of my research come from Eastern Europe, countries of the former Soviet Union, West Africa, and Latin America, and the social-agent subjects come from all countries of the European Union. For the past two and a half years, I have moderated an email discussion list that brings together people selling sex and others interested in commercial sex from Latin America and Europe, including migrant support groups.² My own research findings are complemented by research carried out in many parts of the world and all over Europe.³

In this article, I alternate feminist and other theory with comments from migrants themselves. I cite only women's testimonies, not because there are *not* many migrant transsexuals and men selling sex in Europe but because the deeply gendered discourse about abuse and agency is *applied* only to women. My purpose is not to participate in either side of the debate but to destabilize the two-sided tension by foregrounding how the women who are being discussed talk about themselves and their projects. These testimonies are not academic discourse, lend themselves to diverse interpretations, and should not be taken as representing all migrant women, all women of a particular nationality, or any other generalized group. There are some important commonalities, however. Although the cultural contexts from which women travel vary, discourses positioning them as

victims or free agents are very similar. “Race” as a category does not surface as a clear determinant of experience in Europe at present, where “white” women from newly independent states and Eastern Europe are one of the largest groups of migrants selling sex. The testimonies come from women working in bars, clubs, flats, and outdoors rather than those selling sex in “high-end” conditions. The location of the migrant in any particular testimony should not be taken as her place of permanent settlement, because most of those interviewed have lived in multiple sites and even countries in Europe. Most of the translations are mine.

In the first part of the article, I describe the contours of the current migration of women to Europe and how these voyages come to be characterized in the “trafficking” discourse that defines one side of the contemporary debate. I depict how migrant women’s own descriptions of what they are doing contrast with the characterizations of outsiders, particularly the gendered emphasis on passivity, ignorance, and force. In the second part, I discuss the problematic politics of defining some women as victims and others as helpers. In the third part, I discuss the position that seeks to normalize sex work, bringing out the contradictions of working in a sector where illegality is the norm. The reproduction of stigma among migrants themselves and their belief that sexual employment is temporary mean that they lack the identification with their work that might stimulate their participation in labor activism and political associations. More important, most migrants do not enjoy a civil status in Europe that allows such participation. At the same time, government proposals for “systems” to control the sex sector introduce problematic “sanitary controls” for workers.

The testimonies suggest that women migrants are actively engaged in using social networks to travel, often aware of the sexual nature of the work, and, like other migrant workers, variably able to resist the economic, social, and physical forms of compulsion they face. Their status as “illegal” migrants, without permission to work in Europe, is, for them, the single overarching problem to solve, and their irregular status, not sex, is the heart of the issue. In the conclusion, I argue that migrant women’s exploitation would be better understood and confronted if European supporters could leave their own debate behind, listen to migrants’ own voices, and include migrant women as equal partners in any efforts to improve their situation.

Women’s Migrations in Europe

A number of structural changes in the world economy spur the migration of women, including industrialized countries’ shift to a

service economy, manufacturing's move to developing areas, multinational corporations' increasing dependence on subcontracting, and "structural adjustment policies" of the International Monetary Fund that cut social programming (where women work). Most newly independent states in Europe have also found themselves facing severe economic problems as part of their conversion to free markets. All these factors contribute to a demand for women workers in new sites and to the disintegration of families under stress from lack of income, with the result that women look for alternatives away from home and migration becomes a conventional solution. Migrants recognize this transnational situation as posing pragmatic problems:

The alternative would have been working for one of your Italian firms that have come to Albania to exploit our work. Two years ago, when I left home, a worker in one of your shoe factories made 150.000 lire a month [€77]. A woman, half that amount. I don't understand why Italy is amazed if young Albanians come here to try to make money the fastest way possible. Girls like me in one evening earn 800.000 lire [€413] and sometimes more than a million. Should we be making shoes for 150.000 lire a month? (Albanian woman in Italy: *Corriere della Sera*; quoted in Danna 2003, 85)

Life is very hard there, because there is no work. Today I sent money to my mother . . . to pay for her house. You work, work, work and then they don't pay you, because there's no money. For example, I worked in an ashtray factory, and when there was no money to pay me they said "take ashtrays," 100 ashtrays. So? Can you eat ashtrays? (Ukrainian woman in Spain; Agustín 2001)

I worked in a company, but they were letting people go. I had problems with my children's father, he mistreated me, he threatened me, they were going to fire me. I have a sister who's a resident here. . . . I came with the money they gave me when they threw me out of work. (Ecuadorian woman in Spain; Oso 2003, 30)

The economic impulse is clear, but migrations are not only motivated economically. It is clear that choice is involved, even with the poorest migrants, simply because *everyone* does not migrate from places of poverty and violence. In fact, only a small minority of the world's population actually migrates internationally.⁴ Saskia Sassen notes that if migrants simply flowed indiscriminately to richer countries, numbers would be far more massive than they are. Instead, migrations are selective processes in which "only certain people leave" (Sassen 1999, 2).

