

Migrant sex work and trafficking

Sorting them out

Laura Agustín

INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR. BLOG: BORDER THINKING ON MIGRATION, TRAFFICKING AND COMMERCIAL SEX,
WWW.NODO50.ORG/LAURA_AGUSTIN/

When trafficking is mentioned in the media these days it's usually linked seamlessly with sexual abuse, exploitation, pimps, slavery and ruined lives. Although some hold that we live in a postfeminist world, everyone seems predisposed to assume the worst about women who sell sex – especially how helpless and sexually vulnerable they are, just because they were born female. My research over the past 15 years has broken the many suppositions behind such clichés into manageable pieces, not to say everything is hunky-dory but to get closer to the actual problems rather than the sensationalist, sexist fantasies. The fact that the problems have little to do with sex itself is illustrated in the following description.

A few years ago I met five women in Thailand and Australia, at the request of local NGOs who wanted a Spanish-speaker to visit them. In Sydney I was introduced to the owner of a legal brothel and two of her workers; in Bangkok I visited two undocumented migrants in a detention centre. The women came from Peru, Colombia and Venezuela and were mostly middle-class, although one had little formal education. But their travel stories were diverse.

The brothel owner was a permanent resident in Australia. Her migrant workers had come on visas to study English that gave them the right to work, but they had been required to pay for the entire eight-month course in advance and were in debt. The madam treated them well but kept them close, living in her house and travelling with her to the brothel.

One of the women in the detention centre had been caught with a fraudulent visa at Tokyo airport and deported back to her last stop, Bangkok. Originally invited to join her sister in Japan, she spent a year jail before being sent to the detention centre. The other detainee had been caught during a robbery carried out by her travelling companions in Bangkok (one stop on their travels around Southeast Asia). She spent three years in jail before being sent to the centre (and, by the way, all her papers were false, including a change of nationality). Both women were in the centre because they had no money to pay their plane fare home, and, so far, no one was offering to pay it for them, since both were complicit in the plans for their non-legal travel and work – disqualifying them as victims of trafficking.

The two recently arrived migrants in Sydney seemed to accept doing sex work, but they didn't have much choice of jobs, given the cost of the language course and their inability to speak English. The migrant to Japan said she believed she had not been destined to sell sex even

though her sister had, but she felt guilty because her own family had been involved in getting her false papers. The woman caught in the robbery had sold sex informally during her travels, and seemed satisfied she'd be able to make money that way. The numerous people involved in these arrangements were said to be Pakistani, Turkish and Mexican.

Complex, ambiguous stories like these are often described and denounced as sex trafficking. Much of the outcry revolves around an abstract point – whether prostitution can ever be seen as a “real” job. This question is less relevant to undocumented migrants who have no visas allowing them to work in *any* legal job. Travels that involve selling sex are often talked of as though they were inherently different from all other kinds of travel to work, mostly because migration in general is little understood. In this chapter I'll examine generalisations that erase individual experiences and lead to non-productive debates. I'll look at ideas about migration, job markets, the informal economy, the sex industry, trafficking – and the idea of good sex itself.

Why do people leave home?

You work, work, work and then they don't pay you, because there's no money ... 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 2005)

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.

(Nigerian woman in Italy: Danna 2004)

Both these migrants were selling sex when researchers spoke to them. Scholars explaining why people move to another country to work cite many causes: international structural conditions and globalisation of markets; national immigration policies; the feminisation of poverty; wage differentials between countries. They talk about loss of land, recruitment by foreign employers, the desire to join family abroad, flight from violence, persecution and natural disasters. Any single person may have multiple reasons to consider migrating, but no single condition guarantees that he or she *will* migrate. None of the theories accounts for the desires and aspirations that poorer people feel, just as richer ones do (to see the world, to get ahead, to escape limited lives), or for personality traits that make a migration seem plausible to some people and not to others (willingness to take risks, ability to tolerate uncertainty).

