

Selling Sex in Order to Migrate: The End of the Migratory Dream?

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This article analyses the trajectories of female migrant sex workers in Switzerland, and discusses the ambivalently empowering and disempowering subjective experiences of the people involved in their varying local contexts. It shows that sex work represents, on the one hand, a chance for women to migrate legally, to find work in order to achieve their migratory projects or just to survive. On the other hand it highlights that the link between migration and sex work is emblematic of the cost of entering Europe today, and questions the extent to which migrating through sex work could mean the end of an improvement in quality-of-life through migration. This article gives a differentiated analysis of sex work and the functioning of agency, in order to grasp the mechanisms and conditions of this particular type of migration.

Keywords: Female Migration; Sex Work; Subjective Experiences; Empowerment; Vulnerability; Switzerland

Introduction

Migration has always been motivated by the dream of an improvement in one's quality of life. Nowadays, when migration has become a much more temporary and precarious phenomenon, one might wonder if this dream is still present. Why are people still interested in migrating under such precarious conditions? Do they still see the destination country as an 'Eldorado' despite all the difficulties surrounding their migration? These questions are even more pertinent in the case of migrant sex workers. With the increase in restrictive admission policies in European countries, which tend to authorise entry only to those who have specific skills—and especially are highly skilled—the dream of (legal) migration is nowadays only possible, for people coming from outside the European Union or Free Trade Association, through temporary migration or even through sex work. On the other hand, sex work somehow represents the end of the dream because, even if one considers it as just another low-skilled, female-exploiting job, and

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even if entry into the sex market is not enforced, the choice to work in this field is often motivated by a significant lack of other opportunities.

This new framework has led scholars to reconsider the migratory process from the individual point of view and therefore to pay more attention to female migration. During recent years, studies about the migration of women have mainly concentrated on how such migration is shaped by gender issues (Catarino and Morokvasic 2005); little attention has been paid to the jobs they are undertaking outside their country of origin. Sex work, in particular, has scarcely been studied either in terms of labour or of migration analysis (though see Agustín 2006, 2007). This gives rise to a number of questions:

- How do female migrants become sex workers?
- When and why does the passage from migration to sex work occur?
- What is the profile of these women?
- What is their life likely to become in the country of destination?
- How do they cope with this temporary situation as well as with their entry into the sex market?

The links between the migratory process of female migrants and their entry into the sex market raise other questions:

- In what way is this migration shaped by gender?
- To what extent is sex work, for women coming from countries outside the EU/EFTA, a consequence of the difficulty experienced in attempting to migrate to a European country in any other way?
- Conversely, in what way does sex work pull people to migrate?
- What are the similarities and differences in migration into sex work compared with other types of labour migration?

I answer these questions using empirical material from a study on female migrant sex workers in Switzerland (Chimienti 2007, 2009). The first section sets out the research design employed in such a sensitive field as female migrant sex work. This is followed by an overview of the general legal framework and management of prostitution and the sex market in Switzerland. The next section describes my interviewees' reasons for migrating and their trajectories. I then compare these with their motivation to work in the sex trade and their trajectories in this market, discussing the dynamics between migration and the sex work process through the links and discrepancies between these two key elements. Finally, a review of the whole migratory process leading to sex work helps to answer some of my original research questions. The conclusions plead for a more differentiated analysis of sex work and the functioning of agency in order to grasp the mechanisms and conditions of this particular type of migration.

Researching Female Migrant Sex Work

To better understand the lifestyles of my interviewees and the organisation of the sex market, I had to immerse myself in this milieu. I conducted structured observation in 33 establishments which, together, represent the different types of sex market. My 55 main informants were female migrants working in the sex market. In order to draw out the bigger picture of the organisation of sex markets, I also interviewed 23 members of associations, social workers and state or local employees, and 16 employers or owners of sex-market premises. The interviews with sex workers lasted on average three hours, and 10 informants among the 55 were seen during the entire period of the research, from 2004 until 2007. Finally I analysed documents which helped me to understand the regulation and management of the sex market—laws and regulations concerning migration and sex work, the police database containing the profile and number of sex workers, activity reports from associations working with sex workers, etc. These documents and my various interviews allowed me to understand the motivations and resources related to actual life in the sex trade and the contextual logics of sex work, showing the ambivalently empowering/disempowering subjective experiences of the people involved in their varying local contexts.

Beyond the profiles and types of informant, I used two other variables in this search to understand the organisation of the sex market and the agency of the sex workers. These are, firstly, two regions of Switzerland—Geneva and Neuchâtel—that have different legislation and a different sex market structure; and secondly, three types of work situation—strip clubs, champagne bars and massage parlours. Each type of prostitution occurs in a different type of premises, regulated by specific laws, as I will now discuss.

