

# Cahiers de l'Urmis

12 | juin 2009 :

Circulation migratoire et insertions économiques précaires en Europe

Travailler à la marge en Occident

---

## The *Other* and her Body: Migrant Prostitution, Gender Relations and Ethnicity

MONICA MASSARI

---

### Résumés

English Français

The phenomenon of commercial sex has gone, during the past two decades, through significant changes due, firstly, to the expansion of the market of commercial sexual practices and, secondly, to the diversification of prostitution typologies, practices and available places. This phenomenon appeared within a social and cultural climate characterised by women's emancipation processes and changes occurred within the realm of sexual morality. As far as prostitution is concerned, the processes of modernization and globalization of the commercial sex market have made available new consumer models – thanks, for instance, to Internet and the possibility to easily reach sexual tourism destinations – which have revolutionised prostitution practices. This expansion is also linked to the emergence, on a large scale, of migrant women in the sex business circuits of most European countries.

In line with the need to overcome a reductionist approach that views the foreign prostitution phenomenon as a mere economic or criminal issue, this article aims at shedding some light on the *subjective* dimension of some of its main actors: in particular prostitutes and, where possible, clients. The analysis focuses on the dimension of radical *otherness* – physical and symbolic – associated with prostituted bodies and, in particular, the bodies of “other” women: migrant female prostitutes.

Au cours des deux dernières décennies, le secteur du commerce sexuel s'est profondément transformé en raison, d'une part, de l'expansion de ce marché et, de l'autre, de la diversification des formes de prostitution, des types de pratiques et de leurs lieux d'exécution. Ce phénomène est apparu dans un climat social et culturel caractérisé par un processus d'émancipation des femmes occidentales et des évolutions survenues dans le domaine de la morale sexuelle. En ce qui concerne la prostitution, les processus de modernisation et la mondialisation ont mis à disposition de nouveaux modèles de consommation - notamment par les échanges via Internet et la possibilité d'accéder facilement à des lieux du tourisme sexuel. Cette expansion est également liée à l'émergence, à grande échelle, des femmes immigrées dans les circuits de la plupart des pays d'Europe du sexe.

Ces mutations et la prédominance des étrangères dans ce secteur ont stimulé de nombreuses recherches sur cette question. Dans le but de dépasser l'approche réductionniste de la prostitution en tant que simple question économique ou pénale, cet article vise à faire la lumière sur la dimension *subjective* du phénomène. S'appuyant sur une enquête menée en Italie entre 2004 et 2006, il aborde la question de la représentation à travers le regard de ses principaux acteurs, en particulier les prostituées et, dans la mesure du possible, leurs clients. L'analyse se concentre sur la dimension de l'altérité radicale - physique et symbolique - des éléments associés à la prostitution et, en particulier, les corps des “autres” femmes - migrantes - prostituées.

---

### Entrées d'index

**Mots-clés** : altérité, prostitution étrangère, représentation, travail du sexe

**Keywords** : Foreign prostitution, otherness, sex market, subjective dimension

*Texte intégral***Introduction**

<sup>1</sup> Over the past fifteen years, the large-scale entry of migrant women into the various networks of the European commercial sex industry has led multiple scholars and researchers to focus on the characteristics of migratory trends which nourish this market (Abbatecola, 2006; Anderson & O'Connell Davidson, 2003; Berman, 2003; Campbell & O'Neil, 2006; Kempado & Doezema, 1998; Massari, 2003). These include the exploitation modalities adopted by pimps and exploiters, the management approaches used within the various prostitution sectors, as well as the national and international policies adopted in order to regulate the phenomenon. These studies have also underlined the need to understand sexual-economic exchanges within the globalization processes, which are inseparable from economy, culture, politics, labor relations and, last but not least, gender relations, both in the origin and in the destination countries. However, considering the need to overcome a reductionist approach which views the prostitution phenomenon as a mere economic issue, this article aims at shedding some light on the *subjective* dimension of some of its main actors: prostitutes in particular and, where possible, clients.

<sup>2</sup> Based on the results of the research project "*Domination and inferiorization: migrant bodies within prostitution networks*", conducted by a research team of the University of Calabria<sup>1</sup> in Italy between 2004 and 2006, the analysis focuses on the dimension of radical *otherness* – physical and symbolic – associated with prostituted bodies and, in particular, the bodies of "other" women: migrant female prostitutes. With this in mind, during the fieldwork, selected actors were met and interviewed: members of NGOs involved in projects related to prostitution and/or women trafficking for sexual exploitation (49), migrant women with a past prostitution experience (20), sex workers (2), judges and prosecutors involved in anti-trafficking investigations (2), experts (2), psychologists working for a hot-line providing support to prostitution clients and their relatives (2) and members of two associations bringing together prostitution clients, former clients and – as they define themselves – friends of prostitutes (3). It could be interesting to note that during the project two other associations based in Italy, which bring together prostitution clients, were identified through the web. Although one of them had a short existence and no longer exists, the research team managed to interview one of its members who preferred not to be recorded during the interview. As far as the other association is concerned, called "*Progetto La ragazza di Benin City*", it brings together clients, former clients, friends of prostitutes and Nigerian women with a current or past prostitution experience. This association is very active in spreading awareness to clients about the phenomenon of trafficking women for sexual exploitation, and has as main target Nigerian prostitution networks.