Migrations are obviously overdetermined, and among the many elements to take into account are human desire and personality types disposed to take risks and look for adventure, independence, and opportunities, as well as the presence of networks already in place, as fragile as they can be.

There wasn't any work and I wanted to be independent. I have a big family, but I didn't get along with them. I wanted to be on my own. I saw the neighbours who are doing okay, who have money because there's someone in Italy. And so you go. (Nigerian woman in Italy; Danna 2003, 84)

I left my job in the Ukraine because it was boring there. I wanted to go abroad and experience the world. After my experience in Italy I came to Turkey two years ago because I was looking for a "chance." . . . When I came to Turkey I didn't know about the opportunity to work as a sex worker. I first worked as a translator in Karakoy. (Ukrainian woman in Turkey; Gülçür and Ilkcaracan 2002, 415)

Apart from strategies to make money and structural conditions shaping the labor market, women also want to travel. Exposed to media images that depict travel as essential to education, pleasure, and worldliness, people in poor as well as rich countries want to see famous places, experience a little glamour, be admired, meet new people, and marry. Lucía, a dancer in a provincial Caribbean city, told me about the offers she had so far received to travel to Europe. She had been offered a full package at a decent price, but for Switzerland, not France, her preferred destination. Another offer would have taken her to France, but the price was too high. From Lucía's point of view, she was an intelligent consumer using travel agents. She knew that selling sex would be an aspect of her first European job, but she didn't think there would be no *other* aspect to her life or that she wouldn't have the capacity to change it eventually. She saw herself as an artistic dancer and intended to get into "straight" show business (Agustín 2003).

These are typical dreams of poorer girls from cultures around the world, including poorer European girls. Valerie Walkerdine (1997) criticizes British middle-class horror at juvenile talent contests, noting that singing and dancing talents are among the few from which working-class girls are not excluded. As Pauline Barber (2000, 406) says, migrants "act within a regime of power and discipline from global political economy and skewed development that manages to capture women's hopes for their future despite its personal risks." Why, then, does so much of the discussion about these migratory journeys concentrate on concepts of force and violence?

The Drive to Define "Trafficking"

The anxiety about "trafficking" building up in the past ten years in Europe is part of a general trend focusing on transnational crime, penal law, and citizen security expressed in the idea of a "Fortress Europe" that must protect itself from invasion. In the discussion on "trafficking," emphasis increasingly goes to hypothetical large-scale crime organizations dedicated to enslaving migrants, although the UN Crime Commission's own report found little proof of such activity (CICP 2003). Rather, opportunist networks appear to form in particular situations where people see migration as a solution to their problems, networks composed of current, former and potential migrants (Massey 1993).

One side of the feminist debate describes non-Western women migrants as deceived and recruited against their will. The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) and the European Women's Lobby believe that "trafficking of women for sexual exploitation" is particularly pernicious and define women migrants as sexually endangered and powerless to defend themselves.⁵

Whatever levels of knowledge and "consent" are involved, however, women are *never* made aware of the extent to which they will be indebted, intimidated, exploited and controlled. They believe . . . that they can travel to a richer country and earn large amounts of money in a short space of time, which they can then use to move themselves and their families out of poverty and despair. *In reality*, they are told they owe a huge debt which must be repaid through providing sexual services, and they are able to exercise *virtually no control at all* over their hours of work, the number of customers they serve, and the kinds of sex they have to provide. (Kelly and Regan 2000, 5; emphasis added)

Here, the authors reduce all migrants to passivity and ignorance. The problem is that many migrants do know what is ahead of them, do earn a large amount of money in a short time selling sex, and do have control over their working condition. Debts are, in any case, common among all kinds of migrants:

People come here that have a debt, for example one girl I have right now. They've all come on their own feet, they have a debt they have to pay. . . . The last girl had to pay a million [pesetas] [€6.010], . . . After five months she was finished. (Dominican woman running a flat in Spain; Agustín 2001)

The "trafficking" discourse relies on the idea that deceit was used to get women to leave home, but research indicates that large numbers of migrant women who work in the sex industry did know that their

work in Europe would have a sexual component if not be directly “prostitution.” Although this does not mean they loved the idea or had many other options, it does mean they were not completely deceived.

