

## **Sexe et villes: la prostitution à l'ère des migrations mondiales**

Lillian S. Robinson

### *Résumé*

*Cet article décrit les rôles historique et actuel des migration liées au genre et du travail dans l'industrie du sexe en explorant les contradictions inhérentes à ces migrations, où les jeunes femmes des zones rurales migrent vers les villes des pays en développement alors que les clients de l'industrie du sexe migrent vers les destinations touristiques « chaudes ». L'auteure s'attarde à la nature économique de ces migrations féminines dans le contexte des deux principaux phénomènes qui les expliquent: les réfugiés et la traite des personnes. Les études de cas, surtout asiatiques, révèlent qu'une application généralisée de l'étiquette « traite des personnes » interprète mal la propre agence, la vie quotidienne et même l'oppression des travailleuses du sexe. En examinant les facteurs qui influencent les migrations des femmes en quête d'emploi et les conditions qui perpétuent leur entrée dans l'industrie du sexe, l'auteure conclut qu'il faut tenir compte des choix limités qui poussent les femmes, dans l'économie mondiale actuelle, à devenir travailleuses du sexe. Elle remet donc en question l'utilité, dans les pays développés, de criminaliser leurs activités, suggérant plutôt qu'il faut les protéger en élargissant leurs droits.*

## Sex in the City: Prostitution in the Age of Global Migrations

Lillian S. Robinson

### Lillian Robinson-an appreciation

*Lillian Sara Robinson, feminist scholar, Professor of Women's Studies, critic, and activist, died on September 20, 2006. She was born April 18, 1941 in New York City. She taught at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, SUNY Buffalo, University of Paris - Institut Charles V, and East Carolina University, among others, before becoming Principal of the Simone de Beauvoir Institute, the Women's Studies college at Concordia University in Montréal in 2000.*

*Lillian was a committed Marxist feminist critic. Her goal was to use feminist analysis as a tool for political change, by making visible the particular ways in which gender intersected with social class and race in the formation of social structures, and by encouraging intergroup alliances for equality. Lillian wrote numerous essays on feminism and literature, work and popular culture, some of which appeared in journals such as *College English*, and all of which were collected in her anthology *Sex, Class, and Culture* (1978). Her work appeared regularly in *The Nation* and *The Women's Review of Books*. She undertook an anthology of criticism, *Modern Women Writers* (1995) followed by a second anthology of her work *In the Canon's Mouth* (1997). During her years in Montreal, she published her final book, *Wonder Women* (2004), a critical study of female superheroes.*

*Following a lecture trip to Thailand in 1993, Lillian developed a strong interest in the question of international sex tourism and government dependence on women's sex work as an eco-*

conomic development tool. She joined forces with a collaborator, Ryan Bishop, and the two produced an article on the subject for *The Nation*, which grew into their book, *Night Market: Sexual Cultures and the Thai Economic Miracle* (1998). Lillian continued, both in collaboration with Bishop and on her own, to study sex tourism within international migration. In association with Montreal-based organizations such as SAWCC [South Asian Women's Community Centre] and the Immigrant Workers' Centre, Lillian concentrated her efforts on discussing the problems associated with the feminization of poverty and the exploitation of labour of immigrant women, especially those from the developing world.

The rights of immigrant workers, it must be said, were not an abstract issue for Lillian. As an immigrant labourer herself, she faced restrictions on her employment while in Canada, and felt limited in her political activities by her status. She experienced repeated official obstacles and delays in pursuing her application for permanent residence in Canada. At the time this article was written, she had been forced into a struggle with Concordia's administration, whose directors withdrew the offer of tenure with which she had been hired originally, and threatened to discharge her if she was not able to secure permanent residence within a year. The conflict was resolved only by her untimely death.

Greg Robinson<sup>i</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Greg Robinson is the nephew of Lillian S. Robinson and executor of her estate. He is Associate Professor of History at the Université du Québec à Montréal, and author of *By Order of the President: FDR and the Internment of Japanese Americans*. Dr. Robinson's article is published posthumously with the permission of Lillian Robinson's estate and the permission of *Recherches féministes* who published the French version of the article in their 15(2), 2002 edition of their journal.

*Abstract*

*The article traces the history and current role of gendered migration and sexual labour through an exploration of the contradictions inherent in gendered migration in which rural youth are migrating to the cities of the developing world while sex-customers migrate to “hot” tourism destinations. The author focuses on the economic nature of this migration within the context of the two main concepts used to understand women’s migration: refugees and trafficking. Case studies, particularly from Asia, reveal that a blanket application of the trafficking label misinterprets the agency, daily life and even the oppression of sex workers. By examining the factors that influence women’s migration for work and the conditions that perpetuate their entrance into the sex industry, the author concludes that there is need to take into account the limited choices in today’s global economy that compel women to engage in sex work. She questions therefore the utility, in developed countries, of criminalizing these activities, suggesting instead that they be protected by extending their rights.*

Well before its present global phase, capitalism was associated with the migration of the dispossessed, and the migration of the female dispossessed was associated with sexual labour. The process began with population shifts within countries, from rural areas to burgeoning urban sites, and continued with movements across international borders. In sixteenth century England, for instance, the enclosures that characterized the capitalization of agriculture created an underclass of vagabonds who survived by beggary, theft, and, in the case of women, prostitution. Thomas More describes the genesis of that underclass in strongly satirical terms:

Your sheep begin now...to be so greedy and wild that they devour human beings...[Landowners] leave no ground to be tilled, they enclose every bit of land for pasture...[I]n order that one insatiable glutton and accursed plague of his native land may join field to field and surround many thousand acres with one fence, tenants are ousted...[And] what remains for them but to steal and be hanged...or to wander and beg (More, 1518: 24-25).

