



PII S0277-5395(02)00278-9

THE “NATASHA” EXPERIENCE: MIGRANT SEX WORKERS FROM THE FORMER SOVIET UNION AND EASTERN EUROPE IN TURKEY

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Synopsis — Women have been migrating across the world in increasing numbers and the sex industry remains one option for work in host countries. While there is currently much controversy over whether sex work is “forced” versus “voluntary,” the underground nature of the sex industry, combined with prevalent restrictions on illegal/undocumented immigration in host countries, creates working and living conditions for women that facilitate health risks, violence, harassment, police bribery, detention, and arbitrary deportation. In this paper, we focus on the case of migrant sex workers from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in Turkey. Using a combination of sources including newspapers, participant observation, interviews with key informants and with migrant sex workers, we document the experiences and working conditions of women who travel periodically from their own countries to Istanbul to undertake sex work. We conclude that policy debates regarding sex work should focus not so much on whether women “choose” to enter this profession but should instead focus on the need to ameliorate migrant women's living and working conditions by addressing restrictive and abusive immigration policies and by decriminalizing undocumented sex work. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

THE “NEW MIGRATION”: WOMEN IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

Women have become increasingly visible in the transnational migration process (Kofman, Phizacklea, Raghuram, & Sales, 2000) and currently, nearly one out of every two migrants in the world is a woman (United Nations, 1995). This phenomenon has challenged the view, prevalent in scholarship on migration, that the prototypical migrant is a male whose female family members join him for the purpose of “family reunification” (Kofman et al., 2000). Consequently, recognizing that women now make their own decisions to migrate for themselves or for their families, feminist scholars have expounded on the need to shift the focus of scholarship from women's associational migration to women's autonomous migration (e.g. Anthias, 2000; Buijs, 1993; Lutz, 1997). In addition, arguments have been developed on the need to expand the scope of scholarship to undocumented migrants, of whom women make up an increasingly important component—especially in the largely illegal sex industry (Morokvasic, 1993; Phizacklea, 1998; Lutz, 1997).

Several factors have been proposed to explain this increasing “feminization of migration” (Castles &

Miller, 1993). Different than those that have traditionally stimulated migration in men, these interrelated factors include changes in gender roles in both receiving and sending countries (Campani, 1997), a growing demand for women in the receiving countries' informal domestic and sex-related service sectors (Campani, 1997; Pettman, 1996), economic need that disproportionately affects women in times of economic restructuring (Anthias & Lazaridis, 2000; Moghadam, 1993; Phizacklea, 1998), and the wish on the part of women to escape from oppressive or violent environments, to transcend traditional sex-role constraints and to create a “better life” for themselves (Kofman et al., 2000; Phizacklea, 1998).

An additional change has been that new countries of destination have emerged within Europe. The boundaries between countries of origin and countries of destination have become blurred as traditional sending countries have become receiving countries at the same time (Koser & Lutz, 1998). More specifically, women from the former Soviet Bloc countries have increasingly begun to migrate to countries in Southern Europe which have traditionally been viewed as sending countries—such as Italy, Spain, Greece, Portugal, and Cyprus (Anthias & Lazaridis, 2000). Fewer methods of border surveillance and less

stringent entry requirements have been among the explanatory factors for this migration to Southern Europe (Fielding, 1993).

In addition to petty trading, much of the work migrant women undertake in these countries is geared towards the informal service sector, with sex work and other service-related work (e.g., domestic labor, care taking of children, the infirm or elderly) being a major source of income (Kofman et al., 2000; Psimmenos, 2000). In particular, because of the underground nature of sex work and restrictive immigration policies, many women remain in these countries illegally and without documents (Anthias, 2000).

Sex work across national boundaries is not a new phenomenon and the existence of “foreign” sex workers in countries in Europe and Latin America has been documented at least since the 1800s (Kempadoo, 1998). However, given the difficulty in obtaining official documentation regarding a mostly illegal and ambiguously defined activity such as sex work, the question of whether migrant sex work has increased over the past century remains a controversial one (Kempadoo, 1998). Nevertheless, there is ample documentation that the sex industry is booming globally and that women are moving—or being moved—across borders for the purpose of working in the sex industry in almost every country in the world (see Coomaraswamy, 1997).