I separated [from my husband] and then began to work in my city in a club. . . . Since the work was hard, I said to myself, I’m going to go far away . . . to Spain, because I had a friend here and my mother came years ago and stayed five years. . . . My friend helped me come and my mother helped with the money for the ticket. (Brazilian woman in Spain; Bueno 1999)

Once I was talking with a friend and she asked if I wanted to go to Spain. I knew why, so I said: “Ah, do you want to?” . . . and I don’t know where she met this guy, he got the papers for us . . . the money and we left. . . . This guy went to look for work, where are the best places to work, where there are men. . . . Because one place has a lot of men, another doesn’t. . . . I worked in Logroño a month or so . . . then back to Málaga . . . a month or two, then I came here. . . . He talked first with the boss of this place . . . said he was looking for work for us. (Ukrainian woman in Spain; Agustín 2001)

Of course, “knowing beforehand” that one will sell sex may be a poor measure of potential exploitation and unhappiness, because it is difficult, if not impossible, to know what working conditions will *feel* like in future jobs (a problem not unique to sexual occupations). Even if migrants have sold sex or seen it sold at home, the work they do in Europe can be completely unfamiliar, for example, standing nude in a window or next to a highway for twelve hours a day, with no other social contact with customers. Sometimes migrants do not know how using false documents will make them complicit and vulnerable, or they may sign a contract without understanding how being in debt would affect them. Some people eager to travel do little research to test what they are told by scouts, vendors, and “traffickers”; others initially feel love and trust for the person facilitating their travel, who, often enough, are members of their own networks of family and friends.

Migrants may know some things and not others, with complicated results. whether the work is sexual or not.

A friend proposed that I come, she knew a girl who could bring me. In Colombia the work situation is very bad and I wanted to leave, so I said: I’m going however I can. You sign a note for seven million pesos [€4.207] and they tell you that you can pay it back working for a month. You know what you’re going to be doing. Anyone who says she didn’t know, it’s a lie, a married

lady with children, how can she not know what she's going to be doing here? When you arrive, you crash, because the work is bad and it's a lie that the debt can be paid in a month. You talk with the other girls and see that the debt is more than it cost the girl to bring you. [But] I want to pay her, because she takes a risk, too, to bring you over. (Colombian woman in Spain; Oso 2003, 34)

I arrived in Almería through a friend's mediation. I began to work as a domestic, I was badly paid and mistreated. Sundays I came to the edge of the sea and cried. One Sunday a Moroccan man saw me crying, I explained my situation to him, he took me to his house. I was a virgin, he promised he was going to marry me . . . he got me a residence card. . . . He found me work in a restaurant and let me stay in his studio, he told me I had to pay rent. I began to sleep with some clients from the restaurant. . . . Now, I would like to go to France, I want to get married. . . . My sister who lives in Béziers says she's going to find me a Frenchman, to get a residence card. (Moroccan woman; Lahbabi and Rodríguez 2000, 18)

To come to Spain, my brother-in-law lent me the money. My cousin encouraged me to come, saying that I could work as a waitress in the bar her husband had opened. When I arrived in Pamplona, I found that he wanted me to work in the bar, but without getting paid, he said the bar didn't make enough to be able to pay me. (Colombian woman in Spain; Oso 2003, 32)

The complex intertwining of migrant projects is evident. Each side of the transaction tries to get the best deal and takes advantage of whatever opportunities arise. Women, as well as men, use other people as necessary.

Some facilitators of migration take tremendous advantage of these situations, withholding personal documents and threatening relatives. Others count on the psychological dependency and disorientation recently arrived migrants feel. A relationship that began with friendship may end in disenchantment, abandonment, or abuse:

Every girl that worked for Cindy knew that that day she was going to be there and that she had to give her the money or deposit it in her account. Later she would stay a while in each place where she had left a girl . . . at the same time she was maintaining control over what happened with them. (Likiniano 2003, 55)

As soon as I was brought to Turin I understood that I had ended up in a blind alley: I found myself with a "madame" who

ordered me onto the sidewalk and wanted 50 million [lire] [€25.800]. It was a real nightmare. (Kennedy and Nicotri 1999, 36)

In the worst cases, there is total deceit from the beginning: a traveler who never thought of doing anything sexual when accepting a trip to Europe, who was given information about one job and who was physically forced into a different one.

