

Bodies for sale Migration and sex work

Corpi in vendita Migrazione e prostituzione

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abstract

There is a clear, though hidden, link between migration and sex work. Migrant women are often trapped in a vast range of transactional sex (of which sex work is only a part), due to global gender asymmetries and EU admission policies. Yet, migrant sex work also involves young men, unaccompanied minors, and queer people, in a complex apparatus formed by transformations of globalized capitalist economy, our (post)colonial cultural heritage, and male clients' gender identity. This reality asks for a theoretical analysis as well as a political-educational engagement in building our future multicultural society.

Key-words: migration, sex work, male clients

Esiste un chiaro (ma non sufficientemente indagato) legame tra migrazioni e prostituzioni. Per le donne migranti la prostituzione è solo una parte di un più vasto ventaglio di occasioni di sesso transazionale a cui spesso sono costrette dalla rigida legislazione europea sull'immigrazione e dalle asimmetrie di genere globali. Tra i migranti, la prostituzione coinvolge però anche giovani uomini, minori non accompagnati e persone LGBT, in un dispositivo complesso prodotto dalle trasformazioni del capitalismo, dall'eredità culturale del colonialismo e dall'identità di genere maschile dei clienti. Tale vasta realtà chiama la pedagogia a prendere la parola sui modelli di società multiculturale che si stanno oggi strutturando.

Parole-chiave: migrazioni, prostituzioni, clienti

Bodies for sale

Migration and sex work

Throughout Europe, recent decades have seen a sharp growth in the offer of sex work, as well as the demand, which has become selective, differentiated and specialized (Oso Casas, 2010). We should have expected a decrease in demand for paid sex, due to changes in sexual morality of our society but, contrary to our expectations, the sex trade has grown both in the number of people involved (as sex workers and as customers) and in the turnover produced (Serughetti, 2013, p. 99). Today, sex work occurs in a variety of ways, such as full time prostitution, a secondary job, an occasional, auxiliary income... So, there are streetwalkers, call girls, casual or floating prostitutes and sex workers in brothels...

The recent proliferation of commercial sex is also due to the increased presence of immigrant women.

1. Female (heterosexual) sex work

Free from traditional constraints (and social protections) that they had at home, pushed by economic needs and lured by the hope of a better future, women are mobile like never before. Yet, trapped by the persistent gender asymmetry of our globalized economy (Simone, 2010), they can end up working in the sex trade, specially in street work.

Although in many other Western countries, street work constitutes a small percentage of all prostitution, equal to 10-20%, in Italy it is estimated equal to 65% (Molteni, 2012, pp. 245-6). Only 10% of this type of prostitution concerns Italian women, the rest is made up of migrant women (Palladino, 2010, p. 160). Migrant women – mostly from Nigeria, Romania, Moldova, Ukraine, Albania, Morocco and Russia (Serughetti, 2013, p. 39) – represent, in fact, half of all our sex workers, and virtually the whole of street prostitution, the most visible and risky (Cole, 2010, p. 87).

The sex trade shows an internal differentiation, a polarization between

“high prostitution” (escorts, call girls, indoor prostitution...) and “low prostitution” (at street level). In our economic system, the symbolic value of goods (all goods, bodies included) overrides their “use value”. And identical female bodies are different to each other depending on their symbolic, exchange value, and street walkers are worth less than sex workers of the high market. In short, street prostitution is the “hard discount store” of the sex trade. And it is not surprising that immigrant women are over-represented in this sector.

In our society, migrants seem marked by a symbolic overexposure that makes them simultaneously foreign and marginal. This dual-connotation arbitrarily simplifies (migrants are marginal), then generalizes (all marginal people are foreigners), and finally naturalizes (they are this way by nature, independent of their actions) (Burgio, 2015). Consequently, the migrant condition – by implying inferiority, marginalization, and racist contempt – creates a fertile ground for exploitation, especially for women. So, transnational sex work has to be understood in the context of a broader web of forms of gender inequality that migrant women are subjected to.

