

The Conundrum of Women's Agency: Migrations and the Sex Industry

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In this article I begin with an overview of migration theory as it relates to those selling sex, including two key concepts: the feminisation of migration and labour migration. I then explore the interest that has arisen regarding the ways people leave their countries and arrive in others, in general, and then the particular concern for those who sell sex after arrival in Europe. I describe the ideas involved in the 'trafficking' discourse, the conflicts associated with efforts to define the crimes involved, the role played by the 'violence against women' discourse and the subtleties encountered in migrants' own testimonies that destabilise the rigid debate that dominates this issue. Although this subject would appear to be a major source of concern in the UK, little empirical research has been published. There is no reason to believe, however, that the situation will develop very differently from what is well established all over Europe, in diverse national and cultural contexts, and since the nature of migrant sex work in Europe is itinerant and transnational, the best way to conceive of the subject is in any case as 'European'.

What and Who is a Migrant in Europe

The first category in need of discussion is that of the 'migrant'. The UK has a longer history of immigration from former colonies into the mother country and a more apparently multicultural society than many other European countries, but the use of the term migrant is more recent here. Confusion arises from different usages of the word migrant in different national contexts.

Although statistics show that in many areas of Europe other *European* migrants are still among the most numerous groups within the migrant whole, the word 'migrant' tends to be used to signify non-European. Similarly, migrants who have now been 'assimilated' and made citizens of a particular European state are sometimes included and sometimes not in popular definitions and census exercises. Official government accountings, which vary across the European Union, do not publish statistics on immigrants *per se* but on different states related to immigration, such as visa status, residence status, municipal registration or permission to work, in a variety of bureaucratic categories. Many people refer to the dichotomy legal-illegal, but the possibilities are far more complex, taking in workers with definite assignments, transit migrants, suitcase traders, the self-employed, 'forced' migrants, those who are to some extent hiding and those who have escaped being recorded at all. In some countries, migrants move in and out of legal status repeatedly (Singleton and Barbesino 1999: 20).

Theories of migration have tended to concentrate on questions of causation—why people move to new countries. Some theorists focus on international structural conditions such as recomposition of capital (for example, in 'export

trading zones') or globalisation of markets, without considering the micro-level where individuals decide to migrate. Others look at the national-policy level or at household units. Still others consider wage differentials between countries, the focus being on individual decisions. Causes are given as attempts to make better or more secure money than possible at home, loss of land, recruitment by employers abroad, 'family reunification' projects, flight from violence, persecution and war and the 'feminisation of poverty'. None of these excludes the others; individuals may experience multiple such causes at a time and no single condition guarantees that someone will migrate. Nevertheless, considerations of specific migrations are often characterised by discussion of 'push-pull factors' (eg, see Massey et al 1993).

These factors are conceived as conditions on both sides of the migration, the point of origin and the point of reception. Thus armed conflict and loss of farming land may push people away from home, while labour shortage and personal networks may pull them to another place. The basic concept is unarguable, but envisions human beings as being acted upon, leaving little room for more subtle issues of desire, aspiration, anxiety or other states of the soul. It's questionable whether push-pull terms would be used nowadays for Europeans, who are less likely to be seen as passive subjects being acted upon and more likely as modern selves searching actively for better situations in which to realise their identities.

In most government accounts of migration, migrants are distinguished from refugees, who are imagined as having no desire to leave, as forced to by natural disaster, armed conflict or violent persecution and as going wherever they are offered asylum or temporary shelter. Official refugee-status is granted by the UN High Commission on Refugees to people fleeing from selected situations, but many similar situations are not officially recognised (wars not recognised as such, for example, because a struggling group is unrecognised by a national government). Individual countries may also make their own distinctions relevant to whether they grant refugee and other statuses to particular groups or not. Thus the identifying characteristic 'passport', and its corresponding state's status (first-world, poor, at war, non-EU), determines how national governments decide to call people migrants, refugees, guest workers, tourists, students or business travellers, and, according to which label is assigned, the traveller has access to more or fewer rights and obligations. In general, those whose problems are not recognised as meriting political asylum and who enter without work contracts come to be characterised as 'economic migrants'. In the UK, the large category available to migrants is 'asylum-seekers', which means they need to present themselves as victims or potential victims, not as able, healthy people desiring to work hard and become part of British society.