But the concept of “force” also must be examined to understand what victimization may mean in this context. Francesco Carchedi (2003) proposes three different categories of “prostitution”: “autonomous,” “semi-autonomous or semi-voluntary,” and “coerced and/or slave-like,” but such schemes need considerable leeway to account for the mixed nature of many experiences. Some people start out doing domestic work but feel compelled to sell sex because of the differential in pay; others feel psychologically obligated but actually could physically escape; some connive with and manipulate those obligating them; others find no room to maneuver at all.

Additionally, people’s conceptions of “risk” and morality vary; women selling sex in Nairobi, for example, when asked if they realized that the job could be dangerous, answered that they were not doing it to live safely but to earn money and be independent (Pheterson 1996, 18). Larissa Bogdanova comments on young migrant women from the provinces now in Moscow with “sugar daddies”:

To return to the provinces and to live as poorly as your parents would be like dying. So there is no choice! You have to pay for your right to live in the capital, to have a good job and a flat with what you have got. With your body . . . The stupider ones do it just for money, those with more brains and bigger plans do it for a prestigious job and a place to live. (Quoted in Pickup 1998, 1000)

Because an infinite array of relationships is possible between migrant and entrepreneur, boyfriend, sugar daddy, and “trafficker,” presenting all women involved as passive and ignorant erases important differences among them. Most of the abuses denounced in the “trafficking” debate are closely associated with the unregulated and uncontrolled sectors in which migrant women find employment—domestic service no less than the sex industry.

When “force” is invoked to denounce jobs in the sex industry, attention usually focuses on women who are moved or “sold” between sex clubs, suggesting that this situation is the essence of exploitation. Yet migrants reveal that living in a club may be convenient to their ends:

When you live in the club it’s cheaper, because it’s a daily rate that you pay for food and lodging, while if you live outside you

have to pay the expenses of flat, food, transport. . . . Most of the time you're in the bar, you save more. My sister and I finished working, went to bed and slept as much of the day as we could to avoid expenses and to feel that the time was passing faster. (Colombian woman in Spain; Bonelli 2001, 81)

I came to Spain and began working in a [private] house; it was a very hard job because in my country I worked as a secretary in City Hall. I earned little. . . . Then I began to meet people who worked in this [sex]. . . . No one mistreats you, except if you leave to go outside and something could happen to you, but inside nothing can happen . . . you end up feeling protected. (Ecuadorian woman in Spain; Bueno 1999, 380)

When we lived in the club we had the owner on top of us taking care of us: "don't go with this one," "don't go with the other one." He was like our father. (Colombian woman in Spain; Bonelli 1999, 81)

Those who make it through the first period of indebtedness and disorientation may decide to stay in the sex industry:

One day I met a friend of mine while I was walking in the town centre. . . . I learned that she was a prostitute so her children could live in a decent way. This work has the advantage of financial ease and freedom to work schedules that allow spending more time with the children. (French woman of Algerian parents in France; Cabiria 2002, 286)

When you work a lot in one place then you . . . you get tired of the clients. . . . Even though it will be the same, you imagine another place with other people, and then you come to life inside. . . . I go to another country, another city. Lately I live between Mallorca and Barcelona. . . . In summer I always go to Mallorca to spend a little time with my son. (Latin American woman in Spain; Cuanter 1998, 93)

Sometimes I enjoy working, I can travel and see beautiful places. I can go to nice restaurants. I enjoy that the Turkish men view us as desirable. (Ukrainian woman in Turkey; Gülçür and Ilkcaracan 2002, 419)

Even when migrants say they were lied to or feel disillusioned about some aspect of their situation, they typically complain of the working conditions they are forced to accept, and not about the work being sexual per se. Often they want to remain in the sex industry, but in less exploitative conditions, because of the amount of money

they can earn: €5,000 per month is not an uncommon wage in many Spanish clubs, for example.

It makes me laugh when they think that I am not an honest woman because I do this job. Of course, as a job it's ugly, and I don't understand why in Italy they don't let us do it in organised places; I don't understand what is bad about selling love for money. . . . With this job I have made it possible for all my brothers to study and I have supported my mother, so I am proud of being a prostitute. (Nigerian woman in Italy; Kennedy and Nicotri 1999, 32)

Without knowing how different kinds of sex businesses run and how migrant women perceive the advantages and disadvantages to themselves, outsiders run the risk of misunderstanding. Particularly when they only talk to people who have sought help from nongovernmental organizations or the police, they never hear these more complex testimonies and may totalize everyone as purely exploited.