The relationship between European men and migrant women is, in fact, asymmetrical and can include a wider range of arrangements called *transactional sex*, in which sex is exchanged for money, goods or services (Giorgio *et alii*, 2016). Within the vast area between real prostitution and arranged marriages, for example, women of poor countries can be also involved in *sex tourism*, with men of advanced countries (Weiss, 2016). Furthermore, women are at increased risk for engaging in transactional sex to be able to migrate, and later, female migrants can experience difficulties accessing legitimate employment in Europe, and transactional sex could become a main tool for survival (Giorgio *et alii*, 2016, p. 1123). In short, real prostitution is only a part of a wider sex trade, and the link between migration and sex trade is emblematic of the cost of entering Europe today, due to restrictive admission policies that tend to increase entry through the sex work industry: the choice to work in this field is often motivated by a significant lack of other opportunities (Chimienti, 2010).

The mismatch between migrant workforce and the restrictive policies of destination countries often push migrants to rely on illegal migration channels (smuggling) and to contract debts that then force them into prostitution and the enormous amount of money linked to sex work produces also forms of trafficking of young women, as it is well known (Abbatecola, 2006, p. 42).

Furthermore, if women often suffer violence (Ulivieri, 2014), women who work in prostitution suffer disproportionately more violence than other women: by pimps, traffickers, club owners, drug dealers, by-

standers, police, but primarily by customers (Rodríguez Martínez, 2015, p. 125). And dangerous working conditions, fears and experiences of xenophobia are also widespread (Oliveira, 2016).

However, it is a fact that – as research shows, today – the majority of migrant sex workers had decided to work in the sex industry in order to avoid a greater exploitation in other sectors (Mai, 2016). In contrast to the image of the prostitute as a passive figure, armless victim of trafficking, sex workers can be defined as agents of their migratory projects that decide to use commercial sex for instrumental aims (Oso Casas, 2010). Our notions of agency, exploitation and trafficking need to be viewed into the framework of migrants' needs, in the context of their increasingly precarious and marginalized lives. We have to recognize that maybe the *free migration / forced migration* dichotomy is a neoliberal, false and Eurocentric one, and that it is overridden by migrants' priorities grounded in the socio-economic realities of the global South (Mai, 2016, p. 6). Anyhow, migrating in an era of nationalistic panic around migrations and human trafficking is really complicated for migrants (Mahdavi, 2015) and sex workers – developing their migration between restrictive migration policies and an irregular and often dangerous employment sector – face increasingly exploitative working conditions. Furthermore, criminalization and marginalization of the sex trade exacerbate the extent of exploitation, and places sex workers at risk for increased levels of stigma, discrimination and harassment (Mai, 2016).

2. Male (homosexual) sex work

Transnational prostitution involves young male migrants, as well. The intercultural relationship between the Western gay community and migrant sex workers in our cities is influenced by the historic weight of European homosexual tourism, which is directed towards destinations like Cuba, Thailand, and Sri Lanka (where there are tolerated forms of male prostitution) or towards places like Maghreb where (because of their non-identity based conception of sexuality) young men are disposed to have sex with Europeans, perhaps in exchange for a small gift (Patanè, 2002, pp. 15-16). And, even today, much of the prostitution between men in our cities seems ethnically marked. Many sex workers are from Romania, Albania and Bulgaria (Oliviero *et alii*, 2010, p. 50) and we have recently seen Nigerian male prostitution take place in hotels and nightclubs, but the large majority of young men come from Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia (Di Nanni *et alii*, 2010, pp. 20-22).

Both in the case of sex tourism and in male prostitution we have subjects that have a (sexual) meeting between two different sides of economic asymmetries, of power and citizenship. It is an instrumental exchange in which the difference enacted is an ethno-cultural one that prevails over a hypothetical sexual symmetry. In addition, we often have the presence of many economic, ethno-cultural and... sexual borders since the migrants who sell sex do not identify as homo/bisexual but simply have an economic need.

At times, sex work is a difficult decision among a very restricted range of underpaid and casual work opportunities. Sometimes, these boys search a fast-track economic gain to remit money home and to fulfill their aspiration to a more hedonistic lifestyle (Mai, 2015a, p. 30). In the case of young men who are illegal aliens in Italy, instead, prostitution represents a last hope: the body becomes their only tool for survival. And finally, prostitution can be lived as a kind of “social cushion” that aids survival during times when other jobs are lost (Oliviero *et alii*, 2010, p. 64).

