SPECIAL SECTION

**Sexual encounters, migration and desire
in post-socialist context(s)**

Edited by

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Abstract: This introduction explores the contested issue of 'prostitution' and the transnational flow of sex labor. Drawing on the experiences of female migrants described in this issue, we rethink the impact of socialist transition and examine larger themes such as the role of discursive practices in the establishment of national boundaries and in various forms of international intervention. We problematize the 'traffic in women' as well as the conceptualization of and dichotomies surrounding sex labor. Key points in the current debates on transnational sex work are highlighted and an approach is suggested which conceives of agency and structure not in oppositional terms, but as a continuum. Considering the structural conditions imposed by neo-liberal policies, we argue that ethnographic accounts can help explain how transnational openings in the market for sex work are internalized as opportunities for young women in post-socialist contexts and how economic liberalization becomes accepted as 'natural' and 'inevitable'.

Keywords: prostitution, transnationalism, sex work, post-socialism, neo-liberalism, trafficking

Introduction

Since the early 1990s, with the breakdown of socialist regimes, there has been a dramatic flow of female sexual labor across the borders. This special section of the volume¹ concentrates on the flux of young women of the post-socialist countries that are experiencing the restructuring of their economies. The 'post-socialist' category refers here to the experience of socialist regimes in the period of liberalization that created similar ideological landscapes and a common array of social institutions. The aftermath of the various socialist regimes has been marked by the 'uncertainties' of market reform, privatization

and democratization. For the most part, this experience is concentrated in a more or less geographically bounded area of Eastern and Central Europe and the territory of the former Soviet Union. Nevertheless, as reflected in the contribution on the Cuban experience, the common repercussions of changes to state socialism clearly illustrate the limitations of a purely 'area studies' approach to post-socialism.

Post-socialism as common experience

The experiences of women migrants described in this special section provide one

entry-point into understanding the 'transition' and the migration that has occurred from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union to Western Europe and Turkey. While there are many types of 'flow' across borders following the collapse of the FSU, all of the essays in this section focus on just one aspect of this migration, i.e. commercialized sexual encounters involving young women from formerly socialist countries which are experiencing neo-liberal financial programs that have impoverished many people.

As Humphrey (2002) argues, neo-liberal reforms and structural adjustment have affected women more negatively than men, leading to a reduced sense of well-being and hope even among middle-class and well-educated women. Although the different post-socialist regions experienced economic crises of varying severity, in most countries women were the most vulnerable members of the labor market during the process of political and economic restructuring. Nor did they fare any better in terms of social benefits or educational opportunities. In regions of industrial 'restructuring' and plant closures, female-headed households have emerged with women being bearing the major responsibility of managing multiple strategies for household survival (Buroway, Krotov, Lytkina 2000).

Long before transition literature was well established, Hann (1993) suggested comparisons with the Third World experience. More recently, Verdery (2002: 15) and Humphrey (2002: 12) have pointed to the value of parallels with post-colonialism and post-imperialism. The forces of finance capitalism coming from outside the post-socialist countries have exacerbated these difficult conditions. It is important to note here that the recognition of a relationship between prostitution or commercialized sex and political economy does not automatically imply the victimization of female subjects. Rather, awareness of this interface exposes the complexity of prostitution. Similarly, other literature on commercialized sex suggests a number of factors – e.g. the dependence of export-oriented economies on foreign investment and loans,

militarism and the drive to increase tourism – that can all influence the way in which prostitution is constructed.

More recent anthropological literature on globalization and transnationalism has opened up fresh perspectives in migration research. Dichotomous analyses framed in such terms as host/sending societies, first/second generation, etc., have been reconsidered. Instead, we think in terms of a 'transnational social space' or 'transnational social formations' in conceptualizing cross-border relations. If we acknowledge the insufficiency of a one-directional approach founded on center/periphery, local/global, sender/receiver analysis, we need to define social space rather than bounded social units. Yet, as shown in this special section, the use of the relatively new terminology and conceptual framework of transnationalism and globalization runs the risk of neglecting long-term historical continuities and conditions in which sex work is situated.