In the UK as the rest of Europe, much public discourse reflects the fear that avalanches of opportunists from the global south are set to overwhelm 'welfare' states, but migration research does not bear out this paranoia. If it were true that poor people simply moved to any richer country, then numbers of migrants would be enormously greater than they now are, given the poverty of much of the world. On the contrary, 'migrations are highly selective processes; only certain people leave, and they travel on highly structured routes to their destinations, rather than gravitate blindly toward any rich country they can enter' (Sassen 1999: 2). This idea applies in places of armed conflict and crop failure

as well as in crowded cosmopolitan ghettos. In classic migration theory, of course, the 'certain people' were assumed to be men.

The Concept of Feminisation of Migration

A lot of ink has been spilt in an attempt to prove that there is a 'feminisation of migration'. This idea is, itself, the product of a 20th-century gender stereotyping that consisted of ignoring women's movements while reinforcing the myth of the tough, lone male migrant. A study of 7000 English life-histories covering 1660 to 1730 found that more than three-quarters of country women left their villages, in greater numbers than did men (Moch 1992). A completely different kind of study, carried out in Africa to determine the geographic range of sex-related DNA, revealed that male chromosomes tend to be more localised, pointing to a rate of female migration eight times higher than the male, owing to traditional practices under which brides move to their husbands' houses (a common practice worldwide) (Stoneking 1998).

Gendered statistics are considered acceptably reliable only since 1960; these describe the number of foreign-born persons to be included in formal censuses of country populations, plus information on the number of formal refugees (remember that no one is counting 'migrants' as an official category). These estimates show that women and girls were already a large proportion of all international migrants in 1960, when they accounted for 47 of every 100 migrants living outside the country where they were born. Since then the proportion has risen to reach nearly 49% in 2000, 85 million females as opposed to 90 million male migrants. An increase of 2% over 40 years is too small to justify as 'feminisation of migration'. Regional differences exist, with slightly higher proportions of women migrants in developed countries, but these differences are still quite small (Zlotnik 2003).

Currently, changes in national economies promote the labour migration of women in particular situations. Structural changes at the global level must be taken into account, particularly industrialised countries' shift to a service economy while manufacturing is moved to developing countries, conditions that lead to informalisation and create a demand for migrant women (Sassen-Koob 1984); one aspect of this is the increasing dependence by multinational corporations on subcontracting, often to homebased workers (Pyle 2001: 67). And the International Monetary Fund has for decades been imposing policies of 'structural adjustment' on third-world countries who seek or need to refinance loans; these policies mandate severe cuts in government spending, with social programmes the first to be cut. Those who predominate in the social sector and who therefore lose jobs—as teachers, hospital workers, social workers and psychologists, among others—are largely women. These policies are also usually blamed for 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 more conventional solution.

Consider the following typical testimonies of migrant women in Europe:

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 2004a)

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)

It is an unfortunate commonplace that women are considered the 'least demanding' work force, so the fact that women predominate overwhelmingly in poorly-paid or unprotected labour is usually treated as a non-event. Mirjana Morokvasić, a long-time advocate of paying attention to women's migrations, considers that the general lack of surprise at women's undemandingness and concentration in devalorised sectors derives from the idea that their paid employment is not their primary role, an idea held by themselves and also by their employers: 'Their role, or role-to-be, of housewife-mother "justifies" their consideration as subsidiary workers and the level of their wages as complementary wages only' (Morokvasić 1984: 888).

Migration studies as a field have mostly excluded migrants who sell sex, contributing to the general lack of understanding and further stigmatisation of these people (Agustín 2005a).