The highways crowded with vagrants led to crowded cities where brothels took their place amidst “dives...wine shops and ale-

houses...[and] crooked games of chance” (More, 11518: 27), a migrant environment in which diseases, including virulent new sexually transmitted plagues, flourished.

As the mercantile system further swelled the population of Europe’s capitals and port cities, another group left the countryside and joined the descendants of the displaced tenant farmers and agricultural labourers to create an urban working class. This group was comprised of young people who came to the cities to become domestic workers. Practices that would now be characterized as sexual harassment—then called the “seduction” of newly arrived country girls—were common, and the sex industry that was growing with the cities provided employment to girls who were “ruined” and “turned off without a character” (letter of recommendation) as a result of their exploitation. Even for those who were not recruited to the brothels or the streets in this way, the oppressive working conditions for servants, “below stairs”, could make prostitution look like an attractive alternative. In the pornographic best seller *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, another recruitment strategy is revealed, as orphaned 15 year-old Fanny Hill, just off the farm wagon and seeking work as a housemaid in London, presents herself at an “intelligence office” (employment agency) and is hired by a bawd who has come to look over fresh candidates for her establishment (Cleland, 1749: 9-13; for an overview of sex and the servant girl, see Hill, 1996).

With the rise of industrial capitalism, women factory operatives were added to the ranks of those who supplemented or replaced their inadequate incomes by engaging in sex work, which assumed both organized and informal aspects. The puritanical industrialists who established the first American cotton mills in Lowell, Massachusetts, sought to avoid what they saw as the worst moral and material excesses of Europe’s Industrial Revolution by hiring New England farm girls who were lodged in supervised boarding houses and expected to attend twice-weekly church services. This system broke down within a generation at Lowell and was never prevalent elsewhere as native-born labourers were outnumbered by immigrant workers from Europe. In North American cities from Fall River, Massachusetts, to Montreal, Quebec, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some young women from the country migrating to work in the textile industry as well as immigrants from abroad seeking work

ended up in the sex industry (Dublin, 1979). Recruitment for the sex industry started at the moment of arrival. Just as Quebec farm girls were met at the railroad station by procurers offering an alternative to sweatshop labour (Bissonnette, 1991), Jewish girls encountered similar pimps with similar promises on the docks of New York. Those, by far the greater number, who were not conned into sex work but chose it over the sweatshops, usually did so after they had some experience of factory life and its discontents (Baum, Hyman and Michel, 1976: 115-16, 170-75; Weinberg, 1988: 92-93, 198).

In the age of globalization, the migration of women workers, including those who are or who become sex workers, continues in both its national and international dimensions. Women in poor parts of the world migrate from the villages to the cities of their own countries as well as emigrate to find work in richer countries, where they encounter resistance which was not in existence in the days when raw industrial expansion in the metropolis assured them a welcome, albeit near the bottom rung of the proletariat. In this context, sex worker migration, whether the women workers are deliberately moving to be part of the sex industry, are recruited into it, or are trafficked and forced, constitutes a situation of comparatively small-scale entrepreneurship that, perhaps ironically, mirrors the large-scale movements of global capital that brought it into being. At the same time, a parallel migration of almost exclusively male sex customers, most of them tourists and a few sexually-motivated immigrants, circulates from the developed world to sites where sex is a major leisure industry. Again, this male migration mirrors the transnational flow of capital related to mass tourism (Bishop and Robinson, 1998; 1999; 2002; Seabrook, 1996).

This article is an attempt to explore the congruities and contradictions inherent in the two parallel systems of gendered migration. Within this context, rural youth migration to the cities of the developing world and sex-customer migration to “hot” tourism sites inform the social and individual experience of international sex worker migration and have to be understood as part of the phenomenon. The focus throughout is on migration for economic reasons. This emphasis brings the discussion into confrontation with two key concepts in the study of female migration: refugees and trafficking. Women and children make up 80 per cent of the world’s refugees, as they flee the violence and

devastation of war, famine, and political oppression. In common with those sometimes dismissed as “economic refugees”, they often find that sex work offers one of the few available means of survival. The special situation of women refugees forced into prostitution after a desperate migration deserves further and separate study. Only some of the generalizations here about entering the sexual labour force, working conditions, or relations to the host culture and its functionaries apply to those whose initial migration forced them to seek asylum in safer, richer countries.

Trafficking is a more controversial issue among feminist scholars. Almost no one denies that there are women who are kidnapped, sold, or lured abroad with the promise of work outside the sex industry. The sensitive question is whether these constitute the majority (perhaps, as some maintain, the totality) of migrant sex workers. Because my own response to this question is decidedly in the negative, the cases on which I concentrate are those that show how a blanket application of the “trafficking” rubric misinterprets the experience—the agency, the daily conditions, and even the oppression—of many migrant sex workers.

In the contemporary First World narrative, the “migration” of workers is a transnational phenomenon. Workers from developing economies seek work in industrialized countries whilst developed country residents travel to the South often in search of pleasure. Although to be sure, developed country capital has undertaken a more serious and enduring mission in the developing world. A migration story that takes place within the worker’s native land, entailing movement from the country to the city, is seen as an “earlier” pattern because in the industrialized nations it took place many decades, and in some cases even centuries, ago. That kind of migration, however, is an important constituent of working women’s lives in precisely those places where First World investment has “immigrated” and taken root.

Southeast Asia is one of the regions where internal migration is most salient, with the economies of Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines notably dependent on an immigrant labour force. Dr. Lin Lean Lim, editor of the International Labour Office’s groundbreaking study of the “sex sector”, asserts that it is far from official policy to encourage the growth of prostitution:

In none of the countries we studied is it the intention of the government to promote the growth of the sex sector...