Legal Framework and Management of Prostitution in Switzerland

The practice of prostitution is legal in Switzerland if it is carried out independently, i.e. in a self-employed way. However, only women in possession of either a long-term residence permit or a renewable short-term permit¹ have the right to engage in sex work independently in Switzerland. In brief, the Swiss legal framework regarding prostitution is relatively liberal to the extent that it recognises sex work as a form of legal work. However, it does not go so far as to recognise it as a career, as it is not salaried work. From this, there follows a range of forms of prostitution reinforcing the distinction (as in any other economic sector) between indigenous and migrant sex workers and, within this distinction, between stable and temporary migrants.

Since 1980 the patterns of prostitution in Switzerland have changed, as they have in other industrial countries (Outshoorn 2004; Thorbek and Pattanaik 2002). Because migratory movement takes many forms, diversity within the sex market has also increased in terms of profiles, types of setting and services offered by the sex market, and its legal character has taken on an elastic reality. I have observed this plurality in studying the various forms of prostitution in strip clubs, champagne bars and massage parlours, as set out below.

From Hidden to Official Prostitution

- *Strip clubs*: according to Swiss law, strip or 'cabaret' clubs are public establishments where adult performances such as striptease acts are held. Developments over the last 10 years (Sardi and Froidevaux 2002) have demonstrated an increase in this type of establishment in Switzerland. The typical profile of an 'exotic' dancer working in a Swiss strip club is a 25–30-year-old, single, childless woman, from an Eastern European country, with an L-permit as an exotic dancer,² who has completed at least secondary education (up to 16 years old). Whereas 19 out of the 25 exotic dancers I interviewed were single and childless, six were separated or divorced with a child living in their country of origin. Eighteen came from Eastern European countries (the majority from Ukraine, Romania and Russia), a rate that corresponds to that quoted by the police for 2004 (72 per cent; n = 944). This group is the most educated, all having completed primary school education and six having a first degree at university. Officially, dancers work in strip clubs as employees and are not authorised to work as prostitutes. However during the past few years, strip clubs have become places of hidden prostitution. The dance or striptease act that is performed several times during the evening by the employee is nothing more than an alibi for obtaining the work permit, while their principal task consists of encouraging the customer, by various means, to purchase large quantities of alcohol for himself and for the dancers with whom he chooses to associate. This inconsistency between the law and *de facto* practice raises questions as to whether the strip-club dancers' L-permits protect them by facilitating decent working and living conditions under state control, or whether they promote abuse in which the state is complicit. The answers remain ambiguous (Dahinden and Stants 2006).
- *Champagne bars*: these are tolerated by the authorities even though there is no apparent legal authorisation for the services they provide. From a legal perspective, the women who work there are considered as employees of the bar and are not authorised to work as prostitutes. Furthermore, only foreign women in possession of a stable residential permit (i.e. a B- or C-permit) may be employed there. In reality, these venues are overwhelmingly characterised by the informality of the legal and working conditions therein. The perverse effect of this informality (absence of legal and social protection) is that it weakens and impedes these clandestine employees from defending themselves when confronting an employer. As in the case of exotic dancers, the income of bar hostesses is generated, in principle, by them engaging in paid sexual activity, and encouraging the client to drink. It is thus through prostitution that they succeed in saving money, while their other wages (their salary and commission on alcohol consumption) are often used to cover daily expenses. As heterogeneity is high within this setting (although most come from North or West Africa), the type of residence varies from complete irregularity of the stay (as in the case of undocumented migrants or rejected

asylum-seekers) to partial irregularity (as, for instance, a tourist). A small minority of my interviewees in this category do have a stable permit of stay because they are married to Swiss residents. Their profiles also varied: of those I interviewed who came from North or West Africa, two had had fewer than five years at school and were only able to count and read in a basic way, three completed primary school and three others achieved more than ten years of education. They are also a bit older than the exotic dancers, typically between 25 and 35 years.

- *Massage parlours*: these are private establishments (in contrast to strip clubs and wine bars) where prostitution is authorised. Almost all the women encountered in these places demonstrate a larger field of negotiation in the case of problems. Because massage parlours represent legal prostitution, the profile of the interviewees working in this setting reflects greater stability. All employees benefit from a stable permit of residency and some had acquired Swiss citizenship. This stabilisation occurred through marriage with Swiss residents; 16 had children in Switzerland and six had offspring in the country of origin from a former union. For this reason they are older than the sex workers of the two other settings—among the 20 interviewees, eight were over 40 years old—and come mostly from Latin America (especially Brazil), with a few from Asia (especially Thailand) which, before the 1990s, were the typical countries of origin of women working in the sex market. Finally, this group has the lowest educational level, with four having no, or no more than five years of schooling and eight having fewer than ten years; none had university-level education.

This overview of the legal and work contexts of sex work shows, firstly, that legality and illegality are mixed in this market. Secondly, we can see that this market not only involves mostly migrant and female workers, but it is also ethnically organised. Finally, there is a strong link between work venue, residence status and geographical origin of the sex workers, resulting in the following equation:

- most women working in strip clubs have a temporary permit of stay and come from Eastern European countries;
- the champagne bar equates to an irregular situation and women coming from African countries;
- massage parlours correspond to a more stable residency situation and Latin American or Asian sex workers.