Working in informal economies

Legal jobs (in what's known as the formal sector) are regulated and tracked in government accounting. Legal migrant workers possess a work permit and visa; if they work in the informal economy, where no permits can be had, they are not working legally. This fact does not discourage many people from travelling or migrating, however, since they know that jobs in informal economies are plentiful all over the world. That is, they know that if they get across the border, someone will hire them, because there are jobs open. That migration policies don't mention these flourishing markets is confusing, since many of the jobs available are fairly ordinary, if non-prestigious, and can serve to bring in incomes significant to migrants and enhancing social life: manual labour on construction sites, farm labour, live-in domestic service and caring for children and the elderly in private homes, factory labour, restaurant kitchen

employment, cleaning, home piecework and a wide variety of jobs in the sex industry. To take advantage of such jobs, migrants must first arrive.

Legal status is limited to entering as a tourist, student or temporary business traveller with the appropriate visa, or to enter with a job offer and formal working papers in hand. Obtaining a tourist visa can be next to impossible for citizens of many countries, or may require years of waiting because of country quotas. Or the potential tourist/migrant may be able to get a visa but not have the money to buy tickets and survive while looking for work. The imbalance between jobs available to migrants and visas offered to them creates a niche for those able to provide services to undocumented migrants. Many who want to travel search actively for help getting around the rules at home, while others search for them, to sell them trips and jobs. These vendors in the informal economy are known by a variety of names, from businessmen and travel agents to coyotes on the Mexican border and snakeheads in China. They are often relatives or friends, and they may be tourist acquaintances met during vacations who bring friends over to visit or work. Marriage may be part of the deal. Intermediaries may play a minimal part in the migration project or offer a package which links them closely to migrants every step of the way.

Without access to a charge account or formal bank loan, the would-be migrant probably goes into debt to pay for services that may include the provision of passports, visas, changes of identity, work permits and other documents, as well as advice on how to dress and handle interviews with immigration officials or police, the loan of money to show upon entrance with a tourist visa, pick-up service at the airport, land transport to another country or to pre-arranged lodgings, and names of potential employers. These services are not difficult to find in countries where out-travel has become common, and, in certain countries, formal-sector travel agents offer them under the table. Furthermore, for unauthorised migrants, no matter what job they get, under-the-table services continue to be needed after borders are crossed.

Migrating involves a series of risky judgements and decisions. Each step of the way, migrants must weigh information they're given against what they have heard from returned migrants, friends and family living abroad and news reports. Whether migrants buy a full package from a single entrepreneur or make a succession of smaller decisions, only one link in the chain needs to be weak for things to go wrong. Moreover, people who are over-eager to travel may do little research to test information given them and connive in situations that later make them vulnerable. The relationships are further complicated when intermediaries are migrants themselves. Institutions in countries of origin, including embassies and consulates granting visas, know that people are migrating quasi-legally or illegally. These countries have come to rely on money sent back by migrants. It is no wonder that migrants fail to view themselves as really "illegal," much less criminal. Intermediaries, many friends and families of migrants, are also not all criminal exploiters. Such networks have always existed, but only with heightened attention to the sex industry has this varied group been attacked en masse as unequivocally violent and cruel. Travel that results in selling sex is often positioned, in the mass media and amongst social crusaders, as different from all others.

Travelling to work in the sex industry

Selling sex may make travel possible, providing the money to buy tickets. It may be the way people from the countryside or small towns can begin to make a living in cities while they look for other jobs. Or it may be the most lucrative job available once people have arrived at their destination. All kinds of vendors, including domestic and sexual, follow soldiers on campaigns, pilgrims and seasonal and itinerant workers such as miners, seamen and farm workers. Mobility

has been associated with selling sex throughout history; some Europeans migrating to the Americas and Australia sold sex to finance their voyages in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These migrations were sometimes called “white slavery” to distinguish the migrants from formerly enslaved Africans. Avidly covered by the press, the idea that white women were forcibly prostituted created an international movement dedicated to its eradication. Research has shown that many or most of these women migrants (like today), simply saw a chance for new lives in other lands and were willing, at least temporarily, to sell sex to get a chance at them. Between the last upsurge of trafficking discourse and now, *the way* people migrated was not considered of great interest – in dramatic contrast to the present. Now the slavery idea is back in full force.