Prostitution by women from former socialist countries does seem to be on the increase – both in terms of perception and reality – fed by sometimes sensationalist media reports of 'sexual slavery' that has occurred in the traffic in women across national boundaries. These reports have been encouraged by reform movements, sponsored by the International Organization for Migration and the Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women, that seek to regulate 'sexual traffic' across international boundaries and especially to stem the trade in young adolescents. On the other hand, sex workers' international organizations, such as COYOTE,² have sought to raise the status and work conditions of international sex workers, rejecting what they view as the criminalizing discourse of the reformers that stigmatizes young women. The phenomenon of women migrating across international boundaries and becoming involved in sex work has elicited diverse, yet strong, responses from differently situated groups, individuals and organizations.

The varying discourses that have arisen in response to 'post-socialist' women and

international sex work reflect a number of issues that are important in analyzing transnational sexual encounters, and particularly those between the have and have-not centers of uneven capitalist accumulation (Harvey 2002). The exchange of sex for money across national boundaries has many implications for local gender norms, the gender division of labor, transnational identities, international boundaries and treaties, and issues of criminalization and deviance. It can impact on the ways in which countries envisage their economic well-being or self-sufficiency through the notion of national 'honor', as well as how notions of 'community tradition' and 'modernity' are being constructed in the face of neo-liberal globalization. Given the complexity of the issue of prostitution, we shall briefly outline the major thematic layers that seem important in analyzing this phenomenon and the responses to it, and that often reappear in the essays in this section.

Discursive interventions and ethnographic practice

One of the major issues to unpack in analyzing the emotionally-laden phenomenon of transnational sex work is the distinction between the discursive levels of governmental, NGO and other interventions into the trade, and the ethnographic specificities of particular types of sex work, social networks and the individual histories of differentially situated women. The marked differences between how sex work is represented in discursive and organizational structures versus the actual lives and histories of transnational sex workers illustrates the need for a grounded, ethnographic approach to this subject. The essays presented in this section all fill that gap, documenting and analyzing the transnational lives of sex workers from the standpoint of the women themselves. In the process, they go a long way towards unraveling the hiatus between the original location of consciousness in an experiencing individual and abstracted systems of representation, the latter constituting part of the relations of ruling (Smith 1990).

Sex work, often coded as prostitution, has often elicited strong responses from communities, individuals and national and international regulatory organizations. Doezenia (1998, 2000) has ably documented similarities in official responses to prostitution between the 'white slavery' panic of the early twentieth century and the current 'traffic in women' discourses. Both then and now, the predominant image of the transnational prostitute is and was that of innocence, youth and victimization caught in a sordid ordeal of coercive practices and fraudulent promises. A sexually-experienced woman making an active choice to improve her economic or life chances by engaging in sex work abroad does not make an appealing representation for rescue and rehabilitation.

This is probably due to the dichotomies between good and bad women that still underlie most official responses to prostitution and have been part of popular historical consciousness since early suffragettes successfully promoted the criminalization of prostitution in the Victorian period (Walkowitz 1980, Guy 1992). Even recent feminist discourses have contributed to 'othering' the prostitute through the use of dichotomies such as agent and victim (Bell 1994: 2). Second-wave feminists, following in the footsteps of their suffragette predecessors, have unconsciously adopted the good woman/whore distinction that has precluded assigning any positive identity to prostitutes except that of victim (Weeks 1985). This has led to an uncomfortable relationship between second-wave feminist thought, which views 'prostitution' as perhaps the most exploited of all positions in an overall sex-gender system, and sex-workers themselves (Kessler 2002: 219).

Hence, it is important to first differentiate between what has been termed 'the traffic in women', on the one hand, and the lived experiences of those who seem to be involved in commercial sex but are also students, maids or traders, etc. Most of the governmental, legislative and social reform literature has primarily featured the worst-case scenarios of vulnerable young girls

being lured by tales of high wages and jobs in advertising, modeling and/or dancing, who then find themselves ensnared into a life of sordid horror from which escape is next to impossible. Here, it is diverse (including violently abusive) forms of patriarchal, class and governmental oppression that prevent their escape. Tales of abduction are also fairly prominent. This classic victim image – and we are not saying that such victims do not exist – has become the ‘Ur text’ for public understanding of the international migration of sex workers, and it is the symbol around which international organizations such as the International Organization of Migration (IOM), UNICEF and La Strada have developed legal and rehabilitation strategies to prevent the traffic in women and to provide community assistance to its victims.

