



Criminalisation and prostitution of migrant women in Turkey: A case study of Ugandan women[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Based on an empirical research, this paper explores Ugandan migrant women's experiences as cheap undocumented migrant workers in gendered segments of the labour market and in prostitution in Turkey. They often face labour exploitation, discrimination as well as sexual harassment. When these difficulties are combined with the pressure from home and paying off debt, some Ugandan women are even pushed to sell sex. This paper argues that migrant women's involvement mechanisms in prostitution involves varying degrees of lack of choice as a result of gendered migration processes, criminalisation, coercion, exploitation and agency.

Introduction

Since the 1970s, female migrants have become visible globally both in their number and their gendered characteristics in international migration. Feminist scholars have argued that the emergence of gender in migration research owes much to the feminist movement and to the feminist questioning of gender identity (Shrover & Moloney, 2013). In fact, the proportion of women in international migration has not changed dramatically in the last half century, growing from 46.6% in 1960 to 48.8 in 2000 (Zlotnik, 2003). Recently however, women have been markedly represented in high-income OECD countries where the proportion of women in migration flows has increased from 51 to 52% in the last 15 years (United Nations, 2017:15). Female migrants outnumbered male migrants in Europe, Northern America and Oceania (Ibid).

Research has repeatedly shown that women's migration decisions are highly gendered and that gendered inequalities and opportunities affect migration decisions and processes differently for women and men. Migration can mean escaping from coercive social factors and patriarchal relations. These can include the impossibility of divorce, domestic violence and the strict codes of gendered roles such as childcare, or having limited access to property for women (Morokvasic, 1991: 72; Kofman, Phizacklea, Raghuram, & Sales, 2000; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002: 10; Lutz, 2010). Globally, women are more likely to live in poverty than men, be employed in precarious, gendered and poorly paid jobs and are less likely to have access to land, credit or education. Taking the example of sub-Saharan Africa, women have a bigger share in poor households as they have less access to paid work, social protection or are paid less than men (UN Women, 2015: 11).

Furthermore, women's employment outcomes are limited by unpaid care work, patriarchal relations or gendered income sharing.

On the other side of migration, feminisation is part of broader globalisation processes and the changing international division of reproductive labour (Kofman and Raghuram, 2015). Research suggests that there has been a rapid increase in women's participation in waged work, without a commensurate change in the traditional division of labour in the home. This has combined with the gradual disappearance of the welfare state, an ageing society, the marketization of care, and the negative effects of neoliberal capitalist policies on poorer countries to drive the migration of a cheap, gendered labour force, namely women migrants (Sassen, 2001; Kofman et al., 2000; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002; Shutes & Anderson, 2014; Williams, 2014). Sassen points out the link between the effects of economic globalisation on developing countries and informal global economies ('new economies of excess') created to the detriment of the poor, and the increased existence of women in these economies as domestic workers, carers or prostitutes (2001: 100). Today, millions of women migrate from Third World to First World countries to work in gendered segments of the labour market as domestic workers, carers, low skilled, low paid workers or prostitutes.

Prostitution is one of the most hotly debated issues among feminists and crystallises the arguments surrounding agency and the capacity of women in prostitution to consent (Outshoorn, 2005). Two main approaches to prostitution have been identified in this discussion: abolitionist and regulatory. Given the dominance of patriarchal thinking, abolitionist approach or radical feminist analysis refers to prostitution as a harmful practice, which exposes women to male violence. Therefore, this view claims there is no room for consent as prostitution is a

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survival strategy enacted by women to avoid poverty (Barry, 1995; Jeffreys, 1997; Sullivan, 2010). In contrast, the regulatory approach argues that prostitution is a legitimate, if undesirable, form of work ('sex work') and that forced prostitution only occurs when a woman is coerced or forced into prostitution against her will (Doezema, 1998; Kempadoo, 2005; Weitzer, 2010). Developed from liberal thoughts, this approach argues that to position women in prostitution as victims denies their agency and choices.

In classical terms, agency is defined as 'the capacity to make free decisions about one's own life' (Williams, 2010: 2). In a broad sense, agency is affected by economic, social and cultural structures as well as an individual's personal circumstances. The gendered, sexualised, racialised and unequal power relationships in social and economic structures, such as having limited access to the labour market or strict codes of gender roles can create varying degrees of vulnerabilities for women to consent to prostitution. Given the environment, some scholars suggest a criteria to measure agency and therefore the capacity to consent to prostitution. For example, Bettio, Della Giusta, and Di Tommaso (2017) highlight bargaining power as a sign of agency in prostitution. They claim this to be the ability to keep all one's earnings, choosing clients and services provided, working indoors or the ability to negotiate with third parties who control or facilitate their work. It is further argued that the stigma against prostitutes and the involvement of third parties decreases the agency of women and increases violence against women in prostitution (Bettio et al., 2017; Verhoeven & van Gestel, 2017). The criminalisation of women in prostitution on moral grounds and as outsiders or migrants also negatively affects women's agency in prostitution. As there is a hierarchy and varying degrees of control over someone's prostitution, there are also varying degrees of risk associated with violence by clients or third parties (Weitzer, 2010; O'Connell Davidson, 2005: 33). Furthermore, structural and additional factors intersect with multiple layers of inequalities and increase women's risk of trafficking into prostitution (Turner, 2012: 33) or trafficking-like practices. In this debate, based on empirical data from the analysis of Turkey's prostitution regime in which consent is the central issue, this paper argues that migrant women's involvement in prostitution involves a lack of choice, coercion, exploitation and agency. Therefore, I will use the terms 'prostitution' and 'prostitute' instead of 'sex work' and 'sex workers' to imply free choice.