**1. Prostitution, gender relations and otherness**

<sup>3</sup> The phenomenon of commercial sex has undergone significant changes over the past two decades. This is on the one hand due to the expansion of the market of commercial sexual practices, from both the offer and the demand side and, on the other hand, to the diversification of prostitution typologies, practices and available places. The growth of the sex business in most Western European countries became visible between the 1970s and the 1980s, when the first sex shops were opened in some European cities. Various forms of masked prostitution started to be offered in night clubs, massage parlors, saunas and other relax and entertainment places; commercial TV channels and other mass-media with *ad hoc* sex programs expanded; and travel agencies started to organize the first tours of *Western* men toward central and eastern European countries and other exotic places both in Asia and South America (Barry 1996; Kempadoo, Doezema 1998; Bimbi 2001; Monzini 2005).

<sup>4</sup> However, over the past twenty years the expansion of the commercial sex market has reached its highest peak. This has occurred within a social and cultural climate characterized not only by the effects of women's emancipation processes and changes in the realm of sexual morality, which are not necessarily to be taken for granted, but also by the fact that sexual desire, mostly disengaged from love relations, is continuously performed and, sometimes, obsessively introduced into our daily lives. Through newspapers, television, advertisements and, in particular, the Internet and the messages and images of new medias, the sale of a wide range of products often plays upon the stimulation of sexual desire through the process, already observed by Marcuse, where sales and consumer goods are transformed into *libido* objects (2000, 34) – objects that encourage and often celebrate, in a more or less explicit way, the more traditional and predatory dimensions of masculinity.

<sup>5</sup> As far as prostitution is concerned, the processes of modernization and globalization of the commercial sex market have made new consumer models available – partly on account of Internet and the possibility to easily reach sexual tourism places – which have revolutionized prostitution practices. Thus, making available multiple forms of consumption (sometimes even immaterial, or in any case more discrete, such as in the case of the Web), bringing together distant places and allowing a sort of massification of the market, which is now potentially accessible to everybody (Monzini 2002, 9; Barry 1996, 122).

<sup>6</sup> The expansion and diversification of the offer of commercial sexual practices is also linked to the large-scale emergence of migrant women in most European countries' sex business networks. Globalization processes, inseparable from economy, culture, division of labor, politics and gender relations, have had strong repercussions on the dynamics of the feminization of poverty and on opportunities offered to women in the job market (Campbell, O'Neil 2006). The aspiration to improve their income and consumption opportunities, along with personal fulfillment, have often led women to emigrate abroad as a sort of gender emancipatory process (Mottura 2000). However, as was evident during some interviews, women often plan a migratory project in order to escape from poverty and deprivation: « women who decide to go to Italy, » a member of an NGO told us, « only think to improve their family conditions and the situation of their children left in the country of origin ». As another activist of an anti-

trafficking association stresses in her conversation, « Most of the women come from socially and economically disrupted families, families which suffer serious economic and social conditions, people in situations of cultural deprivation. Poverty is always the constant factor which drives them here ».

7 In this regard, female migrations toward Western Europe can be seen from a dual perspective. From one perspective, it is a form of refusal of subjugation, also in terms of gender, that women experience in their countries of origin; thus, it is a sort of emancipation. In another perspective, it is the outcome of a strong demand of their services in the destination countries, where alongside the traditional division of labor based on gender, there is another division between autochthonous and migrant women; the latter are mostly destined to the domestic and sex markets, independently from their educational and professional levels (Kofman *et al.* 2000; Sassen 2002). During the mid-1990s, the situation in several western European cities showed how transformations in the labor market, in occupational structures and contractual regimes – together with the adoption of restrictive migration policies – had opened up new opportunities of exploitation in sectors where women are more easily abused than men. Sex work *de facto* represents one of the occupational paths migrant women frequently take, both because hindered in other activities – because of their illegal or irregular status and the scarce opportunities available – and because much more vulnerable and exposed to being exploited than men. As Giuliana Chiaretti argues, « therefore we face a sort of transfer of functions associated with the traditional role of mother, wife, adult daughter from poor to rich countries. This is a huge phenomenon since millions of women, whether single, married, with children, migrate to the Northern world where they find jobs as nannies, maids, care givers and “sex workers”. It would seem that the rich part of the world is becoming poor in precious emotional and sexual resources and must look to the poorer areas in order to receive new ones » (2004, 9). There is a sort of *ethnic hierarchization* of domestic as well as sex work, or at least a process of substitution (symbolic or not) which calls for foreign women taking on roles linked to the most traditional aspects of femininity which Western women have questioned (Abbatecola 2006, 11)<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, foreign women are often presented a model of *subaltern* integration which accepts their otherness provided that it is kept at a certain distance, even though their activities inevitably involve a sort of insuppressible physical proximity (*Ibid.*; Ambrosini 1999).

8 In this respect, the analysis of female migrant prostitution in terms of a « total social fact » enables overcoming a reductionist approach toward the phenomenon as a mere economic exchange or as a question of public order or a criminal issue. The unique collocation of migrant women within that hybrid and displaced (a no-place) space, in an intermediate position between social being and not being, neither citizen nor foreigner, neither here nor anywhere, condemned to the double blame of absence and intrusion allows them to perform the function of living analyzers « of the most remote areas of social unconscious » (Palidda 2004). If we extend to migrant prostitution the reading that Abdelmalek Sayad provided of contemporary migrations and the mirror-function played by them, it is possible to hypothesize that these women can single out « what is latent in the constitution and functioning of a social order, thus unmasking what is masked, revealing what should be ignored and abandoned in a state of “innocence” or social ignorance, shedding some light or enlarging (thus the mirror-effect) what is usually hidden into the social unconscious and therefore is destined to be kept in the shadow, as a secret or social non-thought » (1996, 10).

