

The (Crying) Need for Different Kinds of Research

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Researchers wanting to study migrant sex workers find receiving funding difficult if they do not stick to themes related to HIV/AIDS, 'trafficking' or violence against women. Laura Agustín shows how these frameworks distort a multiplicity of realities and argues for doing research from a migration perspective.

In October 2001, while on a trip to Australia and Thailand, I met five Latin American women with some connection to the sex industry: the owner of a legal brothel and two migrants working for her in Sydney, and two women in a detention centre for illegal immigrants in Bangkok. These five women were from Peru, Colombia and Venezuela; they were from different strata of society; they were very different ages. They also all had quite different stories to tell.

The brothel owner now had permanent residence in Australia. Her migrant workers had come on visas to study English which gave them the right to work, but getting the visa had required paying for the entire eight-month course in advance, which meant acquiring large debts. The Madam was very affectionate with them but also very controlling; they lived in her house and travelled with her to work. She was teaching them the business; the outreach workers from a local project did not speak Spanish.

Of the two women detained in Bangkok, one had been stopped in the Tokyo airport with a false visa for Japan. She had been invited by her sister, who had been an illegal sex worker but now was an illegal vendor within the *milieux*. The woman had been deported to the last stage of her journey, Bangkok; there she had been in jail for a year before being sent to the detention centre. The second detained woman had been caught on-camera in a robbery being carried out by her boyfriend and others in Bangkok, after travelling around with them in Hong Kong and Singapore; she had just completed a three-year jail sentence before being sent to the centre (and she also had completely false papers, including a change of nationality).

Both detained women were waiting for someone to pay their plane fare home, but no one was offering to do this, since their degree of complicity in their situations disqualified them from aid to victims of trafficking, and not all Latin American countries maintain embassies in Thailand. Only one person from local NGOs visiting the detention centre spoke Spanish.

How can we understand these stories?

Given the very different stories these women have to tell, labelling them *either* 'migrant sex workers' or 'victims of trafficking' is incorrect and unhelpful to an understanding of why and how they have arrived at their present situations. The placing of labels is largely a subjective judgement dependent on the researcher of the moment and is not the

way women talk about themselves, something like the attempt to make complicated subjects fit into a pre-printed form. The following descriptions illustrate this complexity.

While the two new migrants in Sydney seemed accepting of the work they had just begun doing, there was clearly ambiguity about the significance of the language course on which their visas were based, and their debts did not leave them much choice about what jobs to do.

The migrant to Japan believed she would not have to sell sex, but her own family had been involved in getting her the false papers, and she was suffering considerable guilt and anguish. The woman caught in the robbery seemed to have sold sex during her travels, but without any particular intention or destination being involved, nor did she give the matter much importance. The total number of outsiders implicated in their journeys and their jobs was large; nationalities mentioned were Pakistani, Turkish and Mexican. The need for research to understand how all these connections happen is urgent, but funders are unlikely to finance research that does not fit into one of the currently acceptable theoretical frameworks: 'AIDS prevention', 'violence against women' or 'trafficking'.

These frameworks reflect particular political concerns arising in the context of 'globalisation', and they are understandable. *Elements* of the stories of people such as those I have described may share features with typical discourses on 'trafficking', 'violence against women' and 'AIDS', but these are prejudiced, moralistic frameworks that begin from a political position and are not open to results that do not fit (for example, a woman who admits that she knew she would be doing sex work abroad and willingly paid someone to falsify papers for her).

The desires of young people to travel, see the world, make a lot of money and not pay much attention to the kind of jobs they do along the way are not acceptable to researchers that begin from moral positions; neither are the statements by professional sex workers that they choose and prefer the work they do. Yet ethical research simply may not depart from the claim that the subjects investigated do not know their own minds.

Why do we do research, anyway?

A theoretical framework refers to the overall idea that motivates services or research projects. For service projects with sex workers this framework might be a religious mission to help people in danger, a medical concept of reducing harm or a vision of solidarity or social justice. Most projects with sex workers focus on providing services, not doing research, though often the line between them is not easy to draw.