This equation shapes the sex workers' trajectories; I now highlight the similarities and differences according to the categories of sex worker (exotic dancer, hostess in a champagne bar or masseuse in a massage parlours).

Migration through Sex Work: A Classic Migration for Economic Purposes?

Migration is generally explained in terms of push–pull, network or—more recently—emotional factors such as love.³ Migrant sex workers are no exception. What is interesting in their case is how these three elements coincide with a precise moment of their migration. Their migratory trajectories show that their situation of vulnerability constrains them to rational choice—hence the more their situation improves and is stabilised, the more they can afford to pay attention to their emotions. This emphasis on rationality is a consequence of their vulnerability, but it also helps them to deal with it.

Indeed the reasons to migrate among the women I interviewed are close to those of other types of labour migrant in other economic sectors, and concern economic improvement in their living conditions in the destination country and improved future prospects either in the country of origin or in another country. As with other labour migrants, family plays an important role in the migratory process (see, for instance, Efiouyi-Mäder *et al.* 2001). Therefore, the specificities of their reasons to migrate have to be investigated through gender determinants and within economic sector, both factors having an impact on the migratory process and migrants' trajectories within the receiving country.

The individual characteristics of the migratory project constitute one of the main specificities of female migrant sex workers' migratory processes. The aim 'to be independent' emerged as a *leitmotiv* during the interviews. The fact that their project is personal does not mean that they do not help their family (all the women are sending money to them) nor that they have a concrete project (most of the time they imagine they will achieve this in the future), but it does mean that their project always goes beyond the economic perspective.

Beyond this general trend among my interviewees to aim towards independence, four reasons distinguish the migration of sex workers: to avoid deskilling; to seek emancipation; to seek political security; and to improve their children's lives.

- *Declassification.* For those who are more educated (mostly exotic dancers from Eastern European countries), migration was also motivated by the risk of deskilling in their country of origin, and sex work abroad was perceived as a way to avoid this. Seeing their parents unemployed for years on end also served as a 'push factor'. Though activity in the sex market is always perceived as temporary, it does offer the potential to earn enough money to survive in the country of origin.

You know my mother is an accountant. She was fired and for four years she hasn't found any job. She applied for many positions, but it never worked out. She keeps trying. The situation for my father is worse. In my family my mother is both the father and the mother, she does everything [...] You know, I wanted something else for me. This work will permit me to get my degree and to save money. I couldn't have achieved that without coming here (NE/GE, strip club, 7, Eastern Europe).⁴

- *Emancipation.* Another motivation, mostly of sex workers from North Africa working in champagne bars, was their desire for emancipation. Facing several

types of gender discrimination in their countries of origin—for example forced marriage—they want to escape the lives that their mothers endured. If the countries of destination still reproduce gender inequalities, they are less obvious according to my informants, and allow them ways to self-define their lives, in other words to be more independent, as this informant demonstrates:

In Morocco I used to live with my family. I was with them, but I wasn't doing anything. For a woman it is difficult there, they are considered as nothing [*comme des riens du tout*], men are always first. My family did not agree with me leaving, they did not want it, but I came for work and to be independent (GE, Bar, 9, North Africa).

- *Political security.* For women coming from West Africa, political insecurity was also very often mentioned and represented the main reason for migrating. Indeed some of them, before entering the sex market, sought political asylum. Even if they knew that the likelihood of being recognised as refugees was very low, it afforded them one or two years in which to plan what to do in the event of refusal.
- *Improvement of children's lives.* Finally, in the case of sex workers in massage parlours, supporting their families was the primary motivation for migration. As these women are older and more likely to have children, their aim was not to improve their own human capital but that of their children, even if it meant being separated from them, as in the case of the following informant.

It is hard to be separated from my son, but it has to be so...I tell myself that I am doing that for him. I go back twice a year [...]. I call him every day. I have huge telephone bills, but it doesn't matter! (*Would you like him to come in Switzerland?*) No, I leave him there, it is better. It is good that he goes to school there, that he is settled. If he came here, everything would be different for him. He would have to learn another language, another country. In Brazil, he is just about to start university. I don't want to mess with his head [*to jeopardise his future*] (NE, salon, 8, Latin America).

These motivations for migration do not explain, however, why my informants began to work in the sex market after or during their migration, and to what extent both phenomena are interrelated.

Why, Then, Do They Choose to Work in the Sex Market?