DEBATES SURROUNDING SEX WORK: “VOLUNTARY” VERSUS “FORCED” PROSTITUTION

The question of whether women enter the sex industry voluntarily or are tricked and coerced into sexually exploitative practices remains a contentious one. This issue has been divisive in women’s international activism as well as in scholarship on sex work in general; even the use of the term “sex work,” implying that the selling of sexual services should be considered labor like any other, has created much controversy (Bindman & Doezema, 1997; Raymond, 1998a, 1998b).

There are two diametrically opposed views within this debate and at the core of the disagreement is the question of whether a person can choose prostitution as a profession (Doezema, 1998). The main advocates of the first approach base their arguments on the principle that women’s bodies are the site of women’s oppression, and that the male use of female bodies for sex is about power, and not about sex. Consequently, all prostitution is unequivocally defined as the sexual exploitation of women and is equated with violent practices such as rape and incest. Thus, according to

this view, all prostitution must be criminalized and abolished (Barry, 1995; Raymond, 1998a). This has come to be known as the abolitionist perspective (Doezema, 1998).

The second position, which differentiates between forced and voluntary prostitution, was developed by those in the sex workers’ rights movement in response to the proponents of the view that prostitution is inherently violent and exploitative (Doezema, 1998). Here, a distinction is made between women who are tricked and coerced into entering the sex industry by third parties (traffickers and other organized crime) and women who choose to enter the sex industry with full knowledge of the fact that they will be working as prostitutes. Thus, forced prostitution, viewed as a violation of the right to self determination, is counterposed to voluntary prostitution (i.e., sex work), which is viewed as a labor practice based on women’s autonomous use of their own bodies as a source of income (Doezema, 1998).

The difference in opinion surrounding this debate has also had implications on inquiry and activism on migration and transnational sex work. A natural outcome of the abolitionist perspective has been to concentrate on the suffering and victimization of trafficked women, and to campaign against transnational trafficking, while neglecting the need to address sex workers’ rights to economic, social and legal safeguards and decent labor conditions in the receiving countries. On the other hand, those in the sex workers’ rights movement have focused on the need to create differentiated strategies aimed at firstly penalizing third parties who trick, coerce, and traffic women into the sex industry across national borders, and secondly establishing legal criteria and migration policies for safe working conditions for migrant women who choose to engage in the sex industry in the host country. Thus, following in the footsteps of the controversy surrounding voluntary versus forced prostitution, the debate on transnational sex work has become mired in disagreements between those focusing on trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation, versus those focusing on labor migration for the purpose of sex work (see Doezema, 2001; Hughes, 2000; Murray, 1998; Pettman, 1996; Raymond, 1998a, 1998b; Wijers, 1998).

MIGRANT SEX WORK IN TURKEY

Turkey has always had its share of migrants; nevertheless, until recently the absolute numbers remained fairly low, encompassing people of Turkish origin from other countries (such as Bulgaria), or foreigners married to Turkish citizens (Karaduman-Taş, 2001,

personal communication, State Institute of Statistics, Turkey). More recently, however, migration has increased, and the migrant population has diversified to include individuals from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (Karaduman-Taş, 2001, personal communication, State Institute of Statistics, Turkey). In particular, it is mostly migrant women from this region who engage in sex work in Turkey (International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, 2000; US Department of State, 2000).

It is surprising that Turkey has not been mentioned in the new scholarship on migrant women, which documents increasing flows of migration—especially from the former Soviet Bloc—to what used to be the sending countries of Southern Europe (e.g., Italy, Spain, Greece, etc.). We would argue that the pattern of women’s migration from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe to Turkey, as well as their participation in small commodities trading and sex work, almost exactly mirrors the phenomenon as it has been described in Southern European countries (Anthias & Lazaridis, 2000). While Turkey has traditionally been a sending country, with 3 million Turks having migrated to Western Europe alone (İçduygu, Sirkeci, & Muradoğlu, 2001), it has now become a major destination country, especially for women from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe entering the sex industry (International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, 2000; International Organization for Migration, 2001; US Department of State, 2000). In addition, migrant women’s use of the gap created by weaker border surveillance and visa requirements to enter Turkey exactly parallels the use of similar methods to enter Southern European countries (Fielding, 1993).