Women, the nation and border anxieties

As Yuval-Davis (1997) notes, women are often specifically identified as bearers of community norms and values, as the objects, rather than subjects, of the ‘nation’ or ‘ethnic group’.³ This means that sexually appropriate behavior, particularly of young women, is often explicitly tied to an image of positive cultural and national identity. This is because the construction of national identity involves the normalization of proper gender roles to create ‘appropriate’ citizens. Sexual exchanges that involve commercial transactions, and especially transactions across national boundaries, can then symbolize a transgression of community propriety, expressed through the metaphor of ‘national crisis’. Transnational sex work destabilizes the spatial concept of the nation and its bounded territory and the spatialization of identity in terms of the female body. In addition, where female migrants encounter communities that are themselves engaged in processes of identity formation, international sex workers can often become the feared ‘Other’ and stigmatized as ‘whores’.

Here the image of the borderless prostitute functions to ‘close’ community boundaries against the feared cultural consequences of globalized modernity and its ‘free market’ world view.

In a recent article, Kullick (2003) illustrates this fear in his discussion of a law introduced in Sweden in 1994 criminalizing the purchase of ‘temporary sexual relationships’ by clients. Kullick analyses newspaper articles and the words of government officials from that period, all illustrating the fear of an Eastern European ‘invasion’ of sex workers if Sweden were to enter the EU. Kullick argues that wider anxieties about the terms of Sweden’s entry into the EU were articulated at that time through restrictive laws on prostitution, although this time focused on the clients, or ‘Johns’. Sex work is definitely ‘matter out of place’, and concern about the vulnerability of Swedish identity in the face of competition from larger EU economies became condensed in the image of invading ‘Russian prostitutes’.

In patriarchal contexts, the phenomenon of women migrating for sex work can also raise anxieties in the original country, signaling the shame of impoverishment and of the country’s general loss of ‘status’. These anxieties can also be fuelled by concerns about the rising autonomy of women. If they are migrating without being tied to families, and by metaphoric extension to the ‘patrilineal’ nation, then both the market and the nation can be viewed as under threat. Such anxieties were much in evidence in the early twentieth century, when eastern European women who migrated without families to Argentina and elsewhere were assumed to be prostitutes and were denied citizenship on those grounds (Guy 1992). Today, however, the relationship between transnational prostitution and the rise of illiberal nationalisms as a response to globalization is, as yet, an understudied phenomenon.

Berg’s discussion of the relation between national allegories of socialist self-sufficiency versus the reality of Cuban women engaging in sex work is a perhaps the strongest expression of this theme. She traces the historical

connections between the national allegory of revolutionary morality in Cuba, in which prostitution with foreigners became an important symbol of pre-revolutionary and neo-colonial oppression, while its eradication became a symbol of the success of socialism. Its current revival thus destabilizes revolutionary narratives of self-sufficiency and, as she puts it, challenges the moral economy of the revolution. *Jineterismo* therefore became a symbol of Cuba's economic/national crisis of the Special Period. Since more Afro-Cuban rather than Latino women are involved in *jineterismo*, it also destabilized the notion of racial equality that is a cornerstone of the ideals, if not the practice, of the Cuban revolution. As an anomaly to socialist equality and an affront to Cuban nationalism, it became the marginalized 'other' in relation to the nation.