If sex workers' reasons to migrate are similar to those of any kind of labour migrant—primarily based on the perspective of socio-economic stability—this purpose has a double meaning for sex workers. The actualisation of their migration is only possible for them through sex work, not only in order to migrate legally—as in the case of exotic dancers—but also in order to survive or to achieve their migratory objective in their desired country of destination. This is exemplified by the case of the rejected asylum-seekers I interviewed, who no longer receive financial assistance (i.e. who became irregular migrants), and by some undocumented migrants (who have always lived illegally or arrived as tourists in Switzerland). Their reasons for entering the sex market relate both to

the difficulty in finding even care or domestic work⁵ and to the necessity for them to earn as much money as possible in a short period of time, due to the uncertainty of their length of stay in Switzerland. The fact that, among the 55 sex workers interviewed, only three had already worked as prostitutes in their country of origin, supports the idea that migration led to sex work because of the lack of other opportunities, though this can lead to different interpretations. On the one hand, migration through sex work—especially if it allows legal residency, as in the case of exotic dancers—could be seen as a gendered opportunity that men coming from outside the wealthy European countries do not have (Piguet 2004). On the other hand, the unavoidable correlation between migration and sex work questioned the principle of equity with other labour migrants, who are freer to change economic sector.

The trajectories of both the migration and the migrants' work within the sex market are shaped by this chronology of prostitution following migration. If the structural context is determined at the beginning of the migration process, it does not shape the whole trajectory. Individual agency then becomes more important in how migrants deal with difficulties and opportunities, as the next section will show.

Trajectories of Transnational Sex Workers: From a Temporary to a Long-Term Situation

I started this article by describing the objective framework and management of sex work in Switzerland, which gives us an idea of the main difficulties faced by migrant sex workers. Let us now consider these issues from a subjective perspective, highlighting what sex workers consider to be their main problems and how they deal with them.

Common Difficulties

As with the reason for migrating and the motivation for working in the sex market, the trajectories of migrant female sex workers present difficulties the strength of which varies according to each person and situation.

Vague Information Before Migration

Despite the structural and individual differences, entry into prostitution is the result of a personal decision for all informants, reached because of the lack of other opportunities and interpreted by my informants as a possibility to improve their future life. The personal character of the decision does not mean that it was well-informed. Indeed, most of the time the real conditions of work were not known. For instance, most of the exotic dancers I interviewed were usually ignorant of the exact details of their activities. If they knew that the strip clubs were a cover for prostitution, a minority of them, who did not intend to prostitute themselves initially, thought that they could avoid it, not recognising that their low

salary as an exotic dancer and the high living costs in Switzerland would lead them to prostitution if they wanted to achieve their migratory project or at least save some money. However, many were aware of their future role as prostitutes:

I knew how the system worked. It is always tied to prostitution in every country. If you don't want to be a prostitute, you don't have to do it [...] I was in agreement, and I have always tried to earn money by prostitution (GE, strip club, 10, Eastern Europe).

But they were generally unaware of the fact that they would have to drink so much alcohol and the existence of a minimum scale in order to get their commission on drinks they persuaded their clients to buy.

Concentration in the Sex Market

The conviction that sex work will be temporary represents a second similarity among my informants. If some had the desire to stay in Switzerland, all were convinced, when they began to work in the sex-work sector, that it was a short-term situation. Despite this intention, even those who acquired a stable residency permit did not manage to leave the sector. At best they changed the type of setting in order to be self-employed (from strip club to massage parlour) and some of them managed after a few years to buy their own premises, allowing them to host other sex workers as well as to receive a commission on their clients. The difficulty in changing economic sector even after obtaining stable residency could be explained by the segmented character of the sex market, as in the case of other low-skilled economic sectors (Portes and Stepick 1985).

Changing sector of activity is complicated not only because of the economic structure or the low educational skills of some of the sex workers, but because their professional and social lives are concentrated in the sex market. Exotic dancers, for instance, are obliged to work full-time, and sometimes also work during their free time in order to increase their income. Some, however, are led to work more because they do not know what else to do: lacking a social network, not knowing the city in which they find themselves, the world of the strip club and its 'inhabitants' becomes their sole point of reference. The fact that they are in their early 20s and especially that their permit of stay is on a monthly basis—which might lead to a change of premises and region each month—increases their vulnerability towards the influence of the sex market.

The world of the hostesses who are mostly irregular migrants is also concentrated in the sex market. In their case it is the irregularity that pushes them into this situation, as it reduces their opportunity to meet people outside the market. They fear betrayal to the police and sometimes rejection by the members of their ethnic communities, as this informant said:

The main barrier in the sex market is that you only know prostitutes and that I do not have a legal permit of stay. Therefore I am afraid to ask for advice from anybody. I am afraid to be denounced and then expelled from Switzerland. [...] I would need somebody to talk with, somebody who could give me advice [...]. All of us need somebody to talk with, who would show you something else [...]. I live alone with my pain (GE, bar, 3, West Africa).