The Concept of Labour Migrations

Much of the contemporary conflict in Europe about migrants derives from the change to a post-Fordist economy. Earlier labour migrations to Europe were often formalised and conceived of as temporary: Poles to work in mines of the Ruhr in later 19th-century Germany, Algerians to pre-World War II French industry and, the best-known formal programme to stimulate and control a specific migration, the German guestworker system carried out with Turkish labour between 1955 and 1973. These migrants were sought out and came with a contract, and for older generations of Europeans who may themselves have migrated within Europe (for example, the Spanish), this makes all the difference. Formal programmes may also be sponsored by governments of 'sending countries'. Most well known is the Philippines Overseas Employment Administration, which has been sending Filipina women abroad as maids for over 20 years, but Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Thailand also have such programmes.

In Europe in the present, formal programmes control only a small part of labour migrations. Most of the people being called migrants arrive without documents proving they have a job offer, and in a vast number of cases work in jobs outside the 'formal' economic sector. It may be that their professional qualifications are not recognised across country borders, so that a trained dentist or beautician has to work as a taxi driver or babysitter, or there may be national quotas on professional licences. Or, migrants may simply find that there are plenty of natives to fill posts they are themselves capable of carrying out in their new country; in Europe, immigration policy seeks to conserve these jobs for its own citizens, who continually voice the fear that jobs will be stolen by migrants.

For work to be considered legal, it must belong to the formal sector of the economy, that is, be regulated and included in government accounting. Legal migrant workers possess a work permit and the correct visa, by definition in a formal-sector job. However, migrants may also be working in the formal sector *without* a work permit, an illegal activity for both employer and employee.

Alternatively, they may be working in a job for which no work permit exists, in the 'informal' sector. An enormously wide range of economic activities exists outside the formal sector, many of them engaged in by legal citizens and considered conventional. Some of these occupations closely resemble formal-sector activities but do not fulfil health and safety regulations or do not operate in locations zoned for them; some are primarily forms of tax evasion; some are crimes that require a victim; others fit definitions of 'alternative' or 'solidarity' economies (mutual-aid, community projects, voluntary work, self-help).¹ Women are disproportionately represented in the informal sector, through their dominance in domestic service, sweatshop labour, home piecework, 'caring' labour and the sex industry, a trend many authors have described in terms of the displacement of wealthy women's domestic chores onto poorer women's shoulders. Of all these informalised occupations, commercial sex pays the best. Since all indicators point to there being a boom in this industry, it stands to reason that increasing numbers of migrant women should be found working here (Agustín 2004b).

Being 'Trafficked', and Other Ways of Leaving and Arriving

Itinerancy has been associated with selling sex for a long time in Europe, for example among those accompanying pilgrims and soldiers. Internal migrations from the countryside or small towns to cities to look for work are still common, and people from Europe used the sale of sex during their migrations to other continents, for example, those who travelled to Argentina at the end of the 19th century (Guy 1991). The idea that those women were forced to migrate was formulated a hundred years ago just as it is being now.

The phenomenon was called 'white slavery' in the west, in reference to white women supposedly captured and sold into prostitution. Avidly covered by the press, it led to the creation of international organisations and conventions dedicated to its eradication. Numerous authors have written about these events, relating them to anxieties about the nation, 'race', health and women's sexuality (Bristow 1982; Guy 1992; Irwin 1996; Walkowitz 1994) and comparing them to the present (Doezema 2000). Between the last upsurge of 'trafficking' discourse and now, *how* people migrated was not an issue of great interest, but Europe has become so concerned about the number of people who elude its border controls that the question is now addressed everywhere.

For people who want to enter Europe, there two official choices: to enter as a tourist 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. 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. Many who want to travel actively search for work-and-travel offers 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 temporarily enter the field in order to bring friends over to visit or work (Agustín 2003b). Marriage may be part of the

deal. They may play a minimal part in the migration project or offer a 'package' which links them closely to the migrant at every step of the way.