Consequently, official and middle-class responses to *jineterismo* exhibit a language of stigmatization that echoes Victorian reformist approaches to prostitution: those engaging in *jineterismo* are psychologically unfit, lacking in morality, individually ambitious, of a criminal destiny, etc. The fluid activities associated with *jineterismo* have been rigidified into a single category of prostitution in government reactions, as elite anxieties become projected onto the bodies and lives of non-elite Afro-Cuban women. In this way the anxieties about the growth of racialized class divisions in Cuba and their connections to a neo-liberal tourist industry are both assuaged and displaced. Prostitution by Cuban, and especially Afro-Cuban, women exposes increasing inequality in socialist Cuba and therefore has to be pushed outside the Self onto the bodies and lives of women who are increasingly projected as 'anti-social' anomalies of the Nation. The geographical and spatial boundaries around tourist enclaves only underline the outsider status of the women engaging in *jineterismo*. As shown by Berg's contribution, writing about sex work from the standpoint of sex workers themselves provides important insights into the entire system of sex, gender, class and 'racial' categories that define social hierarchies and their

associated forms of embodied morality or habitus (Whitehead 1995).

Discourses of victimization

As Doezeema (2000) shows, the predominant reformist and feminist discourse about transnational sex work highlights the innocent victims of the trade. This is often reinforced by stories of horrific violence, combined with blameless sexual histories, to create the overall impression that such a person could never have chosen to be a prostitute. The stories include young innocents being raped, held in concentration camps or drugged into compliance. Such descriptions not only arouse sympathy in readers, they deny any agency to the female sex worker herself. Simultaneously, they draw an unconscious line in the sand between the 'good' and the 'bad' woman, the reformable and the habitual delinquent, ushering in a new discourse of rehabilitation that condemns some to permanent criminalization and allows others a brighter future. The following story in the *Toronto Star* illustrates this dialectic at work:

"The day they were arrested, they were the darlings of the media and a favorite porn fantasy, all wrapped up in one righteous story of salvation: 22 victims of the 'sex traffic' liberated from their debasement in Toronto's suburbs by a carefully planned police raid. Everywhere (...) they were described as 'sex slaves', conjuring up a vision of exotic but helpless innocents. A day to two later, police revealed that the 22 women, mostly from Thailand or Malaysia, had willingly come to Canada to ply their trade; wiretaps caught them boasting, long distance, about the amount of money they were earning. Public opinion did an instant about-face. Now the women were hardened delinquents, illegal immigrants, tawdry, dismissible, selling their bodies of their own free will. Phew! No need to fret about their fate."

In other words, if a woman is shown to have an actively chosen sex work, for whatever

reason, she is then portrayed as a criminal. Even escape from extreme poverty is not a viable excuse; only fraud, deception and/or physical abuse on the part of the traffickers is acceptable since these effectively deny any choice or agency to the 'victim'. In fact, one could argue that the entire discourse of victimization, with its lurid tales of entrapment, capture and abuse, erases the issue of increasing poverty and income inequality that has been a consequence of globalization, as evidenced in the post-socialist countries. It also reveals much more about the society it is reflecting than about the actual lives of actual sex workers. The discourse of victimization thus parallels – or at least does not challenge – neo-liberal economic and policy prescriptions. The latter promotes individual responsibility and autonomy, denies the role of poverty and social conditions in shaping the agency and choices of individuals and argues that the national state should have a minimal role in alleviating those conditions (Bittle 2002, Kingfisher 2002). Under such a policy umbrella, with its unconscious acceptance that the market determines policy, poverty itself becomes unreformable since it is a matter of individual responsibility. Alteration of some of the consequences of poverty is possible, but only if individual responsibility is stressed in the rehabilitation process (ibid. 2002). In the neo-liberal paradigm, the prostitute has moved from a villain, needing policing, to a victim, needing reform. Choices have to be made, however, between the deserving and undeserving poor, and the only prostitutes able to be 'reformed' have to be both innocent and young, i.e. victims without agency.

In this regard, one of the most refreshing aspects of this special section is its ethnographic approach. All writers have stressed the voices and histories of the women who migrate from former socialist countries and find themselves involved in sexual encounters in Western Europe or Turkey. This standpoint is highlighted in Keogh's discussion. She argues for the 'messiness' of the category of prostitution when examining the everyday lives, life histories and narratives of

Moldovan female migrants. Working mainly as domestics who sometimes have monetized sexual relations with Turkish men, these women effectively destabilize in their lives and livelihoods the dichotomies between good and bad women and their structural complements of wife and prostitute that official discourses often rest upon. Moldovan migrants may be wives who are also supporting their families through a harsh economic period partly through monetized sexual encounters. On the other hand, some of her interviewees state that their livelihoods cannot be classified strictly as prostitution, since they are also emotionally involved with the men from whom they receive monetary payment.