Even when they acquired a residency permit, however, as in the case of women working in massage parlours, their life remained concentrated on the premises. Working on average more than 9.5 hours per day, separated from their family (or a part of it), they face difficulties in creating a social or professional network outside this market. Their husbands are generally former clients and their friends are also sex workers. Their children born or living in Switzerland represent a vector to the 'outside world' and help them to find their work/life equilibrium, as this next quote illustrates:

It is necessary to work and at the same time to take care of your family. If you work too much, you might lose your family. It is necessary to do both. My husband lives in another canton. In the beginning I travelled every day. Now I work and stay here for three days and then go back there and stay for four days with my husband and my children. I work in another canton out of respect for my family, in order to separate the two lives. Here I am the prostitute, Lea. In the canton of Vaud, I am the housewife, the good mother and the good wife: I work well. They are two different things [...] (GE, massage parlour, 4, Asia).

This concentration in the sex market not only involves their lives in Switzerland but also their relationship with their family in the country of origin. The transit back and forth between the home and the host countries cuts them off from their former social network and prevents them from constructing new social links in Switzerland. If mobility between the country of origin and the host country could, in theory, help migrants to maintain their social links, to integrate better and to increase their social capital, the case of migrant sex workers shows that, when this mobility is forced and high, its effects are negative in terms of integration into society, social capital and well-being. This forced mobility (both transnational and local) is especially significant for exotic dancers, who not only have the obligation to leave Switzerland after eight months, but who are often obliged to change strip-club sites, and even cities, each month—creating the feeling of loss mentioned by the next informant:

I feel lost. I do not feel well neither in Bulgaria nor in Switzerland. I do not have a [proper, stable] situation anymore, even in Bulgaria (NE/GE, strip club, 7, Eastern Europe).

Undocumented migrant sex workers have even greater economic and social restrictions. Their irregularity and the fear correlated with it reduce their ability to form relationships. The permit to stay and the segmentation of this economic sector are, however, not the only constraints. Indeed, sex workers who benefit from long-term residency permits also encounter difficulties in leaving this sector. Because their activity in massage parlours is generally kept secret from their families, this closure is increased. As Simmel (1991) and later Goffman (1973) showed only too clearly, secrets have a social function, which can have, in turn, both positive and negative implications. In the case of my informants, keeping secret from their families their activity in Switzerland can be associated with both situations. On the one hand, they want to protect their relatives from worrying about them; lying about their condition or concealing part of it is meant to protect

both the families and the sex workers from the shame caused by the stigmatisation of sex work. On the other hand, these secrets increase not only the distance between migrant sex workers and their families, but also increase their loneliness.

When I feel good, I call my parents [...] It is mentally difficult to lie to them as they do not know about my work here. Sometimes, I do not call even though I need to hear their voices, because it is too hard to lie to them and because I am afraid of contradicting myself forgetting a former lie. (*Why did you choose not to tell them the truth?*) Would you tell your mother: 'Listen, mum, I am prostituting myself in order to help you'? It would destroy everything, all the help I gave to them (NE, strip club, 12, Eastern Europe).

As these different examples highlight, the women all suffer from this concentration in the sex market, which transforms what they intended to be a temporary situation into a long-term condition, and lessens their ability to deal with difficulties. As a consequence, those who have not experienced any improvement in their situation describe their lives as destroyed, feeling that they no longer belong to their country of origin, nor to Switzerland. They feel lost, not knowing what to do, nor how to change or improve their condition.

Lack of Solidarity

Migrant groups' reactions to the stigma attributed to them by the dominant population could be represented along a continuum from passivity to collective mobilisation against the imposed label (Goffman 1969). The ability of sex workers to undertake collective action is diminished firstly because of the heterogeneity within this market, which complicates their identification as a group. This heterogeneity stems from their residency status—from illegal or temporary migrant to sex worker who gained Swiss citizenship—and the type of work (some being employed as exotic dancers, whereas others are self-employed prostitutes and therefore more inclined to identify themselves with this activity). These two factors create not only a vertical hierarchy among women within the same type of sex work, but also a horizontal hierarchy among women working in different types of sex work. Secondly, their economic, legal and social vulnerability reduces solidarity, creating a 'survival' attitude, which is based on the rule of 'everyone for herself'. These two elements—heterogeneity and vulnerability—have become even stronger as the number of sex workers has increased in Western Europe through the opening up of the Eastern European countries, whereas the demand is likely to have remained stable. There is, therefore, increasing competition among sex workers as well as a reduction in the solidarity and group identification among them. Finally, it is not only the increasing number of sex workers correlated with the stable demand which creates less group identity, but also the acceleration of migration flows which complicates the professionalisation of the new sex workers due to the quicker turnover and increased heterogeneity. Hence the transfer of knowledge from the 'experienced' to the 'beginner' sex

worker cannot take place. For all these reasons, solitude rather than solidarity appears to be common amongst the interviewees, as the following quote shows:

I do not expect any help from my colleagues. They are not strong enough. I do not see how they could help me. I rely solely on myself [...] I feel lonely (GE, strip club, 4, Eastern Europe).