9 Prostitution, as such, far from being positioned in the realm of extraneity, tells us about situations, dynamics, strategies, resources and wide-ranging conflicts which closely refer to our society, our systems of social regulation, representations of identity and differences, and processes of social construction of public space. However, the particular visibility of migrant women involved in street prostitution has enhanced a representation of the phenomenon as the realm of « radical otherness », of which the social and relational asymmetries, cultural relations, gender conflicts, symbolic and material resources, social representations, recognition and processes of extraneity would not closely concern our selves. The words of an Italian transgender activist, currently involved in social work, clearly synthesize that crucial change in the prostitution world:

(...) because during the past twenty years... more or less... yes, we have gone from an old way of conceiving prostitution, as I define it, “social”, that is the prostitution performed by a woman with a name, a story, a role, a place, a social connotation, to a prostitute without a name or story, without a place, which is the *mass*-prostitute. This *mass* prostitute is represented by “the Albanians”, “the Romanians”, “the Nigerians”... If in the past we used to talk about..., I don’t know, Cabiria, Elide, Samantha... the Fellinians, just to explain it, to speak in familiar terms, today we talk about groups of people, targets, such as Romanians, Nigerians who, very often, do not have a name...

10 The vision or perception of the foreign prostitute as the *other* « draws, in negative terms and in a non mediated way, what should be kept as extraneous to our world », an easy victim of violence in her culture of origin, « suitable to indicate those forms of uncivilization she would come from » (Bimbi 2003, 55). Moreover, the unavoidable closeness of those women seems to produce, at least for some people, a ubiquitous risk of « contamination » which should in a way be exorcised, through the adoption of effective disposals aimed at setting at a distance, denying and creating indifference, thus overall enacting strategies of annihilation of the *other*<sup>3</sup>. This often means the construction of a shared narration of “us” through an inferiorized and racialized image of the “other”. The migrant woman as prostitute has become one of the most persistent stereotypes of the “foreigner” in our society. And a discursive apparatus has been built up around “foreign” bodies, contributing to the regulation and organization of crucial social and symbolic dimensions, such as sexuality, gender structures and cultural differences.

## 2. Prostitution, violence, sexism, racism<sup>4</sup>

11 Prostitution, therefore, particularly *migrant* prostitution, concerns ourselves and, in various ways, leads us to question ourselves. Certainly, the dynamics of exploitation and slavery-like conditions imposed on most women involved in this market, voluntarily or not, often pertain exclusively to prostitutes and exploiters. Most of the violence in prostitution networks is, indeed, undoubtedly due to enslavement practices adopted by criminal organizations which manage prostitution and other markets, such as human trafficking. However, a more careful analysis aimed at emphasizing the relevance of a cognitive dimension, thereby refocusing the narration upon the subjective perspective of some protagonists – mostly women and, as much as possible, clients – reveals that not all the violence that can be found in this universe can be linked to

exploitation by illegal networks. From the stories collected during the fieldwork, it is possible to identify a multiple range of abuses during encounters with clients, as well as a number of violations due to the social control actions carried out by police forces and institutions – both public and private –, not to mention the violence related to the street, such as the risk of becoming a target for various forms of aggression, assault, brutality, insult, humiliation, etc. « In the “illegitimate” prostitution (that performed by *marginal* women and men, especially foreigners), violence is not an option, but a specific connotation of the relationship with the other » (Dal Lago, Quadrelli 2003, 211). Therefore, violence is not an exception but actually a sort of rule of action:

Let's just say that violence – *said one former sex worker during an interview* – represents a dimension you are obliged to cope with, because when you are in the street you are *exposed*, you are actually open to people's aggressiveness, since you are a symbol, a negative figure, because the prostitute has a negative value in our society. Who works as a prostitute? It's really absurd, very absurd... we know that everybody goes to her... but you are negatively considered. (...) when you are in the street, you really perceive people's aggressiveness and violence: people who walk close to you and feel the right to say anything they want, to throw things at you...

12 As far as migrant prostitution is concerned, particularly that performed by women who visibly come from *other* worlds – such as in the case of African women – we often find, in addition to violence, forms of inferiorization of the other which seem to be deeply rooted in both sexism and racism: phenomena which are both charged with symbolic and material violence (Siebert 2007). We are talking about two ideologies and social practices which strongly feature migrant prostitution and women trafficking and that contribute to shaping them as a sort of *free trade zone*. Some of the women interviewed, for example, recalled how some clients usually addressed them with very negative and vulgar words, and in some cases – as some of the African girls interviewed mentioned during the interview – using expressions aimed at inferiorizing them as though they were animals.

13 As Anderson and O'Connell Davidson highlight in their comparative research on migrant domestic and sex workers, « The racially/ethnically different worker is not perceived as an equal human being and so can be used and abused in ways that would be impossible in respect of workers of the same race/ethnicity » (2003, 42).

