

### Pity and courage in commercial sex

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and hopefully this book will refocus the selective eye of sociology to provoke a much more informed and informative view of personal life as a fundamental feature of the human condition.

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## PITY AND COURAGE IN COMMERCIAL SEX

Laura María Agustín

*Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry*

London: Zed Books, 2007, 224 pp., ISBN 978-1-8427-7859-3 (hbk), 978-1-8427-7860-9 (pbk)

Over the last 10 years Agustín's sharp analysis has represented a unique, not to mention free, online resource to those attempting to move in the difficult field of 'prostitution' and 'trafficking', whether as an 'insider, outsider, stakeholder, political actor . . . researcher-with-a-self-interest', or, as she is, a shifting mix of all those positions (p. 141). The best word to describe Agustín's work is *courageous*. And so is *Sex at the Margins*, her first book published in English with an exhaustive and up-to-date set of references.

Agustín takes us carefully through her own journey to understand that the sex industry in Europe may only be analysed together with its counterpart, the social sector. Why is there such a gap between the way people in Central, South America and Cuba talk about travelling to Europe and the way those reaching out to migrants in Europe discuss them as victims (p. 135)? 'Why [have] so much passion and effort [in the social sector] not managed to improve life for people who sell sex?', asks Agustín (p. 135). She turns our gaze towards privately and publicly funded services, projects and programmes and towards individuals, practitioners as well as theorists – largely women, often feminists, typically in good faith – wanting to 'do something about the problem'. Agustín's lucid critique does not spare rights activists, including sex workers themselves. Indeed, Agustín is likely to make us all uncomfortable, in one way or another. While coming out as a rather crude invitation to reflexivity, her book grows into what might be seen as a twofold intellectual project. In Chapters 1, 2 and 3, Agustín sets out to fill in the silences on commercial sex in theories of migration and of economic services. In Chapters 4, 5 and 6, she exposes important aspects of the material foundation of the interventions on 'prostitution' and 'trafficking'.

Through her original ethnographic work among 'helpers' in contemporary Madrid and through her reading of mid-19th century regulations of working-class women selling sex in France and England, Agustín convincingly demonstrates that the machinery of interventions on 'prostitution' and 'trafficking' is mainly oriented to the self-reproduction of the 'helpers' themselves. While it produces little benefit, or even further exclusions of working-class and migrant people in the sex industry, this machinery of discourses, policies, theories and protests has historically provided middle-class women (and still provides

contemporary 'helpers') with access to occupation, autonomy and public and moral citizenship (see also Jo Doezema's [2000] and Lucy Bland's [1992] analyses of this). Hidden conflicts of interests are also present in approaches that focus on sex workers' rights. Indeed Agustín suggests that 'The interests of migrants who have no right to work and are concentrating on accumulating as much money as they can as quickly as possible may conflict with the interests of Europeans who want to legitimise the industry' (p. 73). More generally, 'Organising for rights requires assuming, if only strategically, a professional identity ("stripper", "prostitute", "sex worker"). Many people who dislike or despise selling sex, or who see it as a temporary means to pay off debts, are unwilling to claim such an identity' (p. 72).

Agustín's research is placed in a frame of anthropology and cultural studies (see also Agustín, 2007). However, her disciplinary attachments, as well as the many relativist statements present throughout the book come across as instrumental and defensive strategies rather than as well-supported epistemological positions (e.g. p. 137). Defence against abolitionist attacks is in fact much needed by those, like Agustín, who are not prepared to base their work on a condemnation of commercial sex as such. Agustín's readers will not forget that it is the usual practice of 'fundamentalist feminism' (p. 162) to respond to critiques 'with denunciations, telling attendees at events and funders that rights activists are "paid by the sex industry" or "known associates of traffickers"' (p. 163).

Corrections to popular beliefs on migrants in the sex industry are central to the book, as is the presentation of increasingly more reliable facts. For instance:

When someone is shanghaied and forced to work, everyone agrees that it is a crime. But 'rescue' raids by police and NGOs often fail because arrested workers refuse to denounce anyone. Critics conclude that workers are afraid of reprisals, but it could be that they have nothing to denounce. Nonetheless, *doubt* is always planted about the condition of the sex worker's state of mind, if not of her soul. (p. 35)