Obviously, the clandestine travel and labor markets involved here, outside all regulation, are not “fair” in comparison with what people enjoy in the first world. But these conditions extend beyond the sex industry and the people who act within them are real, whole people whose migrations have been described as “autonomous”:

It is important to understand that autonomous migration means more than unauthorized (“illegal”) border crossings: it means a community strategy implemented, developed, and sustained with the support of institutions, including formal ones, at the migrants' points of origin and . . . points of destination. Precisely because core institutions (legal, religious, local governmental) support this migratory strategy. . . . Migrants may see their autonomous migration as extralegal, but not necessarily as criminal. (Rodríguez, 1996, 23)

The fact that enormous risks, “ugly” work, and illegality are conventional among those on the bottom rung of the social ladder does not mean nothing should be done about these problems. This is why it is important to advance the debate beyond the place where it has been stuck for so long.

The Problem of the “Victim” Subject

Given the different degrees of complicity and opportunism on migrants' part in the deals made to get them into Europe and employment, “trafficked victim” is a poor description of and discounts what many women say about their own life projects. I think of the

conversation I had with a Colombian woman through the bars of a Bangkok detention center. She was torturing herself with guilt and blame, not because she had been caught and sent to prison but because she had knowingly broken the law when she allowed her family to prepare a fake visa for her to get into Japan. Although this woman had been a victim, she had also made choices and felt responsible, and I would not want to take this ethical capacity away from her.

The word *victim* may be used in a legal sense, but in the case of victims of “sexual exploitation” it transmits the notion that these victims are sexually innocent and ignorant. This concept

ignores the sense of responsibility which leads women to migrate in search of work. . . . “It hurts, but don’t call me a poor thing,” one woman . . . said. Victims can also be very tough who will do anything to avenge the damage done to them and make a better life for themselves. Some victims don’t go to the police but start trafficking for themselves, or side with the traffickers to avoid reprisals. (Altink 1995, 2)

Still, the positioning of migrant women as victims can be understood as the strongest way to argue for helping them. As Ratna Kapur (2001, 5) points out,

In the context of law and human rights, it is invariably the abject victim subject who seeks rights, primarily because she is the one who has had the worst happen to her. The victim subject has allowed women to speak out about abuses that have remained hidden or invisible in human rights discourse.

One problem is that the person designated a victim tends to take on an *identity* as victim that reduces her to a passive object of others’ actions. According to this logic, the subject of the discourse becomes irrelevant, and the “helper” takes center stage, encouraged “to propose strategies which are reminiscent of imperial interventions in the lives of the native subject” (Kapur 2001, 6). Thus the protagonists in debates on “trafficking” are first-world citizens, not migrants, and migrant women are routinely characterized as pushed, obligated, or coerced, even when they travel for the same reasons as men: to expand their horizons and get ahead through work.

This image covers up slippage between issues of migration and commercial sex, as illustrated by this argument from the CATW:

The sheer volume of foreign women who are in the prostitution industry in Germany . . . casts further doubt on the fact that these numbers of women could have entered Germany without facilitation. As in the Netherlands, NGOs report that most of

the foreign women have been trafficked into the country since it is almost impossible for poor women to facilitate their own migration, underwrite the costs of travel and travel documents, and set themselves up in ‘business’ without outside help. (CATW 2003, 3)

In this statement CATW conflates all “facilitated” migration with “trafficking.” Obtaining help with documents, tickets, jobs, contacts, and local knowledge is customary in migration, whether clandestine or legal, no matter what job the migrant finally gets; in some countries, licensed travel agencies offer such assistance.

Discursive slippage is also evident in conflating “prostitution” with “trafficking.” In testimony to a U.S. congressional committee, Donna Hughes misinterprets the act’s definition of “trafficking,” which requires that “force, fraud or coercion” exist. Instead, she says, “unless compelled by poverty, past trauma, or substance addictions, few women will voluntarily engage in prostitution *and are thus* victims of trafficking” (Hughes 2002, 2; emphasis added). For Hughes, everyone who helps a migrant is a “trafficker,” including family, friends, lovers, agents, and entrepreneurs, not just small- and big-time delinquents. Every kind of help, from preparing false passports to meeting migrants at the airport is considered criminal exploitation, and although migrant testimonies speak of the wide presence of women among “traffickers,” this position erases them. Male migrants are granted more agency but excluded from “helping” projects, despite the fact that they, too, suffer from exploitation by employers in sectors such as construction and agriculture.