Still, policies to...promote migration of female labour for earning foreign exchange have contributed indirectly to the growth of prostitution. Also, by contributing to a rising disparity in incomes between rural and urban areas, development policies in some countries have caused the marginalization of some segments of their labour force (Lim, 1998a: 1-2).

This statement's tactful opening is belied by the subsequent remarks, which make it clear that the growth of the sex industry in these countries is in fact a direct result of the national response to global economic planning. Where foreign investment has been encouraged and plants established for the manufacture of clothing, athletic shoes, and toys, the "light industrial" specialties of these countries, a large and predominately unskilled workforce is required. Where mass tourism is the result of global investment strategies, a similarly large and unskilled labour pool is essential to cater to foreign visitors. Where tourism centres on sex, that potential labour force not only has to be extensive, it needs to be constantly renewable, because the employment qualifications are age and gender-specific. Where all this economic activity transpires, there is also a growing need for domestic workers in private homes.

From the point of view of national elites, this army of unskilled workers is most readily recruited from the villages. Policies have, therefore, been adopted whose overall effect is the further immiseration of already poor areas of the country, creating what Lim calls a "rising disparity in incomes between rural and urban areas", to force the younger generation off the land (1998a; 1998b). In Thailand, for instance, this has meant managing land-use, agricultural credits and water supply so that it is no longer possible for families to subsist on "subsistence farming" (Keyes, 1987: 157; Ekachai, 1990: 128; Bishop and Robinson, 1998: 98-99). The North and Northeast regions of the kingdom are populated by ethnic groups other than the Central Thais who run the country. Although subject to severe discrimination because of this ethnic and racial difference, the people of these areas are also regarded as exotically beautiful and girls from there routinely take top prizes in Thailand's many beauty contests. It is not hard to see how, in these circumstances, as subsistence agriculture was being deliberately disfavoured, young women would come to be regarded by national planners as a natural resource

(Ekachai, 1990: 125-129). Diversion of national investment into tourism has also resulted in the destruction of odoriferous and unsightly fishing villages, thus eliminating another traditional source of livelihood and forcing young people from these villages to seek *their* livelihood in the city (Ekachai, 1994).

Not only are the four unskilled job categories alluded to above—sweatshop operative, hotel and restaurant worker (at the level of chambermaid and kitchen help), prostitute, and domestic servant—open to young women from the country, they represent almost all of the jobs available to such women. From the point of view of the new migrants, all the available jobs share the drawbacks of long hours, hard work in unsafe conditions, an absence of collective bargaining, fringe benefits, and protective legislation and little hope for advancement through workplace training or seniority. The jobs often enable the worker to be minimally self-sufficient and thus remove a burden from the family back in the village. Typically it has been the sex industry, however, which most permits the young person to earn enough to send money home. Mary Beth Mills discusses the painful experience of sweatshop workers torn between using their small discretionary income to participate in the (eagerly desired) urban consumer lifestyle and being good daughters who send money home (Mills, 2001: 127-146). Sex workers, particularly those who service foreigners, are able to do both. Such remittances, small as they may seem by First World standards, make it possible for a family to keep younger siblings in school, dig a well, even build a new house, purchase seeds and fertilizer and hire a replacement for the girl's own labour at harvest time. One dream that remittances help fulfill is to purchase a water buffalo for the family, a work animal that helps make the peasant holding more productive (Bishop and Robinson, 1998: 106).

Many young sex workers have had prior experience in one or more other occupations before embarking on their present job. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, miserable working conditions in the runaway shops of Bangkok, like those that prevailed in the sweatshops of New York in the first decade of the twentieth century, make the factories unintentional recruiting stations for the sex industry. The difference is, that however much prostitution New York harboured in those years, it was not sex, but manufacturing enterprise, particularly in the garment industry, that constituted the basis of the city's economic life. In

Bangkok, by contrast, as in the rest of Thailand, the chief industry is tourism, and although the feeding and lodging of tourists create a great many non-sex-related jobs, it is sexual entertainment that brings many tourists and that demands a constant and abundant supply of fresh young women workers. In this sense, provision of labour for the sex industry, which is at the foundation of the national economy's dependence on tourism, *has* to be part of the state's economic planning (Truong, 1990: 158-189; Phongpaichit, 1993: 164). It should be added that, in at least one sense, the sweatshops of Thailand today are worse than those created by industrial development in North America, since they frequently operate on the infamous "three-in-one" model, where the shop contains production areas, storage space, and sleeping rooms in one building (Wichterich, 1998: 3-4; Werly, 1998: 33-48, 109-125).

Girls who move to the city may also enter sex work without a preliminary stopover in other trades. Some are attracted to it by friends' accounts of their earnings, which do not have to be exaggerated to appeal to a young woman from a poor family in an impoverished region. Direct recruitment by the sex industry is also common, with families being paid a sum in the form of a high-interest loan for which the daughter's labour stands as security (Phongpaichit, 1982: 65; Ekachai, 1990: 128). This form of recruitment is not normally practiced for the branches of the sex industry serving foreigners, which offer comparatively (though only comparatively) more attractive and remunerative jobs.

In the case of those migrants from rural areas who become sex workers after informal recruitment by friends or after working as unskilled labourers in other industries, a choice has obviously operated, albeit a forced choice among unsavory options. Some degree of autonomy is also in play, however, for those who are indentured to the sex industry by their parents. Although the initial choice may not have been that of the young woman herself, the fact that the vast majority of the women send regular remittances back home, payments over and above the "loan" from the recruiter, suggests acceptance of a forced choice little different from that of the voluntary recruits (Phongpaichit, 1982: 23, 118; Bounds, 1991: 138).