The global trends in migration are also visible in Turkey, as migrant women become visible both in size and through the characteristics of their work. Turkey, traditionally a migrant sending county, has been both a destination and transitory location for migration since the early 1990s. Its location between East and West, its relatively stable economic status and the break-up of the Soviet Union and the European Union's (EU) restrictions on migrants have all contributed to Turkey's changing migratory status (Erder & Kaşka, 2003; İçduygu & Kirişçi, 2009). Initially, a significant number of transit migrants and asylum seekers, mainly from Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran as well as several African and Asian countries, travelled through Turkey as a pathway to wealthy Europe. Turkey's relaxed visa regime, large informal economy and trade opportunities also attracted tourism as well as trade with neighbouring countries (Erder & Kaşka, 2003). Since the early 1990s, a significant number of people from former Soviet countries (predominantly Russia, Ukraine, and Moldova) also went to Turkey as petty traders or employees of Turkish farmers, construction companies and families as domestic workers (IOM, 2008: 33). The most important characteristic of these circular flows is their gendered nature. Most migrant women were employed informally as domestic workers, salespersons in textile stores or as waitresses in the entertainment industry (Erder & Kaşka, 2003) or were involved in selling sex (Gülçür & İlkkaracan, 2002; Yüksek, 2003). More recently, migrant women are employed as low paid workers in textile and manufacturing ateliers (Coşkun, 2016a; Dedeoğlu & Gökmen, 2011; Eder, 2015). Previous studies show the poor working conditions that migrant women consent to and reveal the fact that they are often faced with sexual harassment

wherever they work.

Previous studies usually focus on domestic migrant workers (i.e. Kaşka, 2009; Keough, 2008) and rarely on prostitution. Research on migrant women's involvement in prostitution in Turkey usually focused on trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation (Ayata et al., 2008; Coşkun, 2014, 2016a). However, one study, Gülçür and İlkkaracan (2002) explored the experiences of migrant women in prostitution and highlighted the restrictive nature of migration policies. Gülçür and İlkkaracan (2002: 413) argue that most migrant women are involved in prostitution due to better pay, flexible working hours, and temporary working options. Their lives and working conditions however are less than satisfactory and their "illegal status exposes them to a high risk of violence, state-sanctioned harassment and discrimination, as well as labour rights violations, with little or no recourse". Yüksek (2003: 217) and Karamustafa (2001) quoted in Morokvasic, 2004: 77 also point out the sexual relations and emotional attachment between some sellers (migrant women) and buyers (male citizens) helped to build trusting relations in informal trade or in starting a business. Kalfa's research shows how migrant women's involvement in prostitution is so strongly pronounced that most migrant women are perceived as prostitutes and encountered sexual harassment wherever they work (2008). There is a limited body of research on migrant women's involvement in prostitution and this is related to the difficulties of conducting research in this area. However, existing research reveals the restrictions on migrant women's formal access to the labour market, insecure working conditions and the sexual harassment they face both in the workplace and in their daily lives. Based on an empirical study, this paper focuses on the experiences of a specific group of sub-Saharan African migrant women in waged work and in prostitution in order to show the available work options for women, their precarious position in the labour market, poor work conditions and transitivity between limited work options.

This paper explores the experiences of Ugandan women both in waged work and in prostitution as they are one of the most prominent groups in prostitution. Being black and relatively new arrival position in Turkey make Ugandan women at the bottom of work hierarchies among migrant groups. Based on interviews, I will show the mechanisms by which Ugandan women are involved in prostitution and the caveats in distinguishing between voluntary and involuntary prostitution. I will argue that Ugandan women's involvement in prostitution is strongly related to their gendered poverty in Uganda, gendered and precarious position in the labour market because of structural factors such as migration policy and labour restrictions on migrants in Turkey. The work options left open for most migrant women in Turkey are limited to either "low-skilled" gendered and informal work in the labour market, such as sweatshop workers, domestic workers or selling sex. As a result of their undocumented and precarious position in the labour market, Ugandan women often face severe forms of labour exploitation, discrimination and sexual harassment within their workplace. When these difficulties are combined with economic pressure from home and debts accumulated with moneylenders, some women are forced into selling sex as a survival strategy and a short-term solution to their problems. Therefore, I will argue that migrant women's consent to prostitution is a result of structural factors and a lack of choice due to gender inequalities, criminalisation, coercion and exploitation under Turkey's migration and prostitution regime.

Methodology and sample group

A qualitative research methodology was adopted in this research and the main data collection tool was semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The interviewees were selected by chain sampling via the researcher's established relations in Kumkapı through voluntary work over many years. I have chosen Ugandan women because they are one of the most prominent groups in waged work and in prostitution among new gendered migration flows in Turkey. I wanted to explore any

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