The demand is commonly expressed for correct statistics on “trafficked women.” Given that not only the sex industry but probably half of all migrations are clandestine, no such figures can exist. Indeed, the entire domain of statistics has to be problematized when the subject is migration (Singleton and Barbesino 1999). At the same time, ethnographic studies are based on particular groups that investigators have access to, so that researchers visiting victim-services projects speak with victims, those approaching street workers hear only certain accounts and so on.

Moreover, given the disagreement about how to define the enigmatic issues of will, consent, and choice involved in migration, projects count in different ways: Some count everyone who has entered a country accompanied by someone else and now selling sex; some include only those who have agreed to denounce a “trafficker” according to local law; some mean everyone who gives money to a “boyfriend”; and some include all migrants selling sex, as CATW does. As John Salt (2000, 31) points out,

The enormous interest and concern for trafficking and human smuggling in governmental, inter-governmental and

non-governmental organizations, in the media and popular opinion, is running ahead of theoretical understanding and factual evidence. This has implications for policy measures designed to combat trafficking and human smuggling, which may not work and also have unintended side-effects.

One such unintended side effect is the potential exploitation of “antitrafficking” arguments by anti-*immigrant* politics. When migrant women are said to have arrived against their will in Europe, states have a good excuse for “repatriating”—deporting—them. This logic has been used to justify recent severe harassment and rounding up of migrants selling sex in the streets of France and Italy. The “trafficking” discourse also tends to accuse foreign men of being criminal traffickers, contributing to social and racial hostility against migrants.⁶

The existence of diverse and complex experiences among women, sometimes similar to and sometimes different from those of male migrants and coming from a variety of conditions, means that no single regime of truth exists and that efforts to help those involved need to be removed from the realm of “debate” about a socially constructed dichotomy.

The “Sex Work” Proposal

Before migrations moved to a central place in the debate over “prostitution,” the issue was the meaning of selling sex. This concern still underlies the other side of the debate.

Migrant women in Europe today find three kinds of jobs widely open to them: domestic work, “caring,” and selling sex. These can all be called service jobs, but those who condemn “prostitution” refuse to acknowledge it as work, assuming that sexual contact is inherently different from all other social relationships (Agustín 2004). This conceptualization reduces a wide variety of sexual commerce to being about nothing *but* sex, whereas research in disparate indoor sites shows that sex often occupies only a small proportion of the total time clients spend there (Agustín 2002; Leonini 1999). A woman said in Santo Domingo:

I know I should get out of this business, but I don't know if I would like any other job as much. In the bar, I spend my time dancing, drinking and talking.

The argument posed against the “antiprostitution” position proposes that sexual labor be recognized as a valid occupation, with concomitant labor rights for those who wish to continue in the industry and help out of it for those who do not (Bindman 1996). This is often characterized as the “pro-sex workers’ rights” position, which variously

argues for more respect for women's choices in difficult situations, greater humanity toward clients, tolerant understanding of sexual needs and desires, a harm-reduction approach to HIV/AIDS prevention, and occupational health and safety standards to protect employees in sex workplaces (see, for example, Kempadoo and Doezema 1998). This position speaks of the right to "mobility" as a way of supporting migrants and repudiates victimization.

The only in-depth, transnational research that has been carried out on the sex industry concluded that governments' acceptance of it as an economic sector and entrance of it in formal accounting is the single realistic strategy for bettering the situation of its workers (Lim 1998). This proposal reasons that when the state taxes and licenses sex businesses, these will also be required to comply with basic health and safety regulations and grant benefits and rights to workers. By referring to an economic "sector," a wide range of jobs are included: "prostitution" services in bars, clubs, and flats; erotic phone sex; peep shows; massage parlors; and lap dancing, whereas the terms of the usual debate omit all these and other jobs included in the concept of a "sex industry."