Different in character from previous migrants to Turkey who often became permanent residents, the travel patterns of these “oscillating” (Buijs, 1993) or “circular” (Morokvasic, 1996; Morokvasic & de Tinguay, 1993) migrants is best characterized by periodic “commutes” between Turkey and their countries of origin, to make a living from what is popularly known in Turkish as “the suitcase industry” (Günçikan, 1995). Arriving in Turkey with an initial sum of approximately US\$1000–2000, these individuals buy goods (such as clothes, small household commodities) from local merchants and then return to their countries of origin to sell these products at a profit. Continuing the cycle, they then return to Turkey with small commodities, selling these and buying more goods to take back to their own countries. The term “suitcase industry” stems from the fact that these goods are often transported in suitcases or plastic bags. This type of trade activity has been

documented for individuals from many countries of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, including Poland, Romania, Russia, Ukraine and the CIS (Morokvasic & de Tinguay, 1993).

In contrast to their male counterparts, large proportions of women from these countries also supplement their incomes in Turkey with sex work, another form of commodity exchange (Beller-Hann, 1995; Günçikan, 1995). Naturally, as this involves longer periods of residence in Turkey, migrant sex workers tend to have greater contact with local daily life and with Turkish society. Especially because they are undocumented migrant workers, they are more likely to come into contact with state officials such as the police.

Sex work in Turkey is allowed under the law as long as the sex worker is registered (International Women’s Rights Action Watch, 1997). Thus at first glance it would seem that since sex work is legal and monitored by the state in Turkey, women would be assured protection from police intervention as well as abuse by clients, which sex workers most often experience in countries where sex work is illegal. The catch for migrant women, however, is that Turkish law excludes sex workers from emigration or immigration. Thus in Turkey under the Passport Act, sex workers are explicitly barred from entering the country, and if caught, are to be immediately deported with no recourse to legal representation (Bindman & Doezema, 1997). In addition, even documented migrant women are not allowed to enter sex work as professionals, since Turkish citizenship is required in order to be a sex worker (Anti-Slavery International, 1993). Thus, given that the legal and social restrictions surrounding the job prevent them from a full enjoyment of safe labor standards, migrant sex workers’ illegal status exposes them to a high risk of violence, state-sanctioned harassment and discrimination, and labor rights violations, with little or no recourse.

EXPERIENCES OF MIGRANT SEX WORKERS IN TURKEY

There are few research studies on migrant sex workers in Turkey and we were unable to find any which focused centrally on migrant sex workers’ experiences and working conditions. Of these, Aral and Fransén (1995) and Ağaçfidan, Badur, and Gerikalı (1993) discuss the public health (AIDS/STD) implications of undocumented migrant sex work and Beller-Hann (1995) and Günçikan (1995) focus mostly on local community responses to and cultural discourses on the phenomenon of migrant sex workers.

Ironically, the major forum for information—a good deal of it obtained via interviews with migrant sex workers—has been the news media. Thus, in order to document the experiences and working conditions of migrant sex workers, we used a combination of methods including newspaper analyses, participant observation, interviews with key informants and interviews with migrant sex workers.¹ More specifically, we analysed a range of articles written on the topic between 1995 and 2001 from three major Turkish newspapers—*Hürriyet*, *Milliyet*, and *Zaman*—as well as from a few other Turkish and foreign news sources such as the *London Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Baltimore Sun* and *New York Magazine*. In addition, we visited, observed local activity and interviewed six key informants (encompassing clients of sex workers, local sales people, and bartenders) and three sex workers in hotels, bars, and businesses in the *Laleli* district of Istanbul, where many of the migrant sex workers live and work. The interviews were unstructured and focused on identifying the experiences and working conditions of migrant women, as well as the local discourses and attitudes surrounding migrant sex workers. To protect the identities of those we interviewed, no real names have been used.

The data analysis identified five themes: (1) the national discourse on “Natashas,” (2) reasons women migrate to Turkey, (3) experiences with clients and pimps, (4) experiences with the “system,” and (5) health issues.