The sex industry, largely unregulated and outside official government accounting, operates through informal networks; to gain access, newcomers must meet an insider. The haphazard nature of this information economy is illustrated by a Ukrainian woman’s story:

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, made the passport, everything, the money and we left ... This guy went to look for work, where are the best places to work, where there are men ... He talked first with the boss ... said he was looking for work for us.

(Agustín 2001)

Many who work in the sex industry knew that their jobs abroad would have a sexual dimension, but they probably did not understand how they would feel or what working conditions would be. The commercial sex they knew about at home may have little in common with the options they have now: standing almost nude in a window or by the side of a highway for many hours, or doing hand jobs in a massage parlour all day, with little other social contact with clients. When part of the migration package included signing a contract without understanding what it meant, the value of foreign money or the language in which the contract was written, problems can obviously become severe. (But, even when migrants say that they were deceived, it’s not the sex work per se they want to get out of; often they would like to remain in the industry, but in less exploitative conditions.)

A friend proposed that I come, she knew a girl who could bring me ... 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 ...

(Oso 2003)

Paying off debts in the shortest amount of time is nearly every migrant’s primary goal, so the focus is on the future, not on past abuses. While the most tragic situations so often cited by the media and nongovernmental organisations come to light precisely because the police have become involved, reporters and activists seeking victims do not meet migrants who have not sought help, and some of them don’t want to be found and rescued. In many cases, family or friends have collaborated in deceiving or misleading migrants. Sometimes, recently arrived and disoriented migrants feel psychologically dependent on intermediaries, who then can exercise

too much control or influence. In the worst cases, migrants are threatened and held against their will, their personal documents are withheld and they are forced to have and sell sex.

As soon as I was brought to Turin I understood that I had ended up in a blind alley: I found myself with a madam who ordered me onto the sidewalk and wanted 50 million [lire] [€25,800]. It was a real nightmare, I cried all the tears I had.

(Kennedy and Nicotri 1999)

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

(Likiniano 2003)

These kinds of situations have prompted not only appropriate concern but also a moral panic that drastically generalises *all* cases as dire and excludes more complicated stories like those at the beginning of this chapter. The words *force* and *exploitation* are bundled into a monolith that sweeps away individual migrants' degrees of knowledge, will and desire. Some women, for example, *feel forced* who could physically escape; others start out doing domestic work but *feel obligated* to sell sex because of the differential in pay, in order to send more money home or pay off debts faster.

The difficulty is that the fundamental terms of the argument attempt to pin down enigmatic issues of will, consent, understanding and choice – the extent to which people travelling with false papers understood the possible consequences of using them, whether they felt love for someone facilitating their journey, whether they knew what a contract meant, how their parents' participation in a deal affected their judgement, if they realised the consequences of being in debt. Such epistemological questions are often unfathomable when involving people secure in their homes, but they become even more so when those involved have left their homes behind to face cultural disorientation on a grand scale through migration. It is also patronising to assume *people don't understand* that all projects to change one's life involve risks. Women selling sex in Nairobi were asked if they realised it could be dangerous, to which they replied that they were not selling sex in order to live safely but to earn money and be independent (Pheterson 1996).

The purpose of showing the many forms a migration can take is not to deny that some forms are dangerous and unfair but rather to avoid homogenising hundreds of thousands of women's experiences and reducing all to a single supposedly universal truth. It is, of course, harder to deal with multiple, confusing levels of innocence and guilt, criminality and victimhood. But if we try to do that, we find that sex itself is not the centre of most stories.