Without access to a charge account or formal bank loan, the potential traveller probably contracts a debt at the beginning of the journey. Services offered for money may include the provision of passports, visas, changes of identity, work permits and other documents, as well as advice on how to look and act in interviews with immigration officials (at the border, in airports, on trains and buses, in the street), the loan of money to show upon entrance with a tourist visa, pick-up service at the airport, car transportation to another country or to pre-arranged lodging and contact information for potential employers. These services are not difficult to find in countries where out-travel has become normalised over time, and in certain countries, formal-sector travel agents offer them. In either case, the debt is a typical element of migration, as noted by a Dominican woman running a flat offering sexual services in Pamplona, Spain:

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. (Agustín 2004a)

All these conditions characterise travels to Europe no matter what job is eventually undertaken, for people without a work permit. And the traveller's necessity continues once inside Europe, where to get a safe job with decent pay and without egregious labour abuses, she or he needs people to provide advice, addresses of safe and inexpensive places to stay, information on whom to trust and whom not and so on. Such contacts, or intermediaries, will provide transport, translations, information on labour and cultural norms, medical references and other, conventional travel advice. Migrant workers in any sector need this kind of help, as do tourists and business travellers. The entry of outside agents into the migration network attempts to redress the imbalance between the number of people seeking entry and the limited visas offered. A lucrative niche is thus created for those interested in making a profit from people's movements (Massey et al 1993: 450). Such networks have always existed, but only with heightened attention to the sex industry has the entrepreneurial side been attacked as morally corrupt and cruel, leading to abundant proposals for its criminalisation. Travel which results in selling sexual services is positioned, according to this view, as different from all others.

Travelling to Work in the Sex Industry

The sex industry, largely unregulated and outside official government accounting, by definition operates through informal networks, including people who facilitate the finding of jobs. To gain access to news of current employment opportunities, the newcomer must meet at least one insider, who may charge money for information and services or not. The haphazard nature of these contacts is evident in one 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 . . .

I worked in Logroño a month or so, I don't remember, then back to Málaga . . . He talked first with the boss of this place, asked if there was an opening, said he was looking for work for us (Agustín 2001)

There is now a small body of empirical studies with migrant women in Europe on the subject of how they migrated. Many who work in the sex industry knew that their labour in Europe would have a sexual aspect if not be directly 'sex work' or 'prostitution'.² They may not have understood, however, what working conditions would be like, since commercial sex at home may have little in common with what exists in Europe: standing nude in a window for twelve hours a day, displaying oneself at night next to a road or highway or performing multiple blow jobs, day after day, with no other social contact with clients. Other migrants have been overtly deceived, for example, 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. Moreover, people over-eager to travel do little research to test what they are told by vendors, allow false documents to be prepared for them that will render them vulnerable abroad and collaborate in other ways in their own deception. Nonetheless, an ethics within the situation is possible, as the following narrative illustrates:

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, 34)

Often enough, those doing the deceiving are family or friends. Sometimes, deceit and control are achieved without physical violence, through the psychological dependency recently-arrived and disoriented migrants feel. 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 'madame' 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, 36)

It is these worst cases that have prompted not only an appropriate public outcry but also a moral panic that erases all shades of meaning in other testimonies. 'Force' is made into a monolith that sweeps away all migrant women, and many kinds of force are bundled together: some people, for example, feel forced who actually *could* physically escape; others start out doing domestic work but feel obligated to sell sex because of the differential in pay. Moreover, people widely understand that any migratory project carries with it risks and dangers, as do many who sell sex: women in Nairobi were asked if they realised it could be dangerous and were told that they were not selling sex

in order to live safely but to earn money and be independent (Pheterson 1996: 18).

The purpose of showing the diversity of forms migration can take is not to deny that some forms are worse than others but rather to avoid homogenising hundreds of thousands of women's experience. Here is the nub of the conflict: If I now refer to those facilitating migrations as agents or entrepreneurs, I appear to condone the kinds of abuses committed by criminals. If, on the other hand, I refer to all facilitators as criminals, I appear to erase the agency of migrants who knew they would be selling sex or who prefer it to other jobs. This point leads me to the debate on 'trafficking.'

The Drive to Define

The lack of a coherent definition of the term 'trafficking' has inspired an avalanche of meetings, conferences and reports all over Europe (and, indeed, the world). In multiple sessions held in Vienna between 1998 and 2000, the UN Commission for the Prevention of Crime and Penal Justice argued over concepts of trafficking, trade and smuggling of human beings, with the emphasis often on women and children. Two lobbying groups tried to influence the commission on the definitions of words such as consent, obligation, force, coercion, deceit, abuse and exploitation. **3** In October of 2000, agreement was reached on two protocols appended to the new UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime which with a 40th country's signature last year has come into force.