As Lim points out, the role of the sex industry is not an overt part of Thai economic policy and planning, and prostitution itself is illegal in the kingdom. Nonetheless, this illegal industry

is fully regulated by commercial as well as criminal law, and the police in the red light districts are there to protect *tourists* from exploitation (Truong, 1990: 154-56; Bishop and Robinson, 1998: 84-85). Tacit agreement about what is unspeakable, and hence must *remain* tacit, is breached only on very rare occasions in official quarters. One such breach occurred in the summer of 1997, after the collapse of the so-called Thai economic miracle, when two officials joked on television that the solution of the crisis called for “prettier masseuses”.

In this context, efforts to stem the tide of migration from the villages also become suspect. In an interview, Mechai Viravaidya, widely known as Thailand’s “Mr. Condom” for his promotion of the latex device, first for birth control and, more recently, for protection against sexually transmitted diseases, describes the projects he has undertaken along these lines:

I’ve gone to the business sector for help...We will...try to decentralize small factories, such as we have done with girls making shoes in the northeast as part of a subcontract with Bata shoes.

He goes on to explain that in the Thai Business Initiative in Rural Development program (TBIRD), each participating company adopts a village,

with the major objective of providing economic opportunities for the villagers so that there’s no migration. Obviously, migration means migration to any job, including sex work. The major emphasis is on young girls in the villages...In the villages we have gone to, not one girl has left to become a commercial sex worker because we told them about HIV and provided them with alternative incomes (Viravaidya: 10).

So, according to Mechai, the solution to stemming migration and especially migration to perform sex work, with its attendant health risks in a time of a global epidemic, appears to be to move the sweatshops to the villages! This approach is not merely short-term, but shortsighted, particularly since corporate motives for the move to rural sweatshops are less concerned with young women’s well being than with the health of their profit margin. The notorious Austrian-owned Eden Group, for example, which manufactures children’s clothing under exceptionally oppressive conditions (see Werly, 1998), met the late 1990s economic crisis by establishing a system of subcontracting of work to even

cheaper workers in rural Thailand, then met their Bangkok workers' protests by closing down operations in the capital altogether (Gill, 1999).

In many ways, Thailand's internal migration pattern typifies the experience of developing countries in Southeast Asia and around the world. But the intimate connection between the kingdom's sex and tourism industries also makes Thailand different from its neighbours. International Labour Office figures for the mid 1990s suggest that there is a thriving sex industry in many Southeast Asian countries, reporting that there are anywhere from 140,000 to 230,000 prostitutes in Indonesia, almost 142,000 in Malaysia and nearly half a million in the Philippines (ILO, 1998: 2). But the role of sex in the respective economies is not the same as it is in Thailand. Since the mid 1980s, tourism has been the *principal* source of foreign exchange in Thailand (Phongpaichit and Baker, 1995), whereas, in the Philippines, that place in the economy is occupied by the export of labour to other countries. Between 30 and 50 per cent of the Philippine population is dependent on remittances from transnational migrant workers, and studies have found that women in this situation send a higher proportion of their wages home than do their male counterparts (Chang, 2000: 130). Thus, in Sri Lanka, the export of female domestic workers, chiefly to the Middle East, generates an amount of foreign exchange into the GDP that is second only to that of tea exports (Enloe, 2000: 192-93).

A high proportion of the internal migration in countries that are not sex tourism destinations is directed in the first instance at manufacturing or domestic work or makes a stop in the capital as a way-station en route out of the country. The sex industry, in this manner, absorbs young women who arrive in the city intending to pursue other kinds of labour. The internal migrants to Calcutta, for example, are characterized by Carolyn Sleightholme and Indrani Sinha as coming from a "vast hinterland ...[containing] millions who live below the poverty line, and whence thousands of migrants flock to Calcutta every year" (1996: 17). They report that

[m]any migrants are brought to Calcutta as temporary labour. Calcutta's workforce is highly politicized and unionized...and some employers prefer to hire non-unionized labour from rural areas...These workers are given temporary work and shelter in temporary slums.

At the end of their period of work they are expected to return to their villages but after experiencing a regular wage, many decide to stay on rather than return to the poverty of their villages. Finding new work and new shelter is not easy and eventually economic pressures become too much for some who end up joining the sex trade (Sleightholme and Sinha, 1996: 18).

Looking at the situation from the other end, Sleightholme and Sinha point out that both the traditional exclusion of women from agricultural work and increasing landlessness among rural men, leading to massive male unemployment, underlie women's need to contribute to the family income (1996: 21). In addition to general systemic policies, Calcutta sex workers report gendered reasons for the poverty that has led them into the sex trade: being deserted or widowed, being victimized by child marriage, incest, physical or sexual abuse, and being shut out, as the daughter of a prostitute, from other opportunities (Sleightholme and Sinha, 1996: 22-30).

As in Thailand, national economic planning and employer self-interest function together to maintain the flow of internal migrants to Calcutta and keep the sex industry well supplied with workers. Yet, Indian sweatshops have already functioned to prevent some migration, with factories moving to the rural environment, where choice of occupation and possibilities of organization for change are even less available than in the cities. In these circumstances, if the working woman is "protected" from the sex industry, it is because she has been enlisted in a less remunerative trade, where her employment in the latest venue of the runaway shop helps maintain wages at the lowest level.

### **Interlude: Men on the Move**

Along with women's prior migration from country to city in the developing world, another phenomenon that informs the international migration of sex workers is, ironically, the "migration" of men to purchase sex. Tourism has become the world's largest industry, whether its size is measured in terms of net profits, number of employees, or geographical extent, and the First World male traveler on his own is an important customer of both the tourism industry and the sex industry. His presence in the sex-tourism site forges a link between that site and his own First World country, one that facilitates the migration in the re-

verse direction of the women whose services he has purchased. As Anders Lisborg puts it, “the influx of tourists to countries such as Thailand has, to an increasing degree, been followed by an outflow of local women. Sex tourist receiving countries, as part of the ongoing globalization process, have now become out-migration countries for local women migrating for work in prostitution abroad” (2002: 100).