The Natasha Discourse

The migration of women from the former Soviet Union has become a major national discourse, especially in the Black Sea region and in Istanbul. A survey of newspapers showed that in numerous articles, migrant sex workers were portrayed as “hot, passionate, blond bombshells” who were available and willing for any sexual acts required of them. This was also reflected in the attitudes voiced by the male key informants. From the articles and interviews, it was also clear that for most people in Turkish society, women from the former Soviet Bloc countries had become equated with the term “prostitute,” regardless of whether they were sex workers or not, and had been given a special name: Natasha. In the Turkish language, Natasha has come to mean a sex worker from the former Soviet Union and is often used as a generic name for all women from these countries (see also *International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights*, 2000). Ironically, this term has even caught on for migrant sex workers from the

former Soviet Bloc in countries other than Turkey—such as England (*London Times*, 1999), Israel (*Moscow Times*, 1997) and the United States (Gross, 1998).

Because of this perception of “Natasha the prostitute,” foreign women—especially blondes—have been harassed in unprecedented numbers in recent years. This harassment has not only come from local men on the streets but also from the police, who have been known to arbitrarily harass, detain, ask for bribes, and/or deport any blonde, foreign-looking woman, regardless of her visa status and regardless of whether she is a sex worker or not. The petty trade (suitcase) industry has suffered a major economic blow because of this harassment, as women traders from the former Soviet Bloc are reported to no longer want to come to Turkey to trade (e.g. *Hürriyet*, 1998a, 1999; *Zaman*, 1998).

The Natasha issue has also provoked much societal debate on the sanctity of the family, even causing stress between husbands and wives. Migrant workers have often been blamed for the increased incidence of AIDS/STDs as well as for the “breakdown of the family” (*Anadolu Agency*, 1999; *Bayer*, 2000; *Zaman*, 2000). Indeed, in Trabzon, disaffected women formed the “Association for the Struggle against Natashas,” devoted solely to banning migrant women from the city (*Günçikan*, 1995). Others have followed in several additional cities (*Baltimore Sun*, 2001; *Beller-Hann*, 1995; *Hürriyet*, 1998b).

Reasons for Migrating to Turkey and Personal Background

Our analyses and interviews showed that the women migrated to Turkey for social and economic reasons, with each influencing the other. Because of the transition to a free market economy and because economic opportunities in their countries of origin consequently became restricted, the women were unable to retain the standard of living which they experienced during communist rule. Simultaneously, however, new opportunities provided by the increased freedom of movement enabled them to travel to other countries, an act previously inconceivable during communism.

Although Western Europe was their first choice, rigid visa regulations prevented women from being able to seek economic opportunities in these countries. Turkey was viewed as a good second choice, since receiving a visa was relatively easy. In addition, its geographic proximity to the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe allowed for easy periodic travel between countries.

Since the sex industry provides an opportunity to earn comparatively good wages, many women entered this profession when they arrived in Turkey. Key informants, as well as the migrant women, reported that, in the initial years following the fall of communism (early 1990s), small groups of women were brought in by the collaborative efforts of the Turkish and Russian Mafia, marketed to customers in Turkey and then brought back, with the profits divided somewhat evenly between the woman and the pimp. However, the women we interviewed reported that this practice had decreased dramatically in recent years and that many women now traveled on their own to work as free agents.

The women we interviewed indicated a variety of reasons for migrating. The most compelling reason cited was the need to access new economic opportunities. In addition, the women also reported wanting to see the world and to have multicultural experiences, looking for new experiences, autonomy, and self-growth and a broader perspective of the world, as secondary reasons. Here are some examples of women's perspectives on migration, in their own voices:

Lena: I came from Kazakhstan, from a small city near Alma-Ata 3 years ago. After the fall of communism I lost my job. I looked for a job and couldn't find any. I got a loan from my neighbour and came to Istanbul. At the beginning I looked for a job and I started to work for 5 US Dollars a day. This money wasn't enough for food, accommodation, clothes. So I started work as a sex worker. Two months later I met my boyfriend and he told me that he would take care of me so I quit this job. ... At the beginning he was giving me a lot of money but later on he started to perceive me as his living partner. ... He wants to marry me and have a child with me. I was pregnant twice by him but I had an abortion both times without telling him. His family and his friends know me and accept me but I don't want to marry him although I love him. I'm afraid that if I marry him our love will disappear, he won't value me any more, he will try to restrict my freedom. So I started to go into the suitcase industry and also to work as a sex worker. In Turkey commodities are cheap, for shopping you have to go to Turkey. I have a daughter in Kazakhstan. My neighbour takes care of her and I have to send them money. The money which I get from my boyfriend is not enough. So I lie to him, sometimes I tell him I go to Kazakhstan but I come to Istanbul and

work as a sex worker. I would like to buy a house in Kazakhstan.