Service projects accumulate a lot of information over time, but it seems as though the only thing governments want to know about is people's nationalities, how old they are, when they first had sex and whether they know what a condom is. Many NGO and outreach workers would like to publish other kinds of information, research other kinds of things. But where, how? If their research proposal does not reflect one of the existing research frameworks regarding migrant prostitution – 'AIDS prevention', 'trafficking' or 'violence against women' – it will be hard if not impossible to find funding.

Some of my own research concerns people who work with sex workers, like the people who read this publication. There is a small minority that is really *only* interested in preventing infections and is therefore satisfied to produce graphics on rates of STDs per nationality. But even many people interested only in epidemiology are frustrated, because so much research continues to focus on street workers and reproduce the same information over and over again. And to study women like the ones I met last October, none of the frameworks mentioned above is at all adequate. AIDS prevention and their health may be important to them, but no more than to anyone else, and no one has done violence to them. So that leaves ‘trafficking’, but not only did they participate in the planning of their trips, they enjoyed parts of them and were willing to do sex work in order to visit places like Tokyo and make the kind of money they could not earn anywhere else.

Now if these women were framed as travelling to work and see something of the world at the same time, it would at least be possible to tell their stories. On the way, quite a number of injustices, most of them structural, would be revealed, and researchers could be satisfied to have brought them out. But also the aspect of these women’s lives that we never hear about would be brought out: their leading role in their own life stories, complete with making decisions about taking risks in order to get ahead in life – what academics call *agency*.

Research without prejudice

The goal of research is to answer questions that will help societies understand themselves better, and these questions cannot avoid existing within some kind of framework. For example, interviews with sex workers about their lives can be carried out within a frame of ‘life histories’, the goal being to publish voices that have been marginalised before. Or interviews with police can attempt to show how they perceive their jobs, inside a criminological frame. There can be ethnographies of brothels (anthropology), surveys on how sex club owners view the business (urban studies), comparative work with people before they work in the sex industry and after (labour studies, psychology), investigations on how small family-and-friends networks function to facilitate migrations (sociology). The list of possibilities is endless, and *all* would be useful for improving our understanding of the sex industry and those who work in it.

However, whatever ‘field’ the frame belongs to, we do *not* need more research imposed by people who believe they know best how other people ought to live and who have already taken a moralistic position before research is begun. An example is the statement “We began this work from the perspective that prostitution itself is violence against women.”¹ On the contrary, we need a lot of research undertaken by people who are very close to sex workers’ lives, or who are sex workers themselves, but who will above all commit themselves to honestly recording all the different and conflicting points of view and stories they run into during the research.

Migration as a research framework

¹ M. Farley, Prostitution in Five Countries: Violence and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. In: *Feminism & Psychology*, 8, 4, p. 406, 1998.

In my view, migration studies is the research frame that makes most sense for thinking about the five women I met last October, as well as for the great majority of those I've met who work in sex, domestic and 'caring' services (for children, the elderly and the ill). When I lived in the Caribbean, it was common to talk to people who were thinking about going abroad to travel and work as migrants, and these are the *same people* who are working now in Europe, Australia, Japan. By locating these women as migrants rather than 'sex workers', whether exploited or not, it is possible to include them in the growing body of research on diasporas, globalisation, immigration law and international relations. A migration framework allows consideration of all conceivable aspects of people's lives and travels, locates them in periods of personal growth and risk-taking and does not force them to *identify* as sex workers (or as maids, or 'carers', for that matter).

The publication of research that looks at migrant sex workers' lives *in a myriad of ways* would eventually affect how society at large considers them. It would inevitably reveal that a minority suffers from disease and violence, while the majority can be seen as resourceful entrepreneurs or pragmatic workers trying to make their way within government policies and structures that are all against them. Harm reduction and other social projects could concentrate on supporting such people at a specific stage of their lives but could also expand into different areas and not be forced to continue to work uncomfortably inside stigmatising frameworks (those that construct all migrants as victims of trafficking or risk groups for the transmission of disease). It's worth a try.

About the author

Laura Agustín is a lifelong migrant and former educator in Latin America who now researches and writes on the sex industry, is affiliated with the Open University, lives in Spain, and has been contracted by the ILO and the European Commission to evaluate sexwork-related programming. She moderates a romance-language e-mail list called IndustriadelSexo. Contact: laura@nodo50.org