14 The indubitable women's emancipation process which, over the past forty years, has allowed women to conquer increased civil rights in the public sphere, higher education and growing integration into the labor market seems to concern only those who benefit from the privilege of citizenship, hence the right to be considered as a person. In the private sphere, women's citizenship, although formally granted, is actually a sort of *halved* citizenship, since the division of roles, labor and powers which we find in the family is still influenced by patriarchal heritage and asymmetrical power relations particularly in the sphere of sexuality (Siebert 2007). In line with traditional approaches, many men consider their wives fit for reproduction, but unfit for erotic pleasure which is perceived as intimately subversive since it could soften male control over women. Therefore, some women live sexuality as *sin*, as it can be perceived in the words of some women whose partners are prostitution clients, interviewed during our research. Some of them explain their partner's going to see prostitutes by blaming themselves for sexual inadequacy. The coordinator of an association expressly devoted to providing support and counseling to clients of prostitution highlights this in his conversation:

I was really surprised, because many wives blamed themselves; they called us and said: « I am really anguished because I discovered that after even twenty or thirty years of marriage my husband goes to prostitutes ». Or, in other cases, there were the children of the client who said: « My father who seemed to be a perfect man, an ideal husband, etc., we discovered that he... ». As far as wives are concerned there was that weird frustration: « probably I am not used to..., probably I was not able, I did not understand his needs, so I would like to be supported in that respect, I would like to understand why I lacked something... ». Many women, instead of being aggressive toward their partners... felt guilty. I was really surprised to see this form of self-guilt by the woman, of herself: « I realize that I do not fit... » they said « for sure I was the one who did not match his needs both psychologically and sexually... ». Therefore they felt guilty.

15 This partly explains some of the subtle dynamics which surround the strong demand of sexual services in our societies, despite the presence of strong freedom of pre-marriage intercourse and women's emancipation; « sexuality – contrary to hunger – » as Gérard Vincent highlights « remains the realm of dissatisfaction » (1988, 169).

16 The ambivalent collocation of the prostitute, as the origin of the term suggests – *prostituere*, to expose in public –, is represented by a form of merchandise (no longer private) which is offered to a buyer. This leads us to question the continuities and ruptures existing between public and private spheres. Both spheres are marked by more or less subtle forms of gender violence, and by deeply embedded asymmetrical power relations which are particularly evident in the case of prostitution. Citizenship – considered in Marshall's terms as « full belonging to the collectivity » – is profoundly eroded in the case of prostitutes, since their status keeps them symbolically and physically away from the community; they are condemned to a « social death » (O'Connell Davidson 2001). They are traditionally excluded from some fundamental rights, such as the right to protection and the right to respect. The feeling that violence experienced by a prostitute is less serious than that inflicted on *honest* women, and that some policemen's attitudes perpetuate abuses toward prostitutes rather than offering them support and protection, are often mentioned in the conversation with some sex workers:

Many policemen (...) always feel... I don't know... to be superior... they must annul those who are on the other side; they must cancel the so-called *criminal*, because they consider criminal a wide range of people (...). On one side there are *normal* people, on the other there are criminals, prostitutes, transsexuals, homosexuals... all those people considered different, considered as the *other*. Of course there is also the policeman who is human, who understands more... but if there was more trust toward the police, a different relationship, I am sure that there would be more denunciations; there will be three times more. I would like to tell you one of the stories I personally witnessed, because it is really terrible... It was when the Bossi-Fini law [*Italian law concerning immigration*] was approved, when policemen started to be overzealous, since they felt strong in their work, in their role as enforcer, you know? One night we were in a street, Via Rigosa, which is particularly dark and suddenly we heard a girl screaming and trying to get out from the car-window... and inside the car there was this guy who was keeping her... We immediately came back with our car because we thought that it was the typical client's aggression; but this guy was a policeman, he was from the Speciale [*a specialized police body*] and they were doing a raid... .. When we stopped close to this car the guy said « Help us, we are trying to keep her... ». But we were supposed to do what? Then the police car arrived and they brought the girl away; but this girl had been treated really badly... when they decided to leave her, they threw her away from the car with a hand on her back, as if she was an animal... I swear to you, it was really mind-blowing, and this guy also did not seem to be normal, he had two glowing eyes...

17 « The loss of the right to respect and protection are obviously closely intertwined; thus, police abuses are perceived as minor deviations since they are directed toward “worthless” women, halved citizens because of the lifestyle adopted » (Abbatecola 2006, 23-24). Unfortunately, the very low level of public interest surrounding the several cases of prostitutes’ homicide in Italy tragically confirms this<sup>5</sup>.

18 As far as respect is concerned, the prostitute label – true or just presumed – brings with it a stigmatizing potential which tends to cancel any possibility to be considered just as a “person” and, even more, a full-fledged woman. That *original sin* induces denying other personal characteristics, abilities or competences, without any chance of redeem. Some Nigerian women met during the research, for example, told us about their problems in finding a job, or even in renting an apartment just because of the implications that their mere physical appearance – woman, black, Nigerian, *therefore* prostitute – had solicited for their interlocutors (employer, landlord, etc.). As O’Connell Davidson clearly highlights, « (...) notions such as exclusion and otherness are crucial in the mainstream idea of prostitution, just as notions of difference based upon biology are essential in the mainstream idea of gender » (2001, 185). Therefore, prostitutes are perceived as *generalized* others. Julia O’Connell Davidson also questions: « which kind of desire can be felt toward a person who is constructed as a sexual “other”, socially dead? » (Ivi, 183). Significantly, the possibilities of being granted recognition or, more easily, any form of respect are, in many cases, closely linked to the capacity to become *invisible*, to disappear, to not be recognized. Some Eastern-European women who worked in the sex market, for example, emphasized in their stories how the success of their social reintegration process was due to their capacity to not be clearly recognized as former prostitutes. In most cases they are white, young and charming, attributes considered more suitable for jobs which require contact with people – such as bars, restaurants, pubs, hotels –, and have a higher level of education, easily camouflageable under the generic label of “migrants” or, as we noticed during the fieldwork, “foreign students”.