Mina: I was working as a construction engineer in Kharkov. After the fall of communism I met an Italian man whom I followed to Bari, Italy. I stayed there for six months. It wasn't possible to find work as an engineer so I tried to get a simple job such as a barmaid, waitress etc. I left my job in the Ukraine because it was boring there. I wanted to go abroad and experience the world. After my experience in Italy I came to Turkey two years ago because I was looking for a "chance." It was more difficult to stay in Europe, or to go to another European country. It was difficult to get a visa and you have to speak their language. Turkey is easier for us. They give a visa for 30 days and moreover it is possible to lengthen the stay through illegal ways. Here we can stay also without a visa. Turkey is also cheaper, you have to have a lot of money for Europe. Everything is very expensive there. ... When I came to Turkey I didn't know about the opportunity to work as a sex worker. I first worked as a translator in Karakoy.

Vera: I graduated as an economist. I lost my job and searched desperately for another job for six months. It was not possible. My parents were taking care of me, which I didn't want as a 31-year old woman. I came to Turkey for a job two years ago. When I first came I started to work in a carpet shop in a harbour near Karakoy. I was earning very little money. A woman friend of mine told me that it was possible to earn more money as a prostitute so I started one and a half years ago. After working as a prostitute for some time I went back to Kazakhstan and bought a house there for 1500 USD and I tried to find a job again but couldn't. So I came back to Turkey as I had no money to buy the necessary furniture. I don't like this job at all. But there is no one to take care of me. ... I don't want to marry but I would like to have a child when I have saved enough money. I want to stay in Turkey in order to save money.

The women had developed several strategies to keep working and living in Turkey, although their official length of visa was restricted to one month and they had no work permits. Most of them stayed in Turkey more than a month either illegally or tried to lengthen their stay through various means such as departing the country for one day across the Bulgarian border or buying false stamps for their passports

from the Turkish Mafia. Another way of staying in Turkey was to undergo false marriages, either for money or for sexual favors. Some women also reported meeting European citizens in Istanbul and marrying them, thus obtaining a residence permit for Europe.

Experiences with Clients and Pimps

The women told us that they had experienced violence especially after their initial arrival in Turkey, but that later they learned strategies to minimize the risk of exposure. However, they all reported that they experienced sexual harassment on the street in the form of being called Natasha or being asked for sexual favors and sometimes being groped. Moreover, economic violence, in the form of a client refusing to pay after sex, was also frequently reported. The women indicated they were unable, in such cases, to make the man pay their fee.

Mina: When I first came to Turkey I was invited to dinner by a Turkish man. I went to dinner together with a woman friend. He told me that we should meet his boss who was supposed to be very rich. We told him that we wanted to go back to our hotel. He seemed to accept it afterwards but when we got into the car we noticed that he took us to a very far away place, we didn't know where. We were very afraid. He also assaulted me physically. I had some bruises as a result. Sometimes the men leave without paying me. I try to get the money at the beginning but sometimes I think that "this man is different" or men plead and they ask me not to make them feel bad about it. So I just let it go. But in the morning they say "ciao" and go away.

Vera: At the beginning I experienced some verbal violence. That was with men whom I picked up on the street. Since then I have been working only by telephone with clients who are acquaintances of my acquaintances. At the beginning I felt very bad when men treated me as a prostitute, wanting just to sleep with me.

None of the women we interviewed were continuously working with pimps but they all reported that they feared them. They reported that they worked with pimps only if they were unable to find any clients themselves. When forced to work with pimps, they received only half of the money paid by the client. They themselves had never

experienced any violence with pimps but one of them knew two friends who had been forced to have sex with their pimps.