In these cases, we have a complex crossing of borders: the intercultural border and the one between sexualities, namely the one between a customer with a gay identity and a sex worker who keeps the penetrative sex role and so can maintain his “heterosexual” (or “normal”) identity, according to the understanding of the male identity in his culture of origin. It is not surprising that – within this multiple crossing of borders – misunderstanding, control, presumption, threats, ransom, and violence are present on both sides (Burgio, 2015a).

Our cities are well aware of migrant male minors prostitution, as well. Recent migratory processes are in fact characterized by an increasing degree of involvement of independently migrant minors, prematurely responsible for the economic life of their families.

These migrant male minors can be involved in sex market and, for example, the media have recently written about their street prostitution near Termini Station in Rome¹. Sexual desire of European men for minors is well known and produces sexual tourism in exotic places like Thailand or Brazil (Cifaldi, 2012, p. 269). Sometimes, prostitution of migrant minors in our cities is a similar case of child exploitation but, as Mai (2015) argues, many adolescents – especially unaccompanied minors – try to escape voluntarily from their infantilization (due to our social protection programs) and search self affirmation (and a match for their

1 <http://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2015/05/21/news/prostituzione_minorile_termini-114882538/> (ultima consultazione: 03/02/2017).

needs) in marginal or illegal environments, including sex trade. We have to recognize this reality, and take into account the fact that the passage to adulthood takes place in different ways across different social and cultural settings and a 17-years-old migrant can already be married and father in his country (for example, in some Roma groups) (Burgio, 2016). Prostitution (like other marginal activities) allows migrant minors to send remittances home, and ensures autonomy, entertainment and luxuries. In short, these young migrants selling sex are the effect of the interplay between globalization, the neoliberal restructuring of their home economies, cultural processes of individualization, and a new “libidinal economy”, centered on economic success and individual spirit of adventure. Compared to the economic marginalization of minors in the migrant labor market and the infantilization of the Italian “unaccompanied minors’ protection system”, prostitution allows these boys to feel desired, worthy (in a commercial sense), and able to build an adult masculine identity (through having sex).

3. Queer sex workers

As mentioned above, male sex workers can be involved in homosexual intercoursés, nevertheless they continue to maintain a “heterosexual” self-identification. In addition, there are LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) migrants, as well.

LGBT migrants live a difficult, peculiar condition compared to their compatriots. When, for example, they return to their society of origin to visit relatives and friends, their LGBT status, in the majority of cases, could remain hidden (Pozzoli, 2008, p. 39). But their relationships with their community of compatriots in Europe, with the group – *id est* – that is considered an extremely important resource for the individual in the migratory experience, are also complex. Surely being migrant and LGBT often forces one to use strategies to handle the stigmatization, and, searching for a balance between these various elements can bring about a kind of identity-surfing: one is migrant *or* LGBT depending on the context (Pozzoli, 2008, p. 50). Being LGBT migrants means dealing with both the host society in general and with the (sometimes discriminatory) LGBT minority population. The West is, in fact, attempting to “normalize” homosexuality (Kulpa, 2012, p. 382) and xenophobic and racist discourses have emerged within a section of LGBT people, too (Coll-Planas, 2011, p. 51). Furthermore, it is clear that the Italian LGBT networks center around an identity-based model, recently developed in the West. Many migrants with

homo/bisexual behaviors do not fully see themselves within our heterosexual/homosexual dichotomous model.

Given these difficulties, sex work can become a way (perhaps the only one) to experience one's desire: "for many migrant young men, selling sex [is] both a way to make money and a way to protect themselves from the stigmatization associated with sleeping with other men for free" (Mai, 2015a, p. 32), for example, and money can be used as a defensive instrument to negotiate a distance between their "livelihood strategies, their sexual orientation and the gender identities that they were prepared to accept for themselves" (Mai, 2015a, p. 34).

Transgender people, finally, suffer a hard-discrimination in the country of origin and in Europe, as well (Obert 2012). The gender transition has substantial cost and people difficultly employ a transsexual, in Italy. Therefore, without a protective social milieu, prostitution becomes a very likely choice for them (Marcasciano, 2002).