The protocols produced two concepts: 'smuggling of migrants' and 'trafficking'. The gender distinction is clear, the 'trafficking' protocol expressing a presumed greater disposition of women—along with children—to be deceived, above all about sex, and a presumed lesser disposition to migrate. In the 'smuggling' protocol, on the other hand, men are seen as capable of migrating but of being handled like contraband (sex is excluded from this protocol) The opposing sides in the debate have both produced annotated guides to the final protocols (CATW 2003; IHRLG 2002).

Numerous authors have attempted to distinguish between the concept of 'trafficking' and migrations of people who sell sex (Alexander 1996; Skrobanek 1997; Mai 2001a; Agustín 2003a), but in the press and NGO fora, the focus on criminal abuse of migrants continues, and other problems often ignored, such as their persecution by the police, their lack of labour protections and other conditions related to the sex industry's 'informality'. The conflation of migrations that involve selling sex with 'trafficking' has been the subject of numerous critiques (eg, Irwin 1996; Doezema 2000; Pickup 1998). How do this conflation and the subsequent confusion come about?

The difficulty is that the fundamental terms being used attempt to pin down enigmatic issues of will, consent and choice: examples include the extent to which people travelling with false papers knew and 'chose' what awaited them, whether they understood the possible consequences of using such papers, whether they felt in love with an entrepreneur or agent, whether they knew what a contract meant, how their parents' participation in a deal affected their judgement or if they understood how being in debt would ultimately affect themselves. If such epistemological questions are often unfathomable when involving people secure in their homes, they become more so when those

involved have left their homes behind to face cultural disorientation on a grand scale through migration.

Thus statistics on 'trafficking' are unreliable, because definitions of the terms involved have not been agreed to. Methodologies differ, counting projects cannot be compared and activists may exaggerate or extrapolate numbers from little data. Several recent projects are setting up databases of information on 'trafficking', but given the lack of agreed-on definitions, the usefulness of the data is still questionable (UNESCO 2003; Protection Project 2003). The US government compiles its own data to publish an annual report on other countries' records on preventing 'trafficking', ranking them according to 'tiers' (US State Department 2004).⁴ The kind of statistical dispute that arises from this situation can be seen in the following Israeli example:

It is estimated that there are between 1,000 and 3,000 women in sexual slavery in Israel, according to a survey conducted by the Knesset's Centre for Research and Information. This survey aimed to measure the public attitude towards trafficking in women. However, debate rages as to the exact number of women in the sex industry in Israel. . . Anachnu Shavot (*We Are Worthy*) believes the figure to be closer to 30,000 (*Jerusalem Post*: 2004).

According to researchers' definitions then, when counting victims they may be referring to everyone who entered a country accompanied by someone else and who now sells sex; they may be referring to people who have agreed to denounce a 'trafficker' according to the local law; they may be referring to everyone who sells sex and gives money to a man or they may be referring to all 'illegal' sex worker migrants. They may be counting victims in countries of origin only, or only in destinations or both; they may be including transit countries, or not; they may be counting only women, or only women and transsexuals and so on. Finally, and most tellingly, it is doubtful that any researcher can gain access to many and diverse subjects, given the clandestine situations they live in. As John Salt says,

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. (2000: 32)

Part of this concern derives from the positioning of all commercial sex as 'violence against women.'

Role of the Discourse 'Violence Against Women'

Although 'trafficking' occurs into sweatshops, domestic service, agriculture, mines and other industries, the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) and the European Women's Lobby (EWL) believe that 'trafficking of women for sexual exploitation' is particularly pernicious, and define women migrants as sexually endangered, less capable of defending themselves and being archetypal victims (CATW 1991; EWL 2001 and 2003).⁵ According to this view, women who sell sex have by definition been deceived and recruited against their will.