Lack of Future Prospects

One last important similarity in their lives concerns their health-related behaviour. If they have to accept the many risks linked to pressure from their employers and/or clients, they are at pains not to increase these risks by their own behaviour. They use condoms with their clients most of the time, avoid illegal drugs and try to dispose of their alcoholic drinks when the client or employer is not watching, etc. If they look after their bodies in terms of physical health and for aesthetic reasons (as their earnings depend on how much clients like them and value their appearance), they find it hard to protect their mental well-being and plan their future, and feel powerless to improve the situation.

I do not have any physical troubles, but mentally, I am stressed. Psychologically, this work is difficult especially when you do not know your client [...] I am afraid of the future [...] I am afraid to get too used to this work and not to be able to give up [...] I cannot see myself in few years [...] (GE, bar, 1, West Africa).

Specific Problems and Ways of Coping

Despite these few similarities, the world of sex workers is heterogeneous not only in terms of their socio-economic profile and background but especially regarding their working conditions, the problems they have to face and their individual agency. Beyond the heterogeneity of this market, I will show that it is characterised by ambivalence. Hence each case might be different and each resource might become a risk for the sex workers and *vice versa*, due to the strong economic and legal variability of this market.⁶ As a consequence, we see that the agency of sex workers not only increases with time, but also increases within one type of sex work (from the constrained type of prostitution where their agency is limited to the negotiated one in which the sex workers are more empowered). This means that the agency of sex workers, and conversely their vulnerability, are always liminal and therefore inclined to change.

Constrained Prostitution

The contractual conditions of employees in strip clubs reduce their autonomy. They can neither choose their clients—who they have to encourage to drink—nor, despite utilising a few tactics, completely control the quantity of alcohol they themselves have to consume. Although they are not forced to prostitute themselves, they are, somehow, encouraged by the establishment's owners in this respect. This is firstly because their salary as exotic dancers is reduced

through several financial sanctions being imposed (even though they are unofficial) by the strip-club owners. For instance, they are fined if they are late, if they do not 'sell' enough alcohol or even sometimes for no apparent reason. They also face pressure regarding their prostitution: the choice of the client, the frequency of the prostitution, the price and where it takes place.

Although entrance into the sex market is usually due to a lack of other opportunities, the exotic dancers interviewed do not describe their being led into prostitution as their main problem—almost as though they were already resigned to prostituting themselves. Indeed, they consider the high consumption of alcohol as one of the main difficulties partly because it is enforced—unlike prostitution, which is mostly voluntary—and partly because they cannot stand it and are not used to drinking it.

The real problem [in strip-clubs] is that you have to drink alcohol. Above all, if you are Moroccan, you are not used to it, because you have never drunk alcohol before. At home, women don't drink, you know. It is difficult. The first time that you come here it is hard, because you have to get used to it (NE, strip club, 5, North Africa).

The abusive deductions from their salary, or the commission on consumption, are the second main problem they have to deal with. Their incomprehension of the reasons for these deductions increases not only the need to avoid them, but also the strippers' emotional stress.

These internal and unofficial rules of strip clubs, in addition to their legal residence status, shape the women's whole migratory process and represent the main difficulties with which they are faced. I qualified the situation of the exotic dancers as a constrained setting, not because the prostitution is forced, but because the relation of power and the control of the employers over part of the activity of the exotic dancers limits their degree of manoeuvrability. Their power is reduced to using tactics that De Certeau (1980: 87) called 'the art of the weak' (*l'art du faible*). Their tactics are made more of guile, trickery and lies than of negotiation. Although built on a certain amount of know-how, the weight of these tactics is doubtful. For instance whilst the strippers cannot avoid consuming alcohol except by leaving this sector of activity, they do manage to decrease or to control their level of consumption. Another way to cope with their situation is to rest after eight months. After this period, their faces are sometimes puffed up from the alcohol and the few hours of sleep they get, even though they are expected to dance every day. Some stop even before this period in order to take a holiday in their country of origin. They use this time to 'recover their shape or health', as many said during the interview, implying almost that their stay in Switzerland made them sick and that working in a strip club could be pathogenic. When they are back in their country of origin they try not to drink and usually go to their doctor for a check-up.

Besides general ways of coping common to all interviewed sex workers, the exotic dancers generally adopt two different types of behaviour. Some tend to resign themselves to these constraints but do not adapt to them, either because they do not accept them or because they do not understand them. Their

resignation therefore signifies that they are no longer seeking ways in which to resist the conditions imposed upon them. Such *fatalistic behaviour* limits the development of personal resources, even though this could represent a necessary moment in which to rationalise their situation before finding ways to cope. Not to think means to avoid the suffering and other emotions, which are unbearable for them at this point.

I avoid thinking about my situation [...] I do not like the work, neither my life here. But I try to think about others things. [...] I do what they ask me to do and try in this way to avoid problems (NE, strip club, 3, Eastern Europe).