Varieties of sexual encounters codified as 'prostitution'

Nilgün Uygun's work stresses the fuzziness of the category of commercial sexual transactions in the Black Sea region of Turkey. She argues that the transnational sex industry, if we choose to call it that, needs to be conceived as including a variety of relations of exchange between men and women such as marriage, dating and/or sex work. Interestingly, despite Trabzon being a culturally traditionalist region, some local inhabitants and businesses view the arrival of 'Natashas' as a sign of increasing cosmopolitanism and modernity for Turkey. In contrast to the lowliness in the sex/gender hierarchy usually assigned to prostitution (Lerner 1986), some Trabzon men viewed the Russian women as ideal romantic partners, teaching them a more varied and sophisticated love life than they had come to expect. However, she also points to an opposite reaction: in contrast to the urban core businesses that benefit from and support the sex trade in Trabzon, the pro-Islamist Welfare Party has reacted strongly against the influx of Ukrainian women. Uygun and Keogh's ethnographic studies are obviously a long way from the stories of victimization that tend to dominate the press and government accounts of international prostitution,

and they highlight the agency and subjectivity of female migrants themselves.

Just as we cannot subsume the aforementioned webs of relations and activities under a simple rubric of 'prostitution', nor can we assume that the meaning and consequences of commercialized sex have been uniform across time and place. As illustrated in Uygun's essay, the early feminist vision of prostitution as a reflection of unequal class positions does not hold. The racial and class positioning of the men and women described here is the reverse of the conventional vision of white men purchasing sex from lower class, non-white women. Not only should the term 'prostitution' be substituted with that of 'sex work', but also the entire notion of 'sex work' seems to be too narrow to understand the fuzzy boundaries between gift and commodity, desire and economic calculation that emerge from the narratives of the women in these essays.

Gifts, commodities and consumption

Uygun's work illustrates that the overlap between gift and commodity may be another theme to emerge from studies of contemporary transnational sex work. Although focusing on the clients of prostitutes, other studies (Prasad 1999, Allison 1994, Bernstein 2002), indicate that the growing sex industry may both express and reflect a general shift away from relational sex, as embodied in the logic of the gift, towards recreational sex, in which the cash element reduces the extent of interpersonal transactions. Here the difference is understood as one between long-term relationships involving mutual obligations and short-term and bounded sexual encounters that appear to contain less hypocrisy and mutual obligation than the former. Such writers argue that the increasingly unbridled ethic of sexual consumption promoted by the market has at least partially redrawn the boundaries between the private and the public, the gift and the commodity. Yet the three studies in this section all point to the fact that such boundaries remain fluid and

often fuzzy: sexuality becomes a part of a series of partly commodified and partly gift-like encounters.

All three studies indicate the inadequacy of the term 'sex work' to capture the complexity of these young women's working lives. Unlike most occupations, except that of doctor or priest, people who engage in commercialized sexual encounters are often identified solely with this activity. For instance, it is difficult to imagine a hyphenated professional identity, such as prostitute-actor, or prostitute-housewife for those women engaging in sex work. Such a generalization of the activity of sex work to subsume a person's entire identity is perhaps a reflection of the fact that dominant, normative views of appropriate sexuality are still predominantly embedded in a gift-like sphere, where notions of morality and obligation hold sway. The commodification of sex still holds the ability to shock; as matter 'out of place', the 'taboo' properties of 'prostitution' invade and overwhelm the more quotidian spheres of a sex worker's life. It is precisely this stigmatization that sex-workers' organizations struggle against.