Experiences with the "System"

Under Turkish law, unregistered—and migrant—sex work is illegal, but few mechanisms exist to prevent this activity. Our observations and interviews with key informants showed that sex workers make significant contributions to local businesses as well as to law enforcement, weakening the state's commitment to the enforcement of laws against unregistered sex work. For example, tourism agencies benefit from the constant sale of round-trip tickets between Turkey and the countries of origin. Local stores sell clothes and other goods, which the women transport home as part of the suitcase industry. Local hotels rent out rooms for extravagant sums. In addition, migrant women are constantly detained by the police and subjected to threats of deportation even if they have a valid visa. The price for being let free is a hefty bribe, totaling an estimated 10% of a woman's earnings every week.

The role of local businesses

We conducted our observations and interviews in a district of Istanbul (the *Laleli* area) where most of the sex workers reside and work. Most local landlords took advantage of the fact that the women were undocumented and were engaged in illegal sex work and therefore charged whatever they pleased. For example, our interviews with women took place at a hostel where 90 women were staying. There were three women to a substandard room, with no central heating and stains on the rugs. The price charged for each room was the equivalent of US\$90, higher than in many high quality four-star hotels in the city.

Police harassment, extortion, and violence

All the women and the key informants we interviewed reported that the Turkish police, especially those in the *Laleli* district, harass and threaten the women. The women reported regular "controls" on the street where police stopped almost all blonde women in the streets or in cars passing by and threatened to confiscate their passports even if they were valid. The women were then compelled to bribe the police in order to avoid being taken into custody. On each occasion, the amount of bribes required by the police ranged from US\$25 to US\$100 (local currency equivalent)

per person. The women reported that they were stopped, on average, from as often as three times a week to four times a month. They also reported that most women were afraid of the police and thus were readily willing to bribe police officers to avoid further harassment and violence:

Lena: When the police stops me and wants to take my passport away I get afraid because they want to take me into custody. Therefore I offer them money... One night I and two women friends of mine were strolling in the street. The police stopped us and took us to Mecidiyekoy police station. They verbally assaulted us, calling us whores and Natashas. One of us didn't have a passport with her. They kept us there a whole night... They asked where we were staying. I told them I was staying with my boyfriend at his flat, that I am not staying at a hotel. The policeman called me "you liar, dishonest woman." When I told them I wanted to call my friend he verbally assaulted me and told me to shut up. He wrote up a report but I didn't know what he was writing. That was one and a half years ago. I refused to sign the report because I didn't know what he had written. I told them I wanted to call my consulate. There was no translator... They hit me with a stick because I refused to sign the report. So I tried to read it and understand with my little Turkish. He had written that I was caught with a client and that I had slept with him for 700,000 Liras. I asked them "where is the client, are you the client yourself?" I told them they were lying and that I wouldn't sign the report. I told them that they didn't know who I am, I have my passport and my visa is OK and I threatened to make a lot of problems for them the next day. The police responded again by calling me a whore and telling me to shut up. Then they took us to "Can-Can" (Turkish slang for the Hospital for Sexually Transmitted Diseases). They did blood tests on us. Then they let us go. The doctor had already told us that we would be let go if we didn't have any sexually transmitted diseases.

It is interesting to note the parallel between the traditional role of pimps and the behaviour of the police towards the women. In some ways, the police had taken over the role of "pimps" by taking a percentage of the women's profits. In turn, this police activity indirectly placed the state in the role of pimp, as state economic interests were supported in two ways: (1) with "extra salaries"

for the police and (2) with an infusion of capital from the women's simultaneous investments in the suitcase industry.

Lack of access to utilities and services

The women reported that one of the problems they faced, because of their illegal migrant status, was lack of access to utilities and services. For example, it was impossible for them to open up bank accounts without a residence permit. Therefore, they had no choice but to keep their cash in their rooms or on their persons, thereby exposing themselves to the risk of theft and mugging. In addition, the women had no access to national health care and had to pay full fees for medical services, regardless of whether they went to private doctors or to public medical facilities.

Health Issues

The women reported that while they were very much afraid of AIDS, they were unable to enforce their right to practice safe sex. The women indicated that the condom was the primary method of contraception in their home countries but that most clients were reluctant to use condoms. Although the women reported they were insistent on using a condom, only 1% or 2% of the clients accepted it. The women noted that they all had regular check-ups when they went back to their countries of origin.