For others, their incomprehension when faced with the internal and unofficial restrictions of the strip clubs and their permit to stay, provokes anger. This feeling pushes them to react—becoming a driving force—by skirting around the internal and external rules of the establishment. In a sense they adopt *dissident behaviour* that employs survival tactics as a mode of action against external events. This attitude has several stages whereby the women begin to understand both the system and the rules, and learn to manipulate the former and disregard the latter. Their dissidence concerns the different dimensions of their activity in Switzerland and aims both to decrease its risks and to capitalise on it. Not respecting the law by prostituting themselves, hiding their earnings from their employers, throwing away as much of the content of their glasses as possible without being seen, and using their intimacy (their body but also their emotions) to multiply the number of clients, are among the ways in which to take advantage of their situation. This is only possible if they control their emotions, playing what Goffman (1973) called ‘a counterfeit intimacy’, but which I see more in this case as an ‘intimate distance’ (Varela 2001) or ‘cold intimacy’ (Illouz 2007); in other words, as an intimacy cannot be avoided but is controlled and rationalised in order that the woman should not suffer but be able to capitalise on the opportunities.

Currently I am seeing five men outside the strip club. Each of them represents a possibility to settle in Switzerland. One has money but he is married, another is single [...] (GE/NE, strip club, 7, Eastern Europe).

Despite the problems caused by their condition as female migrant sex workers and the limited opportunities to avoid or to cope with them, their trajectories show some improvement and some options, albeit minimal, against the reproduction of their distress. If few manage to stop working in the sex market, they all, however, manage to improve their well-being after a few years by knowing the internal rules of the strip-club scene better, by having learnt the language, and by having accrued some spare money which allows them to invest in their migratory project (buying a house, a small shop, in order to study or to help their children). If their higher human capital and the fact that they are younger compared to the women working in other sectors of the sex market are problematic when they begin to work in this market, representing a greater deskilling and less experience, these

then become advantages. Indeed, their higher human capital helps them to stabilise their residency situation through a permit as a student or through marriage—age and beauty representing, in that case, a form of physical capital that helps them to find a potential husband easily or at least somebody who can sustain them financially.

Liminal Prostitution

The difficulties encountered by hostesses in champagne bars bear some similarities regarding the internal rules of the establishment with those faced by exotic dancers. The prohibition of prostitution in these premises results in bar-owners by-passing the law through alcohol consumption, leading to similar risks to health and of violence for the hostesses.

In contrast to the very constraining strip-club situation, the working conditions, residency situation and even the legal basis of the establishment where the hostesses work are characterised by informality and an even more heterogeneous profile. Most of the women working in champagne bars began this work when their other legal migratory options failed. In this sense, champagne bars employ the less-professionalised sex workers. Champagne bars place people in an arbitrary context where prostitution is not authorised, and the sex workers, who have neither work contracts nor (for some) residence permits, can see their situation deteriorate as a result of unexpected police intervention, an unscrupulous bar manager or a violent client. This arbitrariness leads to two types of behaviour.

The situation, which is perceived as anonymous, unmanaged and misunderstood, may lead to feelings of *apathy*. In this case, the degree of manoeuvrability is almost non-existent as the workers are almost entirely restrained by external events. This group, which represents a very small minority among the 55 interviewees, was the least able to cope. These persons were in a destructive spiral, which evoked in some of them suicidal ideas, as in the case of the following interviewee. Since they arrived in Switzerland nothing seems to have improved; on the contrary the distance from their families, getting older and the exhaustion caused by the difficulties they are facing seem to have worsened their situation and even removed all their hopes.

I do not think. I forget that it is me. I pretend. I laugh when the others are laughing; I say what they want me to say. I do not pay attention to myself that works. I do not open the windows, I do not go out, [...] I avoid myself to think. Sometimes I tell to myself: 'It would be maybe better to die' (GE, bar, 7, West Africa).

The arbitrary setting is, however, also interpreted on the part of the hostesses as a sort of freedom that they, in a sense, succeed in managing (not without effort) to their advantage. These persons manage to 'surf' on uncertainty, making it their normality. Risk being their only certitude, they try to take benefit from it, negotiating their daily lives according to the opportunities and difficulties faced, as well as capitalising upon every positive experience.

I am like a tourist here. I just come to work here during the summer then I go to Italy [...] The work is good here and it allows me to pay my rent in Italy. I like my life better than when I started. I know better what I want and I feel free. [...] Before I had sex with friends for free and after a while they left me [...] Now I learnt. I do not have sex for free even with friends. It could be money or gifts, but I want to get something in exchange (GE, bar, 5, West Africa).

The advantages in this case are the result of resourcefulness and a sense of agency. Their outraged determination to pull through is one of the motivating feelings behind their *voluntarist* behaviour. As the above quote highlights, friendship or love are described negatively, as a risk of disillusion and economic loss. Like dissident actors, the voluntarists' well-being tends to be better. From a short-term perspective, their efforts led indeed to improvements, but these individual efforts could, in the long term, burn them out if the improvement was small in comparison with their efforts. I qualified this situation as liminal prostitution, because the life-world is at the border between paradise and hell.