As a strategy to better the lives of many, whether their paid occupations are considered dignified "work" or not, this proposal has merit. But as a vindication of "sex work" as unproblematic, something as "normal" as any other job, it is less convincing. Some people feel selling sex is an art or a form of therapy and welcome calling themselves "sex workers." Other people feel selling sex is analogous to typing or running a machine, don't believe sex has to be tied to love, and can see benefits from being called "sex workers." But many migrant women, including those who do not want to stop selling sex, simply don't think of themselves that way. Rather, they participate in the stigmatisation of "prostitution":

God has to understand that what I do is out of necessity. I know I am doing something bad and that makes me feel bad, but I need the money. (Bonelli 2001, 94)

Supporters of labor rights for people selling sex believe that a formalized industry would allow workers to advocate on their own behalf; thus, they encourage self-organization and the forming of associations. But organizing to resist exploitation requires the assumption of an identity, whether as "prostitute" or "sex worker," if only for strategic purposes. For the person who despises commercial sex, such self-identification is unlikely. For many migrants, who largely have only fallen into what came their way and see commercial sex as the means to pay off debts, identity with sex as a profession is unlikely. One woman described how being known can backfire:

The greatest fear you have is that your family will find out. . . . That's why we watch out for ourselves, we don't trust anyone and avoid letting anyone from our country recognise us. There have been cases where they end up blackmailing you: 'If you don't pay—I'll tell!' (Polanía and Claasen 1998, 105)

That wages can be spectacularly high is considered a significant recompense, but any strategy that requires people to affirm an identity based on this work, "come out" in public, and advocate for their rights is unrealistic and does not attend to much of what they say.

Stigma aside, proposals to normalize the industry serve many needs of those with the right to work, but "illegal" migrants—the majority in the European sex industry—are necessarily excluded. Work is based on state permission in Europe, and even in the Netherlands, the country that has moved closest to normalization of sex work, migrants are not allowed to apply for work permits to sell sex. In fact, in the moment that sex businesses were legalized and began to be counted and regulated a few years ago, migrant workers became less tolerated than ever. The argument for normalization is this:

If the status of prostitutes were raised by repealing the archaic laws surrounding it, street walking would be eliminated and prostitution could take place in properly controlled establishments, as girls could work in the safety of their own place or flat, with police consent and protection in pleasant, discreet, hygienic conditions which would be better for both the prostitute and the client. (IUSW 2000, 3)

Given this logic, migrants are a problem for European "sex worker" groups lobbying for better conditions, for several reasons: They are alleged to lower the value of services by charging less, they are said to be less "professional" than Europeans, and they muddle the claim of sex worker autonomy by being involved in informal networks and illegal activities or by being "trafficked." The interests of migrants who have no right to work and who put their priority on accumulating as much money as possible in a short time are not the same as the interests of Europeans who want to legitimate and professionalize the industry. Because the most important fact conditioning migrants' life is the possession or not of "papers" (legal residence and work permits), proposals that do not take this into account are largely irrelevant to them.

Finally, proposals to recognize sexual labor lead directly to consideration of which "system" should be used to "control prostitution": abolition, prohibition, or regulation. For those who find any paid sex objectionable, only abolition is acceptable, and as a vision of utopia, where sexual, economic, and social relations would be open and fair,

abolition seems very desirable. In practice, however—and abolitionist regimes are the most common throughout Europe—abolition makes the sale of sex so difficult that workers are routinely harassed by the police. When these workers are migrants, this harassment is doubled (Tampep 1999). Even the Swedish law, which specifies penalties for those buying sex and none for those selling, has the unwanted effect of pushing sex transactions out of sight, a condition that can increase danger for migrants. The other “systems” are also problematic for those selling sex. Prohibition penalizes them by definition, meaning they are constantly arrested, and regulation inevitably includes “sanitary controls” for those selling sex (never for those buying it), institutionalizing the kind of system that first outraged feminists in the nineteenth century as violating the rights of women and incarnating the double standard.⁷

None of this means that the “work” strategy should not be advanced, but again, migrants’ concerns are neglected in the usual proposals, omitted because any proposal to ameliorate their situation runs directly into a fundamental problem: The women involved are largely “illegal” in Europe, and thus their access to any rights at all is questionable.

Caught in a No-Rights Zone

Even if migrants were to assume a “sex worker” identity, their illegal status discourages most political action, because by definition they enjoy few civil rights in Europe. In the majority of cases, these women do not have permission to work at *any* job but rather possess false documents, tourist visas, or permission to work at something specific that has been stamped in their passports. European feminists who desire to support migrants should not forget that many in fact have knowingly come to Europe illegally: Neither calling them victims nor normalization of sex work can overcome this. Given their irregular status and vulnerability to police harassment and deportation, as well as the stigma of coming out as sex workers, most are loath to draw attention to themselves. Given the itinerant lifestyle that characterizes migrants selling sex in Europe, they tend not to “settle” or join traditional migrants’ groups, and in some countries they have no right to “demonstrate” or even join associations.