The connection between tourism and immigration sites sometimes takes place through the trafficking of women, but also occurs through marriage, including many marriages whose purpose is to make it possible for the woman to pursue the sex trade in her husband’s country. It also occurs through sponsorship of the woman’s entrepreneurial migration. Some call all the marriages to facilitate migration “shams”, but they actually fall into two categories: those where a commercial intermediary pays a man a fee to go through the initial ceremony and keep enough of the sex worker’s things at his home to maintain the illusion of a relationship, and those where cohabitation, including sexual relations and housework, are part of the working arrangement until the woman has lived in the country long enough to qualify for residency papers (Kongstad, 1999: 3; Mannion, 1999: 3; Ru-enkaew, 2002). It should be specified that this form of marriage for the purpose of prostitution is characteristic chiefly of the countries that make up the European Union. In North America, the marriage-related practice that feminist commentators have linked to trafficking is the procurement of “mail-order brides” (Langevin and Belleau, 2000; Belleau, 2002).

It would be a mistake, however, to overemphasize the “demand” side of the equation by exaggerating sex tourists’ role as direct facilitators of worker migration. The logic of international investment is to seek out cheap labour and natural resources to exploit. When tourism is a focus of that investment and one segment of the cheap labour force is engaged in sex work, international customers follow their countries’ investments in search of the best sexual bargains. For sex workers, as for migrants in other labour categories, the next step is not to seek work in the place where jobs have moved to but to move oneself to the money source that relocated the jobs, rejecting in this way “the existing international division of labour and the international wage hierarchy” (Watenabe, 1998: 122).

From Paris to Honolulu to Bangkok, sex is a frequent

component of the pleasures on offer in international tourism destinations. These destinations also provide other cultural, scenic or recreational activities and many offer something else prized by travelers: bargain or luxury shopping. Those destinations where sex is a primary attraction, as confirmed by advertisements, gender imbalances in tourist-arrival figures and reports of visitors, include the Caribbean islands, East Africa, and Southeast Asia. With the notable exception of Thailand, these Third World sites were developed as resorts where sex was added to such other seductive sibilants as sun, sand, sea and (in the African case) safari. In Jamaica, where tourism is “by far the largest and most important contributor to the GDP” the government’s restructuring of that sector, emphasizing the environment and cultural heritage, for example, is also responsible for the growth in the past two decades of an international sex trade that is not a part of the official program (Mullings, 1999: 55).

By contrast, Thailand became a mass tourism destination as a result of World Bank recommendations made towards the end of the Vietnam War, during which the kingdom’s economy prospered through providing “Rest and Recreation” for American and other foreign troops. The R and R infrastructure was the basis for that segment of the sex industry serving an international clientele. Although this connection was not part of the formal recommendations, the situation could hardly be construed as otherwise with Robert S. McNamara, who had been the American Secretary of Defense in 1967 when the R and R contracts were signed, heading the World Bank at the time the mass tourism plans were laid out (Truong, 1990: 160; Bishop and Robinson, 1998: 98; Formoso, 2001: 58-60).

Tourists make up the great majority of male “migrants” from the metropolis, although some men actually move to the tourism sites to live as, what Jeremy Seabrook calls, “sexpatriates” (1991: 12). Whether they are tourists or sexpatriates, foreign sex customers’ presence in the host country not only forges the direct links that facilitate sex worker migration, but also helps create the conditions for that migration.

Lisborg explains the general relationship in this way:  
Among people everywhere in the world...[globalization] brings to their attention new ways of increasing income, from finance speculation among wealthy capitalists to finding new ways of providing for families among the

poor. It is within this perspective that the international prostitution-related migration should be viewed. Poor people from migrant sending countries in the periphery are through media and tourism daily confronted with the image of the wealth in the core countries...[So the network] goes both ways, from travel agencies which specialize in sex-tourism.... to international marriage agencies that promise to deliver women...to female migrants who end up working in brothels and massage parlors in distant destination countries (Lisborg, 1999: 2-3).

It is often by way of the international customers that sex workers learn how relatively depressed their earnings are, in global terms. Even factoring in a considerably higher cost of living (which these women are in no position to calculate accurately), sex workers in the First World must make a great deal more money and be in relatively short supply—otherwise, why would their compatriots be prepared to travel so far for cheap, abundantly available sex? The more negative the customers are about the women in general or prostitutes in particular in their home country, the more likely the foreign sex worker is to receive the message that there is an obvious and more attractive position for her in the developed countries.

Now that some male tourists are bringing their laptops to the bars of Bangkok to read to the girls what previous customers' Web-based sex diaries say about them (Bishop and Robinson, 2002), the globalized nature of the trade becomes apparent to the sex workers in a new way; it suggests the roundness of the globe and the possibility of migrating to places where the streets they would be walking are clearly paved with gold. Of course, the intention of those who share electronic nightlife narratives with the very sex workers who constitute the narratives' *dramatis personae* is not to make the girls subjects, rather than objects, of global communication, but, once again, their action can have this unexpected effect.