Mina: I try to force men to use a condom. I ask them how they can trust me, maybe I have got AIDS. They tell me I am beautiful and clean and that I couldn't possibly have AIDS. But I am very afraid. I went for an AIDS test only once in Turkey. That was for a man with whom I was in love. I went for a test because I didn't want to cause him any problems. It costs 15 dollars in Turkey. I sometimes read in the newspaper that the women have got AIDS but I have never met any myself. I don't use any birth control but I have never been pregnant. I think I will never get pregnant.

Vera: I use vaginal sprays. I once had to have an abortion because I was pregnant for five months. I had the abortion in Turkey. It cost 100 dollars. Many women have abortions in the fourth or fifth month as they wish that the men accept the child or marry them... It is easier to have the abortion in Turkey as the medical system is more modern... I know that the vaginal spray is not a good guarantee but I still use it. I am very much

afraid of AIDS, I get a medical check-up each time I go back to Kazakhstan.

VOLUNTARY OR FORCED? TRAFFICKING OR LABOR MIGRATION? IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY CHANGE

Coomaraswamy (1997) has outlined four ways in which women become involved in the sex trade globally. The first three components encompass, first, women who are told straightforward lies by traffickers about the nature of the work to be performed and/or coerced into, second, women who are told half-truths about the nature of the work to be performed and end up doing types of sex work they did not previously agree to, and third, women who are informed about the work they will be doing but often have to relinquish control to their procurers and who may be kept in situations of debt bondage. The fourth category is comprised of women who are fully informed about the work, are in control of their finances and have relatively unrestricted movement.

Whether more women are tricked or coerced into prostitution or whether more women become sex workers based on their own decisions remains an unanswered question, and it is also unclear what proportion of migrant women who work in Turkey as sex workers were trafficked against their will. Nevertheless, while we make no claims to knowing the number of women working in any one category in Turkey, we do know from our observations and our interviews with sex workers and with key informants that at least some sex workers from the former Soviet Bloc were in the above-mentioned fourth category and thus cannot be considered within the trafficking framework. Rather, these women must be viewed as agents who are in sole control over their finances and make their own decision to work in the sex trade. Indeed, when we visited and observed the localities where migrant sex workers were staying in *Laleli*, we saw no pimps and no organized activity. Rather, we saw hotels where approximately 100 women were staying independently or with roommates, paying for their own room and board, and keeping their own income for themselves.

This does not mean that we believe women in the first three categories, who fall under the “forced prostitution” category, do not exist in Turkey. Clearly, economic need on the part of the women, coupled with legal restrictions on migration, citizenship status and sex work, create many

opportunities for traffickers and pimps to coerce and dupe women into a life of sexual slavery or debt bondage for indeterminate periods of time. Indeed, the women and key informants we interviewed told us that they knew of women who had been lied to, trafficked and forced into prostitution; however, they also told us that this type of forced prostitution was waning and was increasingly replaced by the advent of women who had control over their own bodies and services, with no third party involvement such as the Mafia or pimps. In particular, it seems that women were more likely to be tricked and trafficked in the early 1990’s (Caldwell, Galster, & Steinzor, 1997), while more recent years have seen many (especially relatively older) women use their own resources to initiate free enterprise and to work independently (Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, 2000).

Migration to Turkey, even for the purposes of a high-risk job like sex work, can provide social and economic advantages to women from the former Soviet Union. From the migrant woman’s perspective, sex work—compared to the alternative of unemployment in her home country—can offer her the freedom to control her own resources, even though some of these earnings may go towards the payment to pimps or bribes to the police. Thus, paid sex can also be seen as a strategy for survival. Our standpoint in this article is that although they are vulnerable to violence and discrimination, some migrant sex workers are paradoxically in control of their bodies and create their own survival mechanisms in a patriarchal world, utilizing prevalent ideologies to their economic advantage. Indeed, the women themselves must also be seen as agents of change, in that they themselves devise their own strategies to make the transition to the values and norms of the host society.

Indeed, one reason why women may choose sex work is that it is much better-paid than most other jobs usually available to them and offers flexible working hours (for example women can work periodically, save money, and return home and undertake child care simultaneously). One woman clearly told us that she preferred to undertake sex work because it was flexible and the pay was superior to “legitimate” work.