Negotiated Prostitution

Women working in massage parlours usually represent the sex workers who made a career in the sex market, i.e. those who received a residency permit to stay and are allowed to work as (self-employed) prostitutes. This trajectory could be seen as a success story, as they benefit from the security of a regular resident status and work independently in the sex market, without the constraints imposed by employers. In order to assure their independence some of them preferred to contract a 'fake marriage', paying the partner in order to come and stay legally in Switzerland, but also in order to be free from the pressure of an arranged marriage.

From another point of view, this type of sex work embodies a failure to integrate in another sector of activity, once having worked in the sex market, this failure coming within the remit both of the individuals and of the welfare state. This opposite perspective should, however, be set against the opinion of the sex workers themselves. How do they consider their trajectories?

The majority of the interviewed migrants working in massage parlours acknowledged an improvement in their life in comparison with their arrival in Switzerland, especially those (seven out of 20) who worked before in another type of sex establishment. The security and independence they acquired allow them to organise their activity in a more convenient way—for instance in terms of schedule. Hence massage parlours are characterised by balance. In this setting, relations are negotiated (as much between salon managers and workers as between workers and clients) and, consequently, the sex workers may benefit from their situation. Their reaction and behaviour are in this sense more homogeneous. Possessing some sort of security, such as their residential permits, they can concentrate on future projections for their lives and work to maintain a balance which improves their well-being. In this improvement in their

life, the family plays a crucial role, but so also does the economic and legal security.

Everything is better now. [...] I have my family and I am old now [*she is 46*], therefore I do not work much anymore. [*She is the owner of the massage parlour and also receives commission from other women working in the premises*]. Everything is perfect for me: I have money, work, my husband who agrees that I work like that and my children [...] I am very happy even if I earn less than before [...] (GE, salon, 7, Asia).

The interviewed women who experienced what I called 'negotiated prostitution' were the only ones among my informants to describe emotions in a positive way and who seem to afford a stable relationship and love life outside their work.

Conclusion

In the title of this article I asked if migration through sex work represents the end of the migratory dream. On the basis of an analysis of female sex workers in Switzerland, there is no single answer to this question. Indeed, the world of sex work is not only heterogeneous but also full of ambivalence. On the one hand sex work represents a chance for women to migrate legally, to find work in order to achieve their migratory projects, or just to survive. On the other hand some scholars see, in the link between migration and sex work, the worst kind of abuse. Beyond the discourses on trafficking (whether this phenomenon be real or hypothetical), this link raises questions about the increasing cost of entering Europe today.

This cost can be put into perspective through what sex workers have achieved by migrating. After a few years, they do indeed manage to improve their situation in Switzerland, and some achieve, at least partially, one of their goals. For this purpose they cannot afford to listen to their emotions, but must act following rational choices. This rational emphasis in their migration should be understood as a means of survival. However, these improvements can also have serious repercussions. Migrating through sex work represents a more severe deskilling than that of other 'dirty work' (Anderson 2000), as it encompasses a higher potential for stigmatisation. The level of constraints is also very high: enforced mobility, destructuring of their lives, socio-economic difficulties after entry into the sex market, etc., which carry a physical and psychological cost. It might be interpreted as 'the cost of the first generation of migration' (Hoffmann-Nowotny 1973) or it might signal the limit of the migrants' agency.

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Notes

- [1] The so-called B-permit, authorised on the enactment of the bilateral agreements of June 2004.
- [2] The L-permit is a temporary permit of stay identical to that held by musicians and artists.
- [3] For push–pull theory see, *inter alia*, Lee (1966) or Massey *et al.* (1993); on networks see Bott (1971), Mitchell (1969) or Rogers and Vertovec (1995); and on emotional analysis related to the migration phenomenon see Mai and King (2009).
- [4] To ensure the anonymity of my informants, while still providing as much information as possible, I coded the interviews as follows: first the region where they work and where I interviewed them—Neuchâtel (NE) or Geneva (GE). I coded more than one region when I interviewed them several times and in different regions, as in the case of informants I followed throughout the whole study. I then indicate the type of premises where they work (strip club, bar or massage parlour), followed by a number denoting whether the person was one of the first interviewees or one of the last. Finally I give the continent of origin of the interviewee (Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe or Latin America).
- [5] This is especially the case of women coming from Africa who declared that, as soon as potential household employers discovered they were from a black minority, they lost interest in employing them.
- [6] The economic variability can be noticed, for instance, by the rapid closure of the premises. During my research, many premises were closed because they went bankrupt, changed location or were inclined to promote a strong turn-over among the sex workers. Regarding the legal variability, the comparative and historical perspectives show that European states’ national regulations on prostitution tend to vary over time in a cyclical way between an abolitionist and a regulatory perspective (Corbin 1978; Outshoorn 2004).

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