The article from which I took the preceding information about customers introducing the World Sex Guide into the sex bars bears the suggestive title "How My Dick Spent its Summer Vacation." In it, my co-author and I point out that the "surrealistic synecdoche of our title, which is closer to reality than one might think, takes material and discursive shape in the notion of sending one's genitalia on vacation and then describing

its adventures for public consumption” (Bishop and Robinson, 2002: section 38). The acknowledged, not to say willingly embraced, alienation of the male tourist body parallels the alienation of the sexual product on sale in the transaction, and the more ways it is conceptualized as a commodity, the easier it is to envisage moving it to where the buyers are commodified. Just as the customers, however alienated, cannot actually send their sex organs without accompanying them on the journey, so the alienated commodity cannot be exported by itself, but leaves the country in the form of an export of both labour and labour *power*.

### **Golden Doors: Transnational Migration of Sex Workers**

The migration of workers across international borders becomes a “problem” to be studied when the general influx of labour to wealthy countries is regarded as creating difficulties *for the recipient countries*. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when industrial development in North America called for the massive importation of labour—from Europe to the Northeast, the Midwest and the Prairies, from Asia to the West and from Mexico to agricultural areas—the “problem” of immigration really meant the problems *of immigrants*, their poverty and the issues of health, education, and culture associated with their immigration to a new country. It was these problems, experienced first-hand by the immigrants themselves, which were seen as creating actual or potential problems for the new country, which sought remedies that would address the problems without interrupting the flow of labour or materially raising its cost.

When unionization, much of it spurred by these same immigrant workers, threatened profits in such labour-intensive industries as textiles, the sweatshops initially moved, in the period just after the First World War, to the racially segregated and thus hard to unionize American South and then, increasingly since the Second World War, to Asia and Latin America (Enloe, 2000: 154-55). In the age of globalization, “heavy,” capital-intensive industry has joined the industrial exodus from North America and to some extent from Europe to the developing world. From the point of view of international development planning, the cheap labour is supposed to stay where it is and remain cheap. Immigration to the metropolis is encouraged chiefly to fill the jobs at the bottom of the wage scale—street cleaning and garbage removal in Western Europe, domestic work and childcare in

almost all rich countries—and strictly on terms dictated by capital. So a vast number of immigrant workers worldwide crowd into the social problem discourse with the adjective “illegal” tacked on in front. Sometimes indeed the words “immigrant” and “worker” are omitted and the adjective is transmogrified into a noun: the immigrant workers become simply “illegals.”

Sex workers face a situation of double illegality, since their labour itself as well as their presence is against the law in most of the countries to which they migrate. It is “due to...[this] typical double illegal character of prostitution related migration... often containing illegal migration and illegal prostitution...[that] there is a serious lack of research, statistics, and other kinds of data which can document the magnitude of the problem (Lisborg, 1999: 3; Lisborg, 2002: 101). The absence of reliable information, quantitative or qualitative, has created a conceptual vacuum into which has rushed a great deal of self-righteous hot air, placing all migration of sex workers under the rubric of “trafficking” (see Doezema, 1998; Murray, 1998).

In the European Union, the definition of trafficking states that it entails transporting

women from...[non-EU] countries into the European Union (including perhaps subsequent movements between Member States) for the purpose of sexual exploitation...Trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation covers women who have suffered intimidation and/or violence through the trafficking. Initial consent may not be relevant, as some enter the trafficking chain knowing they will work as prostitutes, but...are then brought into conditions akin to slavery (ctd. Kongstad, 1999: 1)

Unfortunately, it is a short conceptual step from the statement that “initial consent may not be relevant” to generalized distrust of women’s reports that they are *not* among those whose conditions are “akin to slavery” and that, therefore, they have not been trafficked. Thus, the 2002 report from Quebec’s Conseil du Statut de la Femme cites with apparent approval the authors of a study “*unique en son genre au Canada*” that overtly calls into question the explicit denial by Eastern European sex workers in Toronto that they were trafficked:

Les auteures de l’étude soutiennent qu’un nombre plus important de ces femmes ont fait l’objet de trafic car elles considèrent que plusieurs facteurs amènent les femmes

trafiquées de nier cette réalité...elles constatent que celles qui ont *de toute évidence* fait l'objet de trafic n'appliquent pas l'expression à leur cas. De plus, d'après les auteures, que les femmes considerent qu'elles aient fait l'objet de trafic ou non, elles *semblent* avoir été contraintes de se prostituer (Conseil, 2002 : 29; reference is to McDonald, Moore and Timoshkina 2000 : 10, emphasis added).<sup>1</sup>

It seems to me that it is incumbent upon feminists to try to understand the entire situation of migrant sex workers in its full economic and cultural complexity, giving respect and credence to the narratives of such women within this context. Thus, scholars like Marlene Spanger, Anders Lisborg, Prapairat Mix and Kamala Kempadoo, who interview migrants, or Paul Lyngbye, who interviews their customers, and scholar-activists like Laura Agustin, who is a sex worker advocate, contextualize organized immigration in a way that goes beyond stereotypes, recognizing instead "a fluidity and porousness in boundaries of 'forced' and 'voluntary' participation in sex work" (Kempadoo, 1998: 127).

From the work of such commentators, it transpires that sex workers migrate to the global North from the Caribbean, the English-speaking islands and the Dominican Republic; from the former Soviet Union, especially Russia and Ukraine; from South-east Asia, especially Thailand; and from Africa, including such sub-Saharan countries as South Africa, Uganda, Nigeria, Kenya and Madagascar. Because immigration has been constructed (or more accurately, re-constructed) as a First World "problem," there has been less academic attention paid to the movement of sex workers across national borders within the same region. Thus, Thailand not only "sends out" emigrant sex workers, but also "receives" immigrants for the industry, chiefly from Burma and China (Formoso, 2001: 58), while India, despite its enormous population, also receives immigrant sex workers from Bangladesh and Nepal (Sleightholme and Sinha, 1996). Women also migrate across many borders within the regions of the Caribbean and Latin America (Kempadoo, 1998: 129). .