The project to gain visibility for widespread, routine violence perpetrated against women—their victimhood—has been important to the advancement of women. The problem occurs when a temporary victim status turns into a victim ‘identity’ that implies becoming passive object of others’ actions. This may, however, be the strongest way for supporters to argue for rescue of victims, as Ratna Kapur 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. (2002: 5)

Consider the following text on migrant women from the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit at a London university:

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 2000a, 5, *my emphasis*)

Here the authors totalise a vast array of diverse experiences, ignoring the fact that many women do achieve the goal of earning a large amount of money in a relatively short time. This position advocates for a discursive change among feminists that would make ‘prostitution’ by definition a form of violence against women, with issues of women’s possible ‘consent’ being removed from any consideration. Similarly, issues of migration and commercial sex are fused:

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. . . NGOs report that most of the foreign women have been trafficked into [Holland] 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)

Here ‘facilitated’ migration, including conventional forms of help with documents, tickets and contacts, is fused with ‘trafficking.’ Similarly, CATW proposes that the concept of ‘prostitution’ be made equivalent to that of ‘trafficking’, a move evident in Donna Hughes’s testimony to the US Congress:

. . . unless compelled by poverty, past trauma, or substance addictions, few women will voluntarily engage in prostitution’ *and are thus* victims of trafficking. (2002, 2, *my emphasis*).

Here the act’s definition of ‘trafficking’, which requires that ‘force, fraud or coercion’ exist, is deliberately (mis)interpreted so that all people who help migrants become ‘traffickers’, including family, friends, lovers, agents and

entrepreneurs, and all kinds of help become 'trafficking'. This project is fully gendered, so that both the presence of women among 'traffickers' and male migrants who sell sex are both ignored.

Role of Migrants' Voices

When there is an obviously violent case of someone practically shanghaied and forced to work, everyone agrees that it is a crime. Consider the following testimony:

When I arrived the first day they took me sightseeing and photographed me by the Houses of Parliament, the big clock and in Trafalgar Square. But after that they locked us up. . . They looked me over and afterwards I was told I had been sold for £20,000. To pay off this debt, I would have to sleep with more than 500 men. . . (*Bangkok Post*: 1999).

Many migrants' testimonies do not recount this kind of experience, however, but rather a subtle mix of desire, intention, confusion and collusion. The following four selections illustrate this complexity:

(1) 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 in Spain, Lahbabi and Rodríguez 2000: 18)

This woman's trip to work as a domestic was facilitated by a friend, but her employers abused her. In her time off she was free to take a walk and thus meet a man who offered to help. The relationship appears to have involved friendship and sex. The man obtained legal papers for but also made money from the woman. She began to sell sex, it is not clear how. She wants to migrate again, she wants to marry, and her sister is looking for a man capable of facilitating this project. All parties mentioned try to take advantage of each other at the same time that they seek affection.

(2) 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, but here the work is very hard. 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)

This woman's migrant career also began as a domestic, work she found difficult and ill-paying. She tried out selling sex, is not mistreated and feels safe inside the workplace. This selection is significant because much of the 'victim' discourse about migrant sex work focuses on sites where migrants both live and

work, often presented as a form of slavery. As in this case, however, some migrant workers prefer this situation as preventing them from spending money, protecting them from being asked for documents, not having to do the work of looking for venues and maximising their opportunities to make money.

(3) A lot of the girls were Northerners who, like me, had hitched down to London with lots of high hopes, big dreams and fuck-all else. One or two had escaped from children's homes and crazy fathers who beat or raped them. These were the ones the media and all the 'experts' call 'sick victims'. They were nothing of the sort—they were kids who had the guts to do something about their bad 'home' situation: they ran away, and found sanctuary in the sex industry. That may sound absurd, but it isn't. Those young runaways, some as young as 14, 15, were independent; they had control over their lives, whereas back where they came from they had none. (Roberts 1986: 57)

Nickie Roberts here describes Soho in the 1960s, when she worked as a stripper and met many women like herself who had migrated from abusive family situations in the North. In this testimony, selling sex is made worthwhile when it helps young 'runaways' to find independence.

(4) 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)

This woman does not dispute the 'ugliness' of sex work, but is proud of what it has enabled her to do for her family economically. She also problematises European rationality, which impedes working in an 'organised' way.