Instead, it is important for Agustín to consider that 'most migrants who work in the sex industry know from early on that their work in Europe would have had a sexual component' (p. 30) and that 'many migrants in the industry do achieve their main goal, [which is] to earn a large amount of money in a short time' (p. 38). Agustín is careful to clarify that her 'nuancing [of] migrants' deceit and coercion' in the sex industry, does not deny 'the multiple abuses sometimes committed' (p. 35) against them, in particular by those facilitating their travel and work. Instead, Agustín's point is to question the idea that the crime being committed is 'trafficking' (p. 35). 'Knowing beforehand is' in any case 'a poor measure of exploitation or unhappiness' (p. 30). The elements that most matter to people in situations of abuse are the lack of papers to work legally and enjoy citizens' rights and the poor working conditions in an underground industry. Agustín's analysis provides support for less exclusionary national immigration policies (p. 193) and for the regulation of the sex industry (p. 74). No specific 'solution' or policy, however, is discussed in the book. Rather, the readers are invited to take a step back, and to acknowledge before anything else the existence of autonomous lives that are different from the (middle-class accumulative) western one. These lives are

those of people 'in flux', 'rather than people with identities attached to the jobs they carry out' (p. 47), and of those who 'don't mind being excluded, at least in part' (p. 158). In particular, Agustín pays attention to the forms of resistance from below and to the ways in which people in the margins use the system to their own advantage.

With *Sex at the Margins*, Agustín cannot be mistaken for a neoliberal or nihilist writer – traditions with which she has sometimes been wrongly associated. Her critique appears instead to be libertarian and robustly rooted in postcolonial and working-class people's struggles.

While Agustín ostensibly refuses the search for a general theorization of commercial sex and its stigma, particularly in a feminist tradition (e.g. pp. 7 and 68), in Chapter 3 she nevertheless provides good formulations of important general problems: 'why [do] the[se] jobs [of housework, home nursing, sex] continue in feudal conditions when progress toward rationalisation characterises other work?' (p. 75) she rightly asks, and: 'Is being a "client" or "sex worker" an analogous identity to those based on sexual orientation or gender?' (p. 78). While *Sex at the Margins* does not offer much analytical content for such crucial queries, its approach remains of great help for those of us who believe that these and other general problematics of commercial sex deserve a central place in theories of sexuality and work – including from a feminist perspective.

Indeed, constitutive aspects of commercial sex may be connected to the fact that workers in the sex industry are people who find themselves in the margins, and that by selling sex find a way (often one of the very few) to use the system to their own advantage. In other words, the sex industry represents an opportunity *especially* for the people who are on the margins because of their gender, sexuality, race, class, nationality or migration project. This evidence may be analytically linked to another issue, also mentioned in the book (p. 81). Clients of sex services, as in some other personal services, express an interest in the identity of the provider, who in turn often occupies a marginal social position, and/or instrumentally mobilizes it for money. These complex issues, which go beyond local specificities, need to be addressed if we are to build a better theory of commercial sex – as argued for by Agustín (p. 192). They are also needed if fundamentalist feminist theories in this area are to be challenged. Similarly, we may not analytically ignore the general truth that 'in all cultures and countries, many males consider it permissible and conventional to buy sex' (p. 82), while most women and trans people do not. Furthermore, Agustín may be right to point out (p. 75ff.) that commercial sex has been part of the services traditionally performed without remuneration by female members and servants within the family, services increasingly outsourced into the market – e.g. paid childcare, care for elders and people with disabilities as well as counselling (see Folbre and Nelson, 2000). However, this explanation still needs to make sense of commercial sex taking place before and outside advanced capitalist and western contexts. In this respect, Agustín's project would benefit from feminist work – namely, those 'French' materialist feminists, like Paola Tabet (1989), who have studied the sexual division of labour in a comparative perspective, as well as some British feminists, like Lisa Adkins and Celia Lury (1999) and Beverley Skeggs (2004), who have theorized the labour of identity in the new economy.

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## A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

Stephanie Hepburn and Rita J. Simon  
*Women's Roles and Statuses the World Over*  
 Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006, 265 pp., ISBN 978-0-7391-1356-9 (hbk),  
 978-0-7391-1357-8 (pbk)

This volume sets out to be a handbook of factual information about the 'roles and statuses' of women in a large number of countries from every inhabited continent. It offers social and legal information relevant to women's rights in as comparable a form as possible. For each of 26 countries there is a (variably) brief account of the national population size and structure, the political constitution, the economy and women in the workforce, education, marriage, abortion and contraception, health care, women in public office and women in the military. This promised to be a very useful material for comparative studies, or a handy source of international illustrations for teachers and students alike in gender studies.

Unfortunately, the book cannot be recommended for such purposes. At a general level, there is no introduction to the concepts that it is trying to unite, of what is meant by a role, nor is there a clear definition of 'status'. The reader is left to her/his own devices to pick out those instances where 'status', say economic or marital, is just a description of a particular type of situation, or is loaded with value from the point of view of the social esteem in which the position is held, the economic rewards attaching to it, the degree of autonomy enjoyed by incumbents or standing in law, etc. These various dimensions of 'status' sometimes but not always coincide, and it is important to understand this when considering the 'status of women' and the policies that may improve its various dimensions. I also