19 Those perverse combinations between sexism and racism, violence and inferiorisation, distance and difference are reinforced in relations, both public and private, with migrant prostitutes, to the point that both those who have contact with the latter and public opinion feel substantial indifference. As Paola Rebughini efficaciously stresses, « the more indifferent the victim of violence is, the more distant she is perceived to be even in her difference: not only what is far away in time and space, but also what is perceived as alien does not provoke any emotion and does not move to pity because his/her distance/difference enhance our inattention » (2004, 88).

20 From an analytical perspective, the forms of new global prostitution seem to be shaped according to a very particular type of dominion, characterized by humiliation, shame, misrecognition and inferiorization (Siebert 2007). The three expressions of shame or misrecognition analyzed by Axel Honneth may all be identified in relations that Western clients have with migrant prostitutes: 1. physical abuse until extreme torture which strongly affects the psycho-social integrity of the person; 2. humiliation which affects the normative comprehension of the self, that is the exclusion from socially granted rights, which can lead to the loss of respect for oneself; 3. the denial of social value or respect for cultural difference and the *other’s* group of belonging (1993). All of them consist of relational modalities which aim at de-structuring women’s trust in themselves, their respect and self-esteem, through denial of their individuality. In this regard, most of the women met during the research told us that they had always used fictitious names during their prostitutional lives, which emblematically drew a dividing line between what they had been before (and what they tried to be in that very limited space of their personal life) and what they had become while working in the street. « *My name is not Wendy* » is the title of one the latest book which collects the story of a Nigerian girl who escaped prostitution after some years spent working in the Italian streets (Uba, Monzini 2007). One of the social workers interviewed clearly summarizes this notion:

These girls [*foreigners*] do not have a name, just because they tend to delete it, because of the problems related to their illegality, for problems related to trafficking, immigration, you know, because they have a history that they want to cancel; that is one way, no? [...] We talk about girls... that you see today, for two or three days, three months maximum, but then they disappear... this is mostly the problem.

### 3. Displaced bodies

21 The bodily dimension is one of the crucial dimensions of any definition, representation and discourse on prostitution. Indeed, we face *physical* bodies; *symbolic* bodies; bodies *confined* in power relations, dominion and market relations; bodies as goods of consumption or exchange; bodies which are in all cases instrument and symbol of relations which leave on the skin an indelible mark. In light of this, similarities may be noted between the new expressions of global prostitution and the old forms of slavery practices. In both cases we refer to *naked* bodies, undressed from the enjoyment of rights; *world-less* bodies, expropriated from the capacity or possibility to talk, to express themselves; and, particularly, *excluded* bodies, made invisible, retained from freely moving in the *agora*: that physical and symbolic place where only citizens – those who are entitled by the ruling power to have intellect and *logos* – are granted with the right to exist. The enslaved body, on the other side, stripped of any rights and removed from the citizenship dimension, is at the disposal of any form of violence, manipulation, mutilation, segregation or fraud (Covre 2000). We could probably say that such bodies are absolutely *denied*.

22 In the stories collected during the fieldwork there is often a reference to cases of bodies sold to somebody, obliged to leave everything, to live in unsafe places, to work in unknown cities, to live in a condition of separation and exclusion. They may be defined as *displaced* bodies, forced to move in organized, although alienated and alienating spaces (such as modern Western cities), which prevent people from creating reference in terms of identity and relations. Similarly, these bodies – as well as minds – are continuously confronted with strategies of discipline and enslavement carried out not only through the macabre ritual of rape as a sort of initiation to the work in the street or the Voodoo rites, but also through subtler practices aimed at shaping and transforming their body into a presumed object of desire (for clients) and therefore of exploitation.

23 These are the words of Elena, one of the women with a prostitution experience in the Italian streets, met during the research, who recalls her first working day in Turin:

And this girl said « Let's go to work », but I said « I would like to sleep » but she answered « No, tonight you must work ». « And where am I supposed to go? », and she said « in the streets ». And I had not realized... I thought that I had to do the street sweeper... and I replied « But usually streets are cleaned during the day » and they started to laugh, you know, like pigs, they laughed, laughed, and I felt stupid and I said « Damn! ». She opened the wardrobe and said « These are your clothes, these are for you [for the other girl] ». Oh Jesus! (...) When I saw those clothes where you were naked more than dressed, I went to the toilet, locked the door and started crying. They knocked at the door, but I did not want to come out, but there was just a small window inside... So, at the end, I opened the door, and they tried to calm me down... But I did not want to wear those clothes, but they said « Put them on », and I said « No! ». They gave me the clothes, and I launched them on the bed... Well, at the end what can you do? When you find yourself in those situations you cannot do anything... Either yes, or no. Either you are out, or you are in the game.