There are many such narratives found in ethnographic research carried out among migrants selling sex, and each presents a superficial version of a deep story that must not be taken at face value. Nevertheless, there are enough references here to personal assessments of situations, desires and decision-making to make many researchers refuse to characterise all migrants as victims. This point of view can be described as placing a high value on personal agency and in particular as allowing the possibility that even people with problems may prefer to sell sex than do other work. This perspective also recognises the wide variety of relationships possible between migrants and their families, friends, lovers, commercial agents and even criminals.

Research shows that, even when migrants say they feel deceived, they often complain of the working conditions they are forced to accept, and not about the work being sexual *per se*; they prefer to remain in the industry, but in less exploitative conditions. 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 NGOs come to light precisely because the police have become involved, migrants who have not sought help are often invisible to reporters and activists seeking victims. This nuancing of issues of deceit and coercion does not imply a belief that no 'real' violence and abuse occurs during migrations, whether migrants end up working in sex or any other job.

The UK Context

Although general social concern about migrant women in sex work is recent in the UK, British organisations have belonged to two European networks since the early 90s: Europap and Tampep (European Projects for AIDS Prevention in Prostitution and Transnational AIDS/STD Prevention Among Migrant Prostitutes in Europe Project). In 1998, they together published a guide, *Hustling for Health: Developing Services for Sex Workers in Europe*, which explained how to set up a health project with migrant workers. A third European network, the European Network on Male Prostitution (ENMP), was founded in 1997.

One long-term health-promotion project found that the London workforce became more international during the 1990s (Ward et al 2004; Cooper et al 2004). Numbers of migrant sex workers mentioned by networks and the press must be understood to be very schematic, since all are not using the same method for counting, do not all have the same type of contact with the industry, do not speak all the languages necessary to communicate with all migrants or operate only in big cities. Most counting projects attempt to make tallies of nationalities or ethnicities, but these are also not reliable indicators, since migrants often give incorrect information and use falsified documents. Finally, projects may or may not count transsexual, transgender and male workers. UK statistics in 1999 were gathered from 17 projects, six in London. Central-London projects reported non-UK workers at about 50%, while outside numbers were minimal (1%-10%) (Europap 2000; Tampep 1999). Tampep's more recent mapping exercise showed that for 12 projects in London women migrants accounted for 63% of indoor workers, men for 66%, with figures outside London much lower. No projects reported finding migrants in street work.

Reports are often issued but rarely based on reliable research. The Protection Project's UK Country Report cited a variety of newspaper stories for its statistics (2003). Two other reports on the UK provided only sketchy information (van den Anker 2003; van der Kleij 2002). These and other reports all rely on a single Home Office study which attempted to estimate the number of 'women trafficked in the UK': unfortunately, since this study's methodology was unsound. Although its title is 'Stopping Traffic: Exploring the extent of, and responses to, trafficking in women for sexual exploitation in the UK', the major source of information was a questionnaire survey of 43 police forces in England and Wales in which they were asked about the extent of 'trafficking'. Other sources included interviews with 'senior personnel with the police, immigration, government departments and four NGOs', as well as with journalists. Press reports and estimates were reproduced without critical analysis, no migrant workers were interviewed, migration and 'trafficking' were not clearly separated and 'trafficking' itself not clearly defined for interviewees beforehand. The actual data uncovered showed 71 women 'trafficked' in the UK in 1998; however, the authors extrapolated in highly questionable ways to arrive at a possible 'real' figure of 1420 for that year (Kelly and Regan 2000b). Given these weaknesses, it is unfortunate that so many other sources, anxious for information on the UK, have cited this report.

The Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act of 2002 established the offence of 'trafficking for prostitution', which carries a maximum penalty of 14 years; at the time of this writing several cases have found against 'traffickers' in the UK. Eaves Housing for Women's Poppy Project provides direct support to

'trafficking' victims, including the first safe house for adult women of the type now common in numerous European countries. In Poppy's report on their first year, they listed having supported fully 46 women and housed 26 (Poppy 2004). In 2003, the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine published a report resulting from its European Commission's Daphne Programme-funded project on 'health risks and consequences of trafficking', which included the UK and five other countries (Zimmerman et al).⁶

By 2003 the social alarm over 'trafficking' in the UK was evident, along with the relative lack of concern over migrant women in general; put another way, the conflation between migrants who sell sex and 'trafficked women' was striking (Agustín 2003a). Part of this may be due to an issue mentioned earlier, that UK immigration law is constructed so as to recognise only 'asylum-seekers' as worthy migrants and all others as economic opportunists. The very category 'migrant' is new in the UK and does not carry positive connotations. Thus being a damaged victim or a desperate refugee is valued more than being a healthy person in search of work. The curious result of this policy implies a high economic cost for helping accepted migrants, while those in a position to contribute to society are excluded. The press publish routinely on migrant sex workers, mostly in sensationalist terms on 'sex trafficking'.

The dearth of research on *both* groups in the UK is odd. Kantola and Squires, in an analysis of legislation and policy debates relating to 'trafficking' in the UK, suggest that the scarcity of information and proposals may be related to the traditional emphasis on 'public nuisance' in relation to commercial sex (kerb-crawling legislation and anti-social behaviour orders). They also suggest that in the UK there may be more interest in the exploitation of children than in the situation of adult women, and that child-support organisations have been the most active protagonists in achieving visibility for 'trafficking' (Kantola and Squires 2002: 11). A recent book on 'child prostitution and child sexual abuse' claimed that these problems have been severe and neglected in the UK since the late 19th century (Barrett and Brown 2002).

Conclusion

The social fixation on the worst forms of travel for work and the worst forms of commercial sex need to be combatted by good, responsible research with migrants. This would mean *not* doing what most UK reporting has so far: *not* relying on police reports, *not* relying on informants who deal solely with 'victims', *not* confusing media reporting or project anecdotes with research, *not* conflating 'trafficking' and facilitated migration, *not* proceeding to talk about 'trafficking' with informants without first establishing a single definition that will be stuck to during the research project. Research on migrants who sell sex need not be undertaken less rigorously than any other. The frame used should not begin by victimising but take an open attitude to what experiences migrants may have had, both positive and negative. A migration framework allows consideration of all aspects of people's lives and travels, locates them in periods of personal growth and risk-taking and does not force them to identify as 'sex workers', 'victims of trafficking' or, for that matter, domestic servants or carers—all jobs they may have fallen into by chance and consider temporary. Other issues than jobs should be included in responsible research; for example, the social and cultural assets migrants acquire and the social networks to which they belong.

Research that relies on migrants' own testimonies considerably destabilises victimising discourses (Agustín 2005).

Migrants working without legal permission in Europe are living without basic civil rights: this is the crux of the larger social problem. Whether they are employed in industrial-scale agriculture, domestic service or selling sex, their labour is bought by Europeans. The fact that governments do not recognise many labour sectors in formal accounting leads to widespread abuse of those who work in them, and this abuse can come from employers, police and, indeed, any kind of opportunist out to make money, some of them outright criminals. The challenge for Europeans is to examine their own need and desire for these services, and their own unjust practices toward the 'others' they are employing in them.

Endnotes

¹The range of income-generating occupations excluded from accounting in the formal economy is too wide to be coherent, potentially including any kind of unlicensed service or sale.

²The following studies interviewed women in Ghana, Niger, the Dominican Republic, Thailand, Holland, Russia, Colombia, the Philippines, Italy, Spain, Turkey, Poland and Albania, with similar results: Tabet 1989; COIN 1992; Altink 1995; Skrobanek et al 1997; Casal 2000; Pickup 1998; Ratliff 1999; Nowak 1999; Kennedy and Nicotri 1999; Brussa 2000; Bonelli 2001; Signorelli and Treppete 2001; Agustín 2002b; Gülçür and İlkaracan 2002; Likiniano 2003; Oso 2003; Mai 2001.

³ These words do not translate exactly across languages, so even a final list of accepted words in English does not solve the problem.

⁴ The methodology for this report is described vaguely and cannot be assessed (US State Department 2004: 14).

⁵ A few organisations (Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women, Anti-Slavery International) 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 Partners included the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit of London Metropolitan University.

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