Such associations, generally composed of legal migrants and many dominated by men, also have not espoused the cause of migrants selling sex. They keep silent on the issue or officially support getting women out of “prostitution” and severe measures against “trafficking,”⁸ an understandable attitude given the anti-immigration nature of current European policy making. All this leads to a situation in which many of the vocal proponents of sex worker rights are neither migrants nor sex workers. A recent Dutch initiative aims to reposition the “trafficking”

issue at the state level as “labour migration and rights” (SIGN 2003), a welcome move, but few migrants will come to know about it. European advocates who would like to include migrant women in gender-equality frameworks are frustrated, again, by their civil status. It seems to be a vicious circle, and no one's overt intention, that the voices of migrants are rarely heard.

Voices from the Margins

It is possible to consider migrant women in other ways, for example, in terms of the assets (social, cultural, financial) they acquire as migrants, which then may enable them to “effect change, through both personal and community empowerment” (Gibson et al. 2001, 382). And when migrants are allowed to speak, they may present an original analysis:

We look at migration as neither a degradation nor improvement . . . in women's position, but a restructuring of gender relations. This restructuring need not necessarily be expressed through a satisfactory professional life. It may take place through the assertion of autonomy in social life, through relations with family of origin, or through participating in networks and formal associations. The differential between earnings in the country of origin and the country of immigration may in itself create such an autonomy, even if the job in the receiving country is one of a live-in maid or prostitute. (Filipina member of a migrant domestic workers' group, in Switzerland; Hefti 1997)

For me, migration is the framework most useful for thinking about the great majority of people being paid to provide sexual, domestic, and “caring” services in Europe. Migration studies allow consideration of all aspects of people's lives and travels, locate them in periods of personal growth and risk taking, and do not force them to identify as “sex workers” or “maids,” or be labeled according to what may be a chance or temporary occupation. Migrant women selling sex should be included in the growing body of research on diasporas, globalization, immigration law, international relations, and social exclusion. Their lives before migrating, their possible participation in women's and community movements at home as well as in countries to which they travel, their struggles to change gender relations and influence the policy of their own states are all relevant. The demand for both male and female labor in illegal and unprotected jobs in Europe directly contradicts anti-immigration policies that intensify daily, so that the whole question of “help” needs rethinking.

There must be more study before useful proposals are made, but it seems likely that multiple policy proposals will be necessary if they are to meet the needs of such a varied group. To open up current discussion in this way means a range of social actors become interested partners, and the limited “debate” tradition is diversified. Most important, the subjects of all the concern can speak in public as migrants. Slowly, their voices can be heard.

NOTES

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1. The quote marks indicate that this concept has been shown to totalize a great deal of diverse activity, much of it temporary, occasional, or otherwise informally conceived. “Prostitution” is a constructed category that covers up more than it reveals (Agustín 2002; Bell 1994; Walkowitz 1980).

2. The list uses romance languages. For more information, contact the author.

3. Altink 1995; Bonelli 2001; Brussa 2000; Cabiria 2002; Campani 1999; COIN 1992; Cuanter 1998; Danna 2003; Gülçür and Ilkcaracan 2002; Likiniano 2003; Mai 2001; Oso 2001; Pickup 1998; Polanía and Claasen 1998; Ratliff 1999; Signorelli and Treppete 2001; Skrobanek et al. 1997; Tabet 1989.

4. “The 150 million migrants estimated to be in the world today make up only 2,5 percent of the world’s population” (Shatzer 2001). Some countries, during specific periods, have much higher rates.

5. Some organizations do avoid the conflation of trafficking with prostitution, extending their concern about abuse to migrants who work as domestic servants and in sweatshops, *maquiladoras*, mines, agriculture, and other industries, whether they are women, men, or transgender people.

6. France’s Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, in his 2003 initiative to get rid of street walkers in France, stated bluntly that “our principle objective are the foreigners” (*Le Monde*, 16 January 2003).

7. This was the basis for Josephine Butler’s founding a campaign against the British Contagious Diseases Acts, a movement that then spread throughout Europe.

8. See, for example, Web sites of even alternative migrant organizations, such as the Sans-Papiers (<http://www.bok.net/pajol>).

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