24 The aesthetic transformation of the body, through sexy clothes and make-up, is often made on the basis of Western societies' models. During the ethnographic observation carried out on some local trains which connect Florence with other small cities in the near province, I often witnessed really amazing body transformation processes. Young African women, who got on the train wearing casual clothes and no make-up, looking like young girls with their plastic bags and big suitcase, within the time-frame needed to go from one city to the other radically transformed themselves, while still continuing to talk and eat all together: applying whitening creams to their faces, flashy make-up, seductive clothes, showy wigs and fake nails. By the time they arrived at the destination, they appeared perfectly dressed as objects of desire according to the typical Western image of prostitutes. As Wendy recounts in her biographical book, recalling her encounters with Italian clients: « some of them asked me to take my make-up off only when they brought me at their home, in order to avoid that neighbors, looking at me, might realize that *I was a prostitute* » (Uba, Monzini 2007, 2007). Just for few hours Wendy accepted to throw her mask off- ready to perform a *normal* appearance – and to re-wear it once in the street again. As the director of an NGO based in Turin highlights, « (...) there is an actual psychological and social shaping, transformation of “what you are”. In this case “what you are” socially is usually stigmatizing; it is a source of disapproval and leaves the woman in exclusion and social invisibility. The on-going changes, the continuous transformations of identity become a sort of performance made within relations where neither exchange nor desire exists, because relations are forced within the term of the contract » (Vallarino Gancia 2005, 82).

25 This physical transformation is entirely aimed at emphasizing the various body parts which are considered more attractive by clients. The entire body in its totality seems to disappear. From the interviews with some prostitution clients we can see the emergence of a sort of mutilation, dismemberment of the body into single organs. Some of them, for example, stated that they were not attracted by the women themselves as such, but by their lips, their back, their breasts, and so on. This mechanism similarly occurs in pornography where there is a sort of monumentalization of the various organs, not necessarily the sexual ones (Siebert 2007). Clients' choice is made on the basis of a kind of menu of the various body organs they have in front of them, onto which they project their fantasies and desires. Women are often chosen on the basis of the fantasies connected with single body parts which are used in a totally instrumental way, completely disregarding the person in her integrity. According to this perspective, the dimension of radical otherness attributed to migrant prostitutes would further contribute to providing clients with dehumanized and degraded sexual tools ready to be used (O'Connell Davidson 2001, 185). Tragically recalling what Simone De Beauvoir emphasized as far as prostitution and marriage are concerned, that prostitution allows men to satisfy themselves « on any *body* » (1999, 650) which is not entitled to any personal *rights*, we can say that the global prostitution era allows men to satisfy themselves on any *organ*, the body of which is totally denied the status of person.

26 Concerning the representations and discursive dimensions which are usually constructed in relation to migrant prostitutes, we can therefore identify an on-going sliding between invisibility and visibility, denial and assertion, without being able to trace the boundaries between these two poles in a clear way. On the one hand, these bodies are *transparent, invisible*, or, better, they are made non visible, since they represent a source of disturbance to public viewing and morality. They are bodies which do not exist because they do not have rights; they are entitled to neither juridical nor social citizenship. Those who, for various reasons, have contact with these bodies – clients, exploiters, pimps, institutional agencies, social workers – often tend to absolutize their condition as either prostitute or victim *tout court*, without seeming to recognize female paths of subjectivization in this domain. The social personality of these women, thus their role as social actors, does not emerge. They are not considered as subjects because the “prostitute's” or “victim's” social identity tends to phagocytically engulf any other personal identity dimension (Treppete 2003). On the other hand, these women become the targets of a sort of perverse hyper-attention through various forms of disregard and practices of inferiorization through racism and sexism, all of which lead them to a sort of self-negation or self-denial. « *On my body I put a cross [signifying death]* », tragically concludes Natasha, a young Eastern-European girl who was forced to prostitute herself for several years in the Italian streets, when, at the end of the interview, the interviewer solicited her to talk about her current personal life and plans.

## 4. Concluding remarks

27 The analysis of information and life-stories collected during the research suggests that the body represents a place where various meanings and effects of power sediment. Prostitution offers the chance to consider how that particular symbolic violence which has historically influenced gender relations drives dominated individuals to adhere, within concrete circumstances, to laws that apparently seem irrational. However, it also offers the chance to see that it is even possible to adopt the laws of those who dominate, such as in the case of those women who, after having paid the debt to their exploiters, become exploiters themselves. This demonstrates a sort of reversal of the tyrant-victim logic, leading to identification with the aggressors and, accordingly, with Western profit economy. This change of perspective allows, for example, some women to manage to survive an experience – forced prostitution – which would have been intolerable. Wendy, again, clearly describes this strategy: « actually I was disgusted by any request coming from clients, but I knew that my goal was to empty their pocket. It was *always always always* by thinking about that final goal that I could do everything; otherwise I would not have done anything. I needed money » (Uba, Monzini 2007, 100-101). Cynicism, along with fear and class hatred were – according to Simone De Beauvoir – the modalities prostitutes used in order to cope with violence directed toward them (Siebert 2007). Today, it seems that we should

also take into consideration a post-colonial vision of clients, mostly white men, who ask for commercial sexual services from migrant women. In this regard, the interviews collected in the book edited by Dal Lago and Quadrelli, particularly those conducted with Nigerian women working as prostitutes, are particularly interesting since they show a deconstructed and acute view of the white colonialist man. These authors see in the « brutality of Italian clients over foreign women, our inner Africa or Albania ». According to this perspective, « with the emergence of immigration, those typical colonialist behaviors have re-appeared, while public opinion is silent in front of the current colonial or post-colonial relations » (2003, 239). These remarks recall a deeply rooted tradition during the colonial dominion, represented by the political will to intimately subjugate the dominated through physical and symbolic power over their women's bodies (Siebert 2007). The identification of the female body with the nation – which must be undressed, violated and possessed by the colonizer, yet protected, veiled and closed within the domestic walls by the colonized – still represents a legacy which influences current gender relations. The colonization of women's bodies by dominant virility symbolizes, on a fantasy level, the strongest challenge to the colonized man (and today the male migrant). A street social worker efficaciously explains this point: « It's really interesting that kind of obsessive comparison with the black man that the white has in his encounters with black women; the white tends to get successful from that comparison through two ways: either through the ostentation of violence not very dissimilar from torture over the black woman, or through the use of various sexual tools, the dimensions of which must outsize the supposedly large ones belonging to the black man, as a sort of compensation. The game is just this: managing to provoke a stronger pain than the one they think the black man does. Therefore, there are often racial comparisons made by the white man and racist insults against the black woman during the sexual intercourse » (Dal Lago, Quadrelli 2003, 223). The similarities with practices of racialization and inferiorization of women during the colonial era are really worrying.