The sex in sex work

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)

Is it hard to believe that some people prefer selling sex rather than washing dishes, babysitting, or picking fruit? Consider that migrants, who come in all sizes, shapes and colours, and from

infinitely varying backgrounds, need to be flexible and adaptable to succeed. They often do not know beforehand how they will be living, and they may not know the language. They may fear the police and feel enormous pressure to pay back debts. Their past work experience and diplomas, whether white-collar or blue, are usually worthless. Migrant schoolteachers, engineers, nurses, hairdressers and a range of others find only low-status, low-paying jobs open to them. Many of them, from everywhere on the social spectrum and of every gender identity, prefer to work at least temporarily in the sex industry, in one or another of a variety of jobs.

Bars, restaurants, cabarets, private clubs, brothels, discotheques, saunas, massage parlors, sex shops, peep shows, hotel rooms, homes, bookshops, strip and lap-dance venues, dungeons, webcam sites, beauty parlors, clubhouses, cinemas, public toilets, phone lines, shipboard festivities, as well as modelling, swinging, stag and fetish parties: sex is sold practically everywhere. Where these businesses operate without licenses, undocumented workers with nothing to lose can easily be employed: this is a paradox of prohibition. Already working illegally, migrants may consider these jobs no riskier than others and even advantageous.

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)

On the other hand, selling sex is definitely not for everybody, and some migrants will take on worse-paid or riskier jobs to avoid it: many live-in maids in the first case, "mules" transporting drugs inside their bodies in the second.

What is it that outrages people about women who sell sex? Why are some sexual jobs considered worse than others? Why do some people think better-educated women with more job opportunities *can* choose to sell sex while poorer women cannot? What's going on when people in privileged countries set out to rescue women in the Third World from the sex industry?

The idea of good, and equal, sex

In this day and age, many people believe that sex should express love and that "good sex" must be loving. It is assumed that feelings of love intensify pleasure and that the resulting passion is meaningful and should lead to long-term, emotionally committed relationships. Departing from this supposition, other kinds of sexual relations appear to be inferior: anonymous, public, promiscuous, uncommitted, non-monogamous and commercial.

In the case of commercial sex – all the many varieties – convention would have it that the presence of money means a sexual relationship cannot be good because the parties are not equal. But what does *equal* mean here? One idea holds that sexual intimacy and money must be kept separate, because the person with money has the power to command and control what the other does. But that's not how people talk about buyers of other intimate services like psychotherapy, or services involving physical contact like chiropractics, acupuncture, manicure or therapeutic massage. Does anyone think these professionals' clients have all the control? The reply says that using the body isn't the problem per se but that when sexual organs are involved, everything is different, because sex is key to our innermost selves and when we have sex without love we alienate our deep personal identities. This makes sense to you or it doesn't, but cannot be proved. On such grounds all sexual jobs are decreed soulless, mechanical and damaging activities when the person providing the sex is a woman: this idea forms part of a larger theory

about violence against women that sees women as particularly sexually vulnerable to men who are prone to violence and invasion and who will, given the opportunity of paying for sex, behave violently or demeaningly. This set of ideas about women's sexual vulnerability must be situated in time and culture: not that long ago, vaginas were imagined to be dangerous and devouring and prostitutes to be aggressive, violent women who mugged and robbed potential customers.

The demand that sexual relationships be equal plays a central role in framing migrant sex workers as victims of trafficking. If it's assumed that women from other cultures, because they are economically poorer, are backward, passive, vulnerable objects existing only to be exploited by men with money, then all sexual exchanges between them can be condemned as inequitable. This only works, however, if no other conditions are taken into account: the possibility of strong, controlling sex workers and unassertive clients; migrants' hard-headed determination to get ahead; many people's ability to separate their sexual experiences into meaningful and non-meaningful or into work and play; many workers' affectionate or conventional relationships with clients.