The relative empowerment that the women in Keogh and Uygun's studies experience as a result of commercialized sexual encounters represents, perhaps, the experience of a minority of women. To date, we appear to have such contrasting views and accounts of transnational sex work that it is difficult to reconcile them, either theoretically or empirically. The first view includes the perspectives of the IOM, UNICEF, the police and the courts, which find themselves in the position of rescuing young adolescents from the sex trade. Stressing the vulnerability of prostitutes and the victimhood of prostitution, often without statistics or in-depth evidence, they argue for the criminalization of trafficking.⁴ Indeed, the very use of the legal term 'trafficking' illustrates the lack of choice that they associate with transnational sex work. On the other hand, there are organizations that argue that women have improved their lives as a result of the economic opportunities offered through a combination

of entrepreneurial and romantic sexual relationships that have opened up with easier travel and communication. The position of these relatively fortunate women is, in fact, stressed by international sex workers rights' organizations, such as COYOTE and PEN, who have attempted to decriminalize and unionize prostitution. Some organizations have simultaneously tried to recast the images of sex workers as sex goddesses and modern-day courtesans, offering an array of erotic experiences to the sophisticated consumer. These two positions tend to accentuate the victimization of the prostitute, on the one hand, and their free agency and empowerment, on the other hand.

It is important to remember that the sex industry, like any other, is marked by differentiations based on hierarchies of 'race' and class. Within the realm of commodified sexual exchanges, the labor market includes those who work as escorts, telephone sex workers, lap dancers, hostesses and street prostitutes. Lowman (1989) found that these realms of work in Vancouver were racially segregated, with the better paid and better protected escort services, hostesses and lap dancers being predominantly Caucasian or Asian, while Native Canadians were over-represented in those who solicited on the streets. Bernstein's (2001: 410) study of criminalized 'johns' in San Francisco found that community complaints and police arrests for sexual solicitation focused only on street prostitution, and only in newly gentrifying neighborhoods. Escort services and on-line contracts remained explicitly untouched, as evidenced in a police officer's final advice to criminalized johns: "Next time you're thinking of going out on the street.... Go on the Internet, if you have to, but stay away from minors" (ibid.: 405). Hence, the IOM's push to legislate against transnational sex work may end up criminalizing those sex workers who are already the most vulnerable. Indeed, the effect of the 'John's Law' in San Francisco has been to "divert sex workers and customers into indoor and on-line commercial sex products" (ibid.: 411), a sector that is already more privileged than that of street work.

Liberal studies that emphasize the 'empowerment' of sex work, and the sex worker's free choice in choosing clients and conditions of work, also tend to situate sexual consumption within an expanded and normalized field of commercialized sexual encounters. Taken to its logical conclusion, a young woman's choice to enter the sex industry in order to acquire luxury commodities could be interpreted as individualistic expressive behavior, *à la* Miller, in which new consumption regimes in post-socialist contexts facilitate the growth of a transnational sex industry and of the movement of people across borders. However, even as we reject the moralizing tendency of reformers to view sex work as an extreme form of gender exploitation, there are still sexual and gender hierarchies at work both in the industry and in the wider labor market. The major part of migration for sex work is from low wage countries to high wage countries, and from rural to urban areas in industrializing countries such as China and India (Zheng 2003: 143, Sangera 1997). In other words, the providers of sexual services typically possess less economic, social and cultural capital than their clients. In addition, sex workers' employment and consumption choices, like those of everybody else, are not totally 'free', but are curtailed by the economic and social constraints under which they operate.

The formation of neo-liberal doxa and individualized habitus

The articles contained in this section are valuable ethnographic contributions that destabilize the myth of the 'innocent victim' as the subject and object of transnational prostitution. However, an exclusive focus on cross-border flows can ignore long-term historical continuities that produce the 'push-pull' factors in migration. This is particularly true for studies of sex work, which have been marked by dichotomous theorizations of structure versus agency in relation to transnational migration. Future lines of inquiry could critically unpack the dichotomy that

has emerged between discourses of victimization, on the one hand, and that of sex workers' agency and choice, on the other. As Bourdieu (1990) has shown, objective social constraints are often internalized as subjective states of habitus and then understood and reproduced as 'free choice', particularly in an era that has eulogized the free market and individual choice. One of the effects of commodity fetishism is to naturalize market relations as eternal, transforming objective constraints in the worlds of work and production into perceived freedoms in the world of consumption. Market fetishism, especially its current incarnation in neo-liberal doxa, rejects the notion of social constraints and social causation – indeed the entire realm of society itself – since it views individuals as autonomous agents interacting directly with the 'opportunity structures' of the market (Bourdieu 2002).