28 Today the colonial fight can be found in our European mainland. Immigration, terrorism, invasions, security issues... fear. The phantom of the enemy is everywhere, while the enemy who does not exist is continuously evoked: « And, therefore, people wait for the enemy, although most of the times without any success, until they feel that it is under their skin as an alien, and nobody can live without it anymore » (Giordano, Mizzella 2006, 12). This blurry phantom of the enemy can be confronted through the contamination of bodies. The anguish related to this invisible enemy, to the enemy within, is symbolically defeated through the use of violence, through the availability of sold bodies and the racist and sexist connotations of the new transnational criminal prostitution market (Siebert 2007). Obviously this hypothesis does not refer to the overall prostitution phenomenon, but tries to indicate some particularly relevant trends for the analysis of migrant women's prostitution and their clients' behavior. In this regard, prostitution, and its ubiquitous diffusion and existence, although hidden or denied, represents an interesting field where one can understand gender relations in contemporary society.

29 « The variety of encounters and situations which occur in the prostitution world suggests a modality of woman/man relations which is pretty different from the one performed daily under the sun » (Baldaro Verde, Todella 2005, 109). The extreme sexist and racist traits of some behaviors, more popular than one might normally imagine, may be understood in relation to the changes undergone in the relations between women and men in Western consumption societies. The migrant woman prostitute symbolizes a radical representation of otherness, of somebody who does not belong to our world, who is distant, radically different, linked to a social universe still rooted in archaism or, even, the non-human. On the other side, the autochthonous woman, the Italian woman, in our case, is by definition the woman who is not a prostitute and is emancipated. Racism and sexism, under this perspective, would seem to represent a sort of compensative reaction against the women's emancipation process (Siebert 2007).

30 However, it would be more fruitful to promote a wider debate on the inner cultural contradictions of our *own* societies, instead of absolutizing differences between *our* culture and the one that migrants supposedly bring with them. Through this way we would notice that even in the Western world gender relations reproduce themselves through symbolic violence and physical dominion over women. Moreover, the analysis of the stories, social representations and discourses which inhabit that *border-land* which is street prostitution says a lot about the multicultural societies we live in, about *other* cultures as well as *our own*, about sexual relations in various societies and the reduction of women's sexuality to a service for men within the globalized division of labor (Maluccelli 2007). Therefore, those characteristic traits assumed by migrant prostitution express, reflect and condition relevant aspects of our daily lives as well as civil, social, cultural and institutional perspectives of our societies.

---

## Bibliographie

- ABBATECOLA, E., *L'altra donna. Immigrazione e prostituzione in contesti metropolitani*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2006;
- AMBROSINI, M., *Utiles invasori. L'inserimento degli immigrati nel mercato del lavoro italiano*, Franco Angeli-ISMU, Milano, 1999;
- ANDERSON, B., O'CONNELL DAVIDSON, J., *Is Trafficking in Human Beings Demand Driven? A Multi-Country Pilot Study*, IOM, December 2003;
- AUGÉ, M., *Non-luoghi. Introduzione ad un'antropologia della surmodernità*, Eleuthera, Milano, 1993;
- BALDARO VERDE, J., TODELLA, R., *Gli specchi dell'eros maschile*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2005;
- BARRY, K. L., *The Prostitution of Sexuality*, New York University Press, New York, 1996;
- BERMAN, J., "(Un)Popular Strangers and Crises (Un)Bounded: Discourses of Sex Trafficking, European Immigration and National Security under Global Duress", in *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol 9 (1), 2003;
- BIMBI, F., "Prostituzione, migrazioni e relazioni di genere", in *Polis*, 1, 2001;
- BIMBI, F., "Tra differenze e alterità. Gli « studi delle donne » alla prova del pluralismo culturale", in *Bimbi, F. (a cura di), Differenze e disuguaglianze. Prospettive per gli studi di genere in Italia*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2003;
- CAMPBELL, R., O'NEIL, M. (a cura di), *Sex Work Now*, Willan Publishing, Devon, 2006;