Everyone does not feel the same way about sex: that's the pure and simple of it. Everyone does not think sex is utterly different from all other human activity, or feel their personal identity is linked to it, or think that enjoyable sex must always lead to monogamy or means they are in love. Or that money changes or ruins sex. The suspicion that non-loving, non-committed-partner sex is amoral is recurring at the same time that forms of commercial sex are proliferating. So although we tell a powerful story about sex and love belonging together, we also understand that people want other kinds of sex, and, in fact that present-day searches for personal identity often encourage sexual experimentation. Only the sketchiest data can be gathered when businesses operate outside the law, as sex businesses do in many societies, so we cannot revert to a body of facts that tell us how much exploitation and unhappiness exist relative to how much empowerment and wellbeing. We hear about people who buy and sell sex from our friends, acquaintances, the media, and sometimes through reporting on migration – which is where sex trafficking comes in.

To understand why headlines and social commentators scream that all migrant women who sell sex are victims of trafficking, we need to go back to the still hegemonic idea that the proper place for sex is at home between committed lovers and family. This idea is particularly applied, for not the best of reasons, to people from poorer and non-Western cultures, so that it's imagined that people uprooted from there are particularly sad cases, with women who sell sex abroad imagined to be saddest of all. That notion requires us to reduce migrants to pawns on a global economic chessboard where they have no will or agency at all. Even those who concede that poorer migrants may want to leave home and even prefer to sell sex often insist that they are not *really* choosing anything because capitalism's structural conditions make them into victims by definition. Add that analysis to an emotional antipathy to selling sex and you see why headlines scream.

Positioning most of the world's women as pathetic sexual victims does serve to make their rescuers feel important, and there's no doubt that some people are helped and saved by campaigners. But the neocolonialism required to ignore what so many migrants say about themselves – their experiences, feelings, desires – is a backward step for women's movements that originally hoped to de-link women and sex as an inevitable couplet. It fails to respect different cultures and imposes values *currently* considered the best, rather than looking at the personal or local.

Many migrants reject being defined as sexually vulnerable and in need of rescue and protection.

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

Laura Agustín

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*)

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 İlkkaracan 2002*)

Granting migrating individuals the capacity to make decisions does not mean denying the vast structural changes that push and pull them. On the other hand, it does not mean making them over-responsible for situations largely not of their own making, as global, national and local conditions, as well as luck, intervene in individuals' decisions. As far as the sex goes, it takes too many forms, in a huge proliferation of venues and cultural contexts, for any generalisation to be made (Agustín 2007). If you are interested in complexity and challenge, this subject area is for you!

References

- Agustín, Laura. 2007. *Sex at the Margins: Migration, labour markets and the rescue industry*. London: Zed Books.
- . 2005. "Migrants in the mistress's house: Other voices in the 'trafficking' debate." *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society*, 12(1):99.
- . 2001. "Mujeres inmigrantes ocupadas en servicios sexuales." In *Mujer, inmigración y trabajo*, ed. Colectivo Ioé, 647–716. Madrid: IMSERSO.
- Cabiria. 2002, 2004. *Rapport de synthèse*. Lyon, France: Le Dragon Lune.
- Cuanter. 1998. "Las notas características de la prostitución y su acceso a los Servicios Sociales." Madrid: Instituto de la Mujer.
- Danna, Daniela. 2004. *Donne di Mondo: Commercio del sesso e controllo statale*. Milan: Eleuthera.
- Gülçür, Leyla and İlkkaracan, Pinar. 2002. "The 'Natasha' experience: Migrant sex workers from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in Turkey." *Women's Studies International Forum*, 25(4): 411–21.
- Kennedy, Iyamu and Nicotri, Pino. 1999. *Lucciole Nere. Le prostitute nigeriane si raccontano*. Milan: Kaos.
- Likiniano. 2003. *Tráfico y Prostitución: Experiencias de mujeres africanas*. Bilbao, Spain: Likiniano Elkartea.
- Oso, Laura. 2003. 'Estrategias migratorias de las mujeres ecuatorianas y colombianas en situación irregular.' *Mugak*, 23:25–37.
- Pheterson, Gail. 1996. *The Prostitution Prism*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.