4. Transnational sex work: a complex apparatus

As we have seen, European sex trade is very complex: sex workers can be male or female, straight or gay, transgender or cisgender, sexually active or passive, and so on. However, migrant sex workers are united by the fact that they all are trapped by a triple form of oppression.

a) Socio-economic changes

Sex work is not a universal, cross-cultural practice, and we have to understand why it is so widespread in our capitalist societies. Cooking, doing the laundry, caring for children, the elderly and disabled people – that were previously carried out by the family – are now services available in the labor market. In the West, the service industry has undergone a large transformation and even sexual services are to be read in the wider frame of those care services that have now been commercialized and privatized. In our late capitalistic society, sex work is now part of the "personal services", thanks to a "recreational" conception of sex, part of a wider context of the "leisure economy" (Marchetti, 2011, pp. 40-41). Within this economic and symbolic panorama, the body is designed as a "personal asset" to be exploited through an "individual company" in a ruthless economy. In short, the body has become a direct productive resource (Pilotto, 2010, p. 43).

Furthermore, in our post-Fordist economy, jobs are increasingly precarious, atypical, non-standard, and many workers (and especially

women) are in a state of weakness and over-dependence, in a condition that could be called “prostitutional”. In this general context of the so-called “feminization” of labour, the body of a worker is often “sexualized” and the difference between sex work and “normal” work becomes fuzzy (Morini, 2010, p. 82). If over-dependence and precariousness are general characteristics of the labor market, migrants are particularly weak, because of their lack of a real citizenship.

b) *Masculinity*

The customers of female prostitutes are men (Bertolazzi, 2012). There is not, in fact, a real female-female form of sex work (Agnoletti, 2012). Men are also the customers of male sex workers (Rinaldi, 2012). Male sex work for female clients is statistically insignificant (Rossi, Ruspini, 2012), and the customers of transgender prostitution are men, as well (Obert, 2012). Finally, 93% of the minors’ customers are men (Cifaldi, 2012, p. 270). So, we can affirm that the entire sex trade involves male customers, and prostitution is a topic mainly related to men (Connell, 2000). Customers are, in fact, young or old, workmen, students or professionals, married or single, rich and poor (Abbatecola, 2006, p. 31), but one figure unites them all: their gender.

Between 10% and 20% of men make use of prostitution in the various European countries (Bertolazzi, 2012, p. 109). So, millions of men spend millions of Euros on sex workers encountered through newspaper advertisements, in massage salons, through the Internet... (Baldaro Verde, Todella, 2005, p. 107). Despite the variety of their needs, desires, sexual fantasies and satisfaction forms, customers seem mainly to look for symbolic forms of domination and control, id est for a sexual experience without a real bargaining within a frame of human relationship, according to an increasingly dominant male pattern (Serughetti, 2013, p. 109).

In addition to real sexual intercourse, men seek erotic dances, striptease, erotic call centers and... pornography, which is overwhelmingly enjoyed by males, as we know. Both prostitution and mass pornography (with its online, free distribution) seem, in fact, to have started a process of “global standardization” of male sexuality (Palmisano, 2010, pp. 65-67). There is, in short, a link between sex work and pornography. Through explicit images, sexual scripts and a shared imaginary, an abundant and widespread *sexual pedagogy* forms and teaches the customers to think that there are infinite erotic experiences and that anything is possible in the field of sexuality, provided they are willing to pay. Not surprisingly, then, a recent phenomenon are Web-based discussion sites that bring the customers together in an online community, where they share information

with others, review sex workers, and discuss their sexual services, viewed similarly to other commercial services (Horswill, Weitzer, 2016).

c) *(Post)Coloniality*

If we see interculturality as a simple problem of effective communication and mutual understanding, we blur the economic and political asymmetries between different cultures and, above all, we obscure the role that racism has in our society. Although it has no scientific basis, in fact, racism still generates important social, symbolic and legislative effects, and keeps its spread and its viability in non-scientific discussions, in political debates and in the media.