- CHIARETTI, G., "Le donne migranti nel mondo", relazione nell'ambito del Corso di formazione per operatori pubblici della sicurezza urbana, Progetto WEST-Women East Smuggling Trafficking, Legnaro (Pd), 15 giugno 2004, disponibile su [http://www.regione.emilia-romagna.it/WEST/italiano/formazione/veneto/materiale/1-4\\_relazioneChiaretti.pdf](http://www.regione.emilia-romagna.it/WEST/italiano/formazione/veneto/materiale/1-4_relazioneChiaretti.pdf);
- COVRE, P., Sesso comprato e venduto, 2000, disponibile su <http://www.lucciole.org/filosofia-e-intenti/sesso-comprato-e-venduto.html>
- DAL LAGO, A., QUADRELLI, E., La città e le ombre. Crimini, criminali, cittadini, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2003;
- DE BEAUVOIR, S., Il secondo sesso, il saggiatore, Milano, 1999;
- EHRENREICH B., HOCHSCHILD A. (A CURA DI), Donne globali, Tate, colf e badanti, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2004;
- GIORDANO, V., MIZZELLA, S., Aspettando il nemico. Percorsi dell'immaginario e del corpo, Meltemi, Roma, 2006;
- KEMPADOO, K., DOEZEMA, J. (a cura di), Global Sex Workers. Rights, Resistance, and Redefinition, Routledge, London, 1998;
- KOFMAN E., PHIZACKLEA A., RAGHURAN P., SALES R., Gender and International Migration in Europe, Routledge, London e New York, 2000;
- HONNETH, A., Riconoscimento e disprezzo. Sui fondamenti di una etica post-tradizionale, Rubbettino, Soneria manelli, 1993;
- MALUCCELLI, L., La ragazza di Benin City. Studio di caso su una rete multiculturale, rapporto di ricerca, luglio 2007;
- MARCUSE, H., Eros e civiltà, Edizioni Mondolibri, Milano, 2000;
- MASSARI, M., Il mercato della prostituzione straniera, in Barbagli, M. (a cura di), Rapporto sulla criminalità in Italia, Bologna, il Mulino, 2003;
- MONZINI, P., Sex Traffic. Prostitution, Crime and Exploitation, Zed Books, London & New York, 2005;
- MOTTURA, G., "Immigrazione, « lavori tradizionalmente femminili », traffici a scopo di sfruttamento sessuale: considerazioni su un esempio di complessità sociale", in Carchedi, F. et al, I colori della notte. Migrazioni, sfruttamento sessuale, esperienze di intervento sociale, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2000;
- O'CONNELL DAVIDSON, J., la prostituzione. Sesso, soldi e potere, edizioni Dedalo, Bari, 2001;
- PALIDDA, S., Prefazione, in Morini, C., La serva serve. Le nuove forzate del lavoro domestico, DeriveApprodi, Roma, 2004;
- REBUGHINI, P., La violenza, Carocci, Roma, 2004;
- SAYAD A., "La doppia pena del migrante. Riflessioni sul pensiero di stato", aut aut, 275, pp. 8-16, 1996;
- SASSEN, S., Globalizzati e scontenti. Il destino delle minoranze nel nuovo ordine mondiale, Il Saggiatore, Milano, 2002;
- SIEBERT, R., Il razzismo. Il riconoscimento negato, Carocci, Roma, 2003;
- SIEBERT, R., Genere, processi di dominazione e inferiorizzazione, 2007, dattiloscritto inedito;
- TABET, P., La grande beffa. Sessualità delle donne e scambio sesso-economico, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli, 2004;
- TREPPE M. "L'Altra e il suo doppio. La prostituzione delle immigrate", in Bimbi F. (a cura di), Differenze e diseguaglianze. Prospettive per gli studi di genere in Italia, il Mulino, Bologna, 2003.
- UBA, W., MONZINI, P., Il mio nome non è Wendy, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2007;
- UNITED NATIONS, Protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons, especially women and children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against transnational organized crime, New York, United Nations, 2000;
- VALLARINO GANCIA, F., "Rappresentazioni del corpo, della sessualità e dell'affettività in donne vittime della tratta", in Progetto Li.fe. Libertà Femminile, Donne vittime della tratta esperienze e metodologie, febbraio 2005;
- VINCENT, G., "Il corpo e l'enigma sessuale", in Ariès, P., Duby, G., La vita privata. Il Novecento, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 1988.

---

## Notes

- 1 The project was part of a major research project funded by the Italian Ministry of University and Scientific Research which was coordinated at a national level by Prof. Franca Bimbi (University of Padua). The research team of the University of Calabria (Italy) was composed of Donatella Barazzetti, Teresa Grande, Monica Massari, Antonella Salomoni, and Giovanna Vingelli and was coordinated by Prof. Renate Siebert. To all of them go my most sincere gratitude and thanks, although I am the only one responsible for the opinions expressed hereinafter.
- 2 In this regard the results of research carried out by Bridget Anderson and Julia O'Connell Davidson for the *International Organization for Migration-IOM* on the conditions of exploitation imposed on both sex workers and migrant workers employed in the domestic sector are particularly interesting (Anderson, O'Connell Davidson 2003).
- 3 I am very grateful to Donatella Barazzetti for her precious suggestions on this aspect of the phenomenon.
- 4 I would like to warmly thank Renate Siebert for having allowed me to refer, in writing this paper, to her unpublished essay containing extremely insightful reflections on prostitution, sexism and racism (Siebert 2007).
- 5 According to Isoke Aikpitanyi – leader of the Italian association "Benin City girls" – the amount of Nigerian prostitutes killed in Italy since the 1990s is around 200 (communication during a meeting held in San Gimignano, Siena, 8 October 2007).

---

## Pour citer cet article

Référence électronique

Monica Massari, « The *Other* and her Body: Migrant Prostitution, Gender Relations and Ethnicity », *Cahiers de l'Urmis* [En ligne], 12 | juin 2009, mis en ligne le 26 juin 2009, consulté le 31 octobre 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/urmis/787>

---

### ***Auteur***

**Monica Massari**  
Sociologue, Université de Calabre, Italie

---

### ***Droits d'auteur***



Les contenus des *Cahiers de l'Urmis* sont disponibles selon les termes de la Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.