The Philippines is the chief labour-exporting country whose government organizes the exporting of workers through formal arrangements with the importing nations as well as recruitment, documentation and even training of workers going abroad. The vast majority of these workers are women who, whatever

their educational level and professional orientation, are sent to other countries through official programs like Canada's notorious "live-in caregiver" scheme. Despite the role of both governments and the fact that this labour is gender-based but not usually sexual in nature, Canada's own national commission on the status of women (*Status of Women/Condition feminine Canada*) assimilates this commerce merely as female labour, as it does with the trade in "mail-order brides," another enterprise in which the Philippines figures disproportionately to trafficking (Langevin and Belleau, 2000; Belleau, 2002).

In addition to encouraging the export of domestic workers, the Philippine government does a lively business in the export of "entertainers," chiefly to Japan. State-approved schools train young dancers, while the government administers examinations and certifies them for work abroad (Boti and Smith, 1997). It would be surprising if none of the participants in such a program ended up in the sex industry, given that, in addition to supplying sex tourists to Southeast Asia, Japan is a known importer of sex workers. In any event, there is no clear line of demarcation between the clubs that employ dancers strictly to perform on stage and those where intercourse, social and sexual, with customers is intrinsic to the job description. For this general reason, as well as the existence of specific violations, the Philippine anti-trafficking organization *Gabriela* has openly accused the government of "feeding young Filipinas into the sex industry in Japan" (Chang, 2000: 143-144).

Although *Condition feminine Canada* indicts the Philippines for trafficking its own nationals in the interest of securing foreign exchange, most commentators distinguish a government's legal and official activities from those of "real" traffickers seeking to exploit the migrant labour market. For the most part, however, those in every country who facilitate the migration of workers are no more culpable than the Philippine government and may be considerably less so.

Lisborg identifies three methods by which Thai sex workers migrate to Denmark. He calls them, respectively, Type A, returning with a tourist, Type B, migration through transnational social networks, and Type C, migration through agents and commercial networks (2002: 111-116). For migration that entails leaving with or joining a tourist, the destination is random, depending on the country of origin of a tourist prepared to take a

sex worker home (Lisborg, 2002: 18). Those who migrate in this way, like those who make use of contacts with compatriots already established in the host country, are typically “strong entrepreneurs who relatively voluntarily have entered prostitution in Denmark” after having first been part of the internal migration from poor rural areas to red-light districts of Bangkok or the resort towns (Lisborg, 1999: 21).

It is the third category that is the most suspect from a feminist perspective:

In this category, the women migrate by the use of agents who do the work for financial gain.... The women who migrate through these commercial networks have no social networks abroad they could have drawn upon. Some have not even thought of migration or sex work, until agents contact them and lure them with promises of a rich future abroad...[However] the expectations of migration and a life abroad have spread through the media and former migrants to even the most remote areas. Even without having any kind of social network abroad, people wishing to migrate now often know of agents who will be able to facilitate migration. In this way, migration to distant unknown countries has become a livelihood-strategy for most relatively poor rural people (Lisborg, 2002: 114-15).

Laura Agustin is probably the most vehement critic of a “trafficking” analysis that denies the agency and autonomy of migrant sex workers. Her position is that for “poor Third World women, the jobs available at home are often domestic and sexual. Since the same two jobs are available in Europe and paid much better, traveling makes sense” (2003: 1). The problem then is how to travel. Agustin tells of standing on street corners in Santo Domingo

where women are *trying* to be approached by people who can help them travel, comparing the offers made to them. One woman...described for me the deals she’d so far been offered and turned down, since she was waiting for just the right one. From her point of view, she is not ‘being trafficked’; she is using travel agents, the only problem being that she can’t use standard commercial ones. But she sees herself as a smart consumer (Agustin, 1999: 1, emphasis added).

Terms like “strong entrepreneur” and “smart consumer,” value-laden though they may be, are not meant to whitewash the system, but rather are attempts to find a way of representing the “structural coercion” (Lisborg, 1999: 5) at the heart of the migrant worker’s experience, where the feminization of poverty plus migration adds up to an “increasing number of migrant women who end up in the so-called 3D jobs (dirty, difficult and dangerous) exposing them to considerable risk of economic exploitation and sexual abuse” (1999: 2). But the primary exploitation in this case is not on the part of “travel agents” profiting from sex workers’ desire to find better-paid work. As Prapairat Ratanaloan Mix summarizes the situation: “While some Thai women are indeed victims [of traffickers]...many...make conscious choices and plan their lives carefully in ways that often work to their benefit. These women have significant control over their lives, well-defined life goals, and substantial knowledge of how to achieve these goals (1999: 86). They are, in short, “social actors capable of accounting for their conduct” (Ruenkaew, 2002: 69).

Although from the perspective of the receiving country, migrant sex workers constitute part of the “immigration problem,” the prefix is inappropriate in the majority of cases. They are not immigrants, but simply migrants. Not only have most transnational migrants to the First World already moved from rural to urban areas in their own countries (Ruenkaew, 2002: 116), many migrate from one foreign destination to one or more others (Ruenkaew, 2002: 116). Many, especially within the European Union, live legally in one foreign country and prostitute in another (Spanger, 2002: 123-124) and although the residency cards they obtain by various means are called “permanent”, many hope to return to live in their home countries (Lisborg, 2002: 109-110). For these reasons, as well as due to the nature of their labour, migrant sex workers rarely attempt assimilation into the host society, but retain their only close personal and cultural ties with compatriots who share their situation. This means that the dialect, the food, the music, the religious observance, even the toiletries of home remain the stuff of their daily lives, whereas the new country’s culture is not one into which they are invited or are eager to join (Agustin, 1999: 5; Lyngbye, 1999: 5; Lisborg, 2002: 104-5; Mix, 2002: 97-98).