As Petrovich Njegosh (2015, p. 218) argues, race is not a natural barrier separating “white” people from the “colored”, but it is a fabrication, with its peculiar, shifting dynamics, which are simultaneously material and symbolic, and racism produces different effects, crossing the fields of gender and sexuality (Giuliani, 2015, p. 4). In particular, racism builds a racialized and sexualized vision of otherness, especially of female otherness, that becomes the object of an erotic and exotic desire (Burgio, 2017). Thus, the European whiteness incorporates the racial otherness, reifying and sexualizing it. At the same time, the European whiteness maintains its own difference and the distance from that otherness. The difference between a white customer and a migrant sex worker, then, is an intercultural topic: the sex worker on our sidewalks is for sale as an instrument of sexual pleasure and, at the same time, as “racial otherness”, as “cultural difference”, as a cheap “exotic experience”, such as an “ethnic souvenir” to collect (Serughetti, 2013, p. 188).

This psycho-cultural mechanism has its roots in colonial times, when an erotic imagery – centered on interracial sexuality – was born in Europe (Bellassai, 2011). This specific imagery, on the one hand, constituted a legal and cultural interdict, but, on the other hand, it aroused practices of desire, domination and violence.

For all the colonialist countries, in fact, colonization was a sexualized experience, and the colonialist ideology was animated and sustained by sexual opportunities provided by colonies, compared to a homeland often permeated by sexual inhibitions and a traditionalist moral (Stefani, 2007, p. 97). During the forty years of Italian colonialism, the great mass of our settlers was represented by soldiers, and Italian colonies housed many more soldiers than colonial possessions of other European countries (Labanca, 2002, p. 203). During our colonial war in Ethiopia, 1/5 (about half a million) of the young men between the ages twenty and twenty-five were sent there in 1935 (Stefani, 2007, p. 45); they raped many African women,

during and after the war, because they considered those women as an integral part of their spoils of war. For example, after the conquest of Asmara (1889), General Baldissera ordered that Ethiopian women were enslaved and raffled among Italian officers as a reward for victory (Stefani, 2007, p. 136). During the entire colonial period, then, “free” prostitutes were endemic in the Horn of Africa, reserved for soldiers (*sbarmuta*) or officers (*madame*) (Poidimani, 2009, p. 136). In short, there is a strong but hidden link between sexual desire and colonialism in the Italian recent history. The colonial image of Africa as a sensual paradise has survived in the post-colonial phase, and still persists in our national imaginary: for example, in the iconography of advertising where the black body is heavily used as a synonym of sensuality, or in the commercial success of Nigerian prostitutes in Italy (Burgio, 2014). (Post)colonial imaginary, however, does not work only with female sex workers.

In the case of migrant male prostitution, in fact, clients tend to eroticize imagined characteristics like the skin color, penis size, wild voraciousness, and uncontaminated authenticity of young sex workers (Rinaldi, 2013, p. 186). And, in my opinion, this fact is structured by that same exchange between exoticism and eroticism found in female migrant prostitution. Thus, it is not by chance, for example, that the vast majority of transsexuals that work as street sex workers are South American (Obert, 2012, p. 236).

5. Between cultures and sexualities

Sex plays a central role in our society and in the realm of practices and discourses that regularly and molecularly restructure our identity and our otherness (Rinaldi, 2016). In fact, sexuality is heavily dictated by the culture from which it stems, and thus comes into play during intercultural contact, involving various forms of cultural representations. When sexual practices and cultural representations of migrants interact with those of natives, they contribute to the forging of models of our future society. In the case of migrant sex work, sexuality crosses economic, cultural and citizenship borders. It shows how intercultural contact is not made only of theories, public policies and relational conflicts: sometimes, it has also a very concrete face made of pleasures and money, identities and sufferings, agency and violences... Therefore, studying the complex link between migration and sex work needs an intersectional approach, keeping in mind that migrant sex work is a result of a complex system made of different levels of power: gender, sexuality, race, citizenship, wealth, cultural capital, etc. Deeply under-

standing transnational sex work is the best way to protect vulnerable people, and entails our political responsibility as well as a cultural one because pedagogy – our discipline – is not only a science, but also a promise to keep with the society of tomorrow (Corsi, 2016, p. 42).

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