Nevertheless, while the women viewed their life situation in Turkey as allowing them, on the one hand, new experiences and economic opportunities, they also reported that their life conditions in Turkey triggered many stresses that affected their psychological and physical well being. The women reported that among the community of migrant women there

existed a high level of alcohol abuse and depression. Mina expressed this duality as follows:

Sometimes I enjoy working, I can travel and see beautiful places. I can go to nice restaurants. I enjoy that the Turkish men view us as desirable. . . but some mornings I wake up and say to myself “What am I doing? Where am I?” I need to go to a doctor. I have a lot of depression. Sometimes I can not get out of bed but I have to force myself to work. There’s a lot of stress here. Lately I have been working less. It’s as if I’m constantly at war with myself.

Thus, it was obvious that the conditions under which migrant sex workers live and work in Istanbul are, to put it mildly, less than satisfactory. Clearly, the fact that undocumented/unregistered sex work is illegal in Turkey (Bindman & Doezema, 1997), as well as legal restrictions on citizenship status and sex work (Anti-Slavery International, 1993), place women at high risk for numerous forms of state-sanctioned discrimination, coupled with harassment, threats and requests for bribes from the police. In addition, exposure to racist and sexist attitudes and behaviors creates trauma and stress in the lives of the women.

The picture that emerges from our analyses and interviews indicates that the women are frequently subjected to economic exploitation, harassment, arbitrary detention, violence or the threat of violence—from police and the business infrastructure, as well as from clients and local community members. In addition, because of these risks and the ambiguity that surrounds their legal status, the women must constantly negotiate and re-negotiate their needs and rights with these actors. An example of this is the frequent bribes to police officials in return for not being detained or deported. Another is the (usually failed) negotiations around clients’ condom use. Moreover, substandard housing conditions and lack of rights even in the most simple of areas—for example the inability, as a nonresident, to open a bank account—compound the effects of these stresses.

Doezema (1998) argues that focusing on the voluntary versus forced prostitution dichotomy creates false divisions and moves the debate away from sex workers’ rights to self-determination and good working and living conditions. Thus, the next logical step would be to reexamine state policies on migrants that create human rights violations of migrant sex workers. The existence of harsh immigration policies and restrictive laws on unregistered

sex work in Turkey has created opportunities for local business owners, clients/community members and corrupt officials to exploit the women’s situation as illegal undocumented migrant sex workers. This exploitation has blended together with retrogressive communal attitudes that viewed the women as “fair game” on the one hand and “threats to family sanctity” on the other, to generate intolerable conditions during the women’s sojourn in Turkey.

Therefore, instead of focusing on whether the women were forced or not, we believe it is more important to look at the living and working conditions of the women, to identify where violations of their rights are occurring, and to find ways to ameliorate these. Accordingly, the notion that receiving country governments must protect the rights of migrant women and address their specific needs has been promoted at the international level, with specific recommendations to improve the status of international female migrants, as well as special provisions for the protection of the rights of *temporary* migrant workers during their period of stay in a host country (United Nations, 1995).

Contrary to the opinions of some (Barry, 1995; Raymond, 1998a, 1998b), these rights and needs can be respected by recognizing sex work as labor and liberalizing immigration policies in order to prevent abuse by third parties, including organized criminal networks (e.g., Mafia/traffickers, visa procurers, pimps) and local operational arms of the state (e.g., police and other officials). Decriminalization of sex work, accompanied by labor standards applied to migrant sex workers that promote and protect their human rights, will enable migrant workers to access social services and systems without any penalty. In addition, proper regulation of the operational arms of the state (such as the police) would ensure prevention of arbitrary detention or arrest and nonconsensual physical or virginity tests, as well as penalize those who resort to violence.

ENDNOTES

1. Although we were not involved in sex work ourselves, we were “participant observers” in our approach in that we spent considerable time in the bars, hotels, and local business places of *Laleli* and observed local activity as well as interacted with people. For example, we had drinks in a bar and chatted with a bartender about his experiences with migrant sex workers; we observed sex workers having drinks/dinner with clients; we went to the hotels that sex workers were staying in and talked to them in their rooms; we talked to local sales people who had transactions with sex workers, etc.

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