Lisborg makes the surprising claim that, for the Thai migrants he interviewed in Denmark, everyday life and work life

overlapped, concluding that it was “a full-time job to be a migrant sex worker; the distinction between work and spare time often becomes blurred” (2002: 103). This observation is clearly true for his interviewees, who were employed in a massage parlor open 24 hours a day, where the women worked, watched television, and socialized with one another while waiting for customers, and where some of them also slept. But sex work for migrants assumes almost as many forms as it does for local women. For those who work in clubs, bars, offices, film studios, or even on the streets, not only do Lisborg’s generalizations fail to hold, but the exact opposite is the case.

The separation between the private self and the working self is, in fact, easier to accomplish in a foreign environment and many migrant prostitutes embrace and emphasize the division. At the other extreme from Lisborg’s interviewees are the women studied by Spanger. Typical of these sex workers is one, a Ghanaian, whose approach is characterized as a “social strategy” resulting from “individual and immediate voluntary action”, yet who, in common with the other Africans interviewed by Spanger, describes her occupation as simply ‘that.’ Refusing to define their work more specifically, they also reject the label “prostitute”, which they see as defining themselves, rather than their job, and are unfamiliar with the term “sex worker.” Calling the work “that”, enables them to maintain a state of detachment, even in an interview about their work lives (Spanger, 2002: 123).

Generally, those migrants who feel they were “deceived” in accepting a particular opportunity to migrate to Europe do not claim, even after the fact, that they were tricked into doing sex work, but rather that the working conditions were not what they had been led to expect. This might mean more surveillance and less freedom than anticipated or being involved with more “industrialized” forms of prostitution than prevailed at home (Agustin, 2000: 2). Women who initially migrate for jobs as domestics often switch to sex industry jobs as a way of improving their lot when the job as a domestic servant proves worse than expected. When, however, the original move was for sex work and they feel they are in a “less comfortable” situation, “what matters to the women is not leaving the industry but changing to a different situation inside it” (Agustin, 2002: 2). This explains some of the continual travel that characterizes the experience of

both African and Caribbean sex workers in Europe (Agustin, 2000: 1; Spanger, 2002: 125-126).

As with sex workers who migrate from rural to urban environments in their home countries, these women's actions are shaped by forced choices rather than absolute imperatives. A bad job is compared to other bad jobs that offer even fewer rewards, rather than to the good job that is not attainable and sometimes not even imaginable. This is one difference between sex workers' own understanding of their lives and that of even well-meaning feminists whose conclusions are not based on listening to the women.

Another difference between the perception of workers and some scholars of the industry is the idea of an appropriate remedy to problems whose gravity both acknowledge. The outsiders tend to see the intervention of external organizers as positive, even if the end result of that intervention is a loss of income. The sex workers, however, see no reason to trust, for instance, "cultural mediators" from a health-related agency any more than they would trust any other perceived authority figure. Mannion attributes this distrust to barriers created by sex industry profiteers, without acknowledging that, from the migrant workers' perspective, it may be the cultural mediator, rather than the pimp or travel organizer, who is the threatening outsider (1999: 1).

In fact, there is every reason for migrant sex workers to harbour suspicion of law enforcement authorities and to see all intervening agencies as exercising a police function. If police crackdowns are hard on local sex workers, they have a disproportionately harsher effect on those whose foreign and possibly illegal status deprives them of power where power is "related to control over language, knowledge of the physical surroundings and access to support mechanisms" (Tep and Ek, 2000: 2). But, whereas this evaluation of the case which is sympathetic to migrant sex workers comes from Southeast Asian commentators speaking of Vietnamese prostitutes in Cambodia, Europeans tend to characterize the lack of language skills as a factor in migrant sex workers' *misunderstanding* of the authorities' essential benevolence. Thus, we are told that Thai migrants have low confidence in the Danish authorities because they erroneously identify those authorities with the brutal and corrupt police back home. Reports of banks providing immigrant customers' names to immigration officials reaffirm the women's desire to live and work

outside the organized local system as much as they can (Lisborg, 2002: 104).

If migrant sex workers tend to confuse all authority, it is because, for them, the immigration officer and the cop share one basic function: preventing them from earning a living. The immigration officer who suspects any young single female at the border of intending to work as a prostitute in his/her country and the police officer who arrests or mistreats sex workers, both of them more interested in the non-violent crime the women are committing than in the violent crimes committed against them, represent an equal and indistinguishable threat to the migrant (Sutdhibhasilp, 2002: 174-77, 185-187).

Some years ago, a Californian organization distributed a pamphlet addressing public fear of “illegals.” Its title was “Since When Is It a Crime to Work?” In the two intervening decades, more has been done in North America and Europe to criminalize working in the “wrong” place, the place where one’s labour does not come as cheap as it does in developing countries, than to answer the political question underlying the title. In Canada nowadays, a movement is emerging under the slogan “No One is Illegal”. Only when that assertion is extended to those whose gendered labour contravenes present laws will migrant sex workers find their place in such a movement. Until then, if international migrants “have...become the shock absorbers for the global economy,” migrant sex workers will remain the shock absorbers’ shock absorbers (Stalker, n.d.: 1).

### **Endnote**

<sup>1</sup> *Editor’s translation:* The authors argue that a greater number of women have been trafficked than admit it, as they note that many factors induce trafficked women to deny it..... They note that those who seem to have been *obviously* trafficked do not define themselves as such. In addition, according to the authors, whether or not women consider themselves to have been trafficked, they *seem* to have been compelled to engage in prostitution.

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