We could instead conceive of agency and structure not as oppositional terms, but as a continuum, and as the space through which habitus, i.e. durable, and unconscious dispositions of individuals, are produced. In this perspective, an obvious area to examine in relation to sex work is the processes through which transnational openings in the labor market for sex work are internalized as opportunities for young women and how economic liberalization becomes accepted as 'natural' and 'inevitable' in post-socialist contexts. We could also ask what kinds of structural conditions are producing transnational sex work as a potentially empowering choice for some.⁵ An examination of these questions would involve not only broader research into transnational labor markets, but also more in-depth ethnographic analyses of relations of gender and power in host countries. What kinds of familial authority structures already exist or are emerging in the wake of economic liberalization and how are these impacting on the gender and sexual practices of domestic units? If a woman is responding to transnational 'opportunities' in sex work, then is she also being 'pushed' from behind by actual or potentially patriarchal and/or abusive domestic relationships

in her home country? Much recent feminist work has been devoted to uncovering the unconscious assumptions and practices that underline supposedly free choices in consumer society, for example, in the beauty myth and eating disorders (Bordo 1993). A practice approach to sex work (Ortner 1997, Bourdieu 1990) has the potential of overcoming the quagmire of structure versus agency in which recent debates on prostitution seem to have become mired.

One of the greatest challenges in approaching commercialized sexual encounters without being constrained by the discourse of victimization introduced by international organizations and various NGOs is to strike a balance between recognizing the existence of an unequal balance of wealth and power among those involved in these exchanges and acknowledging the agency of women who adopt a certain subject position as part of their strategy to cope with current crises in the post-socialist regions. The present essays represent an important opening into these areas of inquiry that will constitute a challenging field for researchers, activists and policy makers for some time to come.

Notes

1. This special section of the volume has been developed on the basis of biennial EASA (European Association of Anthropologists) conference workshop in Copenhagen in 2002. It was entitled 'Sexual encounters, desire and discourse in the post-socialist context'.
2. COYOTE is an acronym for one of the earliest sex-workers' rights organizations. It was founded by Margo St. James and stands for Call Off Your Tired Old Ethics.
3. There is now a vast literature on this topic. One of the earliest collections was A. Parker, M. Summer, A. Russo and P. Yaegar (eds.), *Nationalisms and sexualities*, (1992), New York and London: Routledge. See also K. Sangari and S. Vaid, *Recasting women*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, and V. Das, *Critical events: anthropological perspectives on contemporary India*, 1995, Delhi: OUP, for

historical and contemporary examples from South Asia. See also J. Whitehead, 'Measuring women's value: change and continuity in the regulation of prostitution in Madras presidency, 1886–1947', in H. Bannerji, S. Mojab and J. Whitehead (eds.) *Of property and propriety: the role of gender and class in imperialism and nationalism*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001, pp. 153–81.

4. These organizations argue that such statistics are very difficult to acquire. See UNICEF, *Trafficking in women and children in southeastern Europe*, August 2000, pp. 1–10.
5. These issues were underlined when I was invited to an international conference on prostitution to present material on Indian courtesans and their criminalization by the colonial government. An escort from Boulder, Colorado befriended me and explained how and why she had much more power and choice in her new life as an escort than in her old one as a single mother on welfare involved in a physically abusive relationship. I agreed with her, but my lingering questions related to the structural conditions that had produced her 'old life'. Should not it be these (neo-liberal) conditions that we are concerned with, rather than the issue of 'prostitution' per se? Does the current hysteria in the OECD countries over transnational prostitution function to displace real anxieties about increasing global economic insecurity and polarization, as it does in Cuba?

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