

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Nicola Mai, *Mobile Orientations: An Intimate Autoethnography of Migration, Sex Work, and Humanitarian Borders*, Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2018, ISBN-13: 978-0-226-58500-0, 223 pages**

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Considered a modern form of slavery, human trafficking, in its various forms (sexual exploitation, forced labor, exploitation for the purpose of forced criminality etc.), is a complex phenomenon, often hidden behind other criminal offences such as prostitution or irregular migration and involving victims exploited in multiple ways. It requires both adequate understanding and appropriate measures.

The book of Nicola Mai, *Mobile Orientations: An Intimate Autoethnography of Migration, Sex Work, and Humanitarian Borders*, investigates the relationship between migration and sex industry and “the dissonance between the complexity of migrant sex workers’ experiences of agency and the ways in which that complexity tends to be ignored by antitrafficking policies and interventions” (Preface, p. 1). Culmination of two decades of extensive research projects across Europe conducted by the author, professor of sociology and migration studies at Kingston University, London, the book is innovative firstly by the methodological combination of ethnographic observation, semi structured interviewing and participatory approaches: “In all of the projects I directed, I adopted self-reflexive and observational interview methodologies, acknowledging the intersubjectivity between researcher and researched as a key methodological dimension of knowledge production” (p. 30).

Organized in nine chapters, the book deals with a range of cases and tells detailed stories from sex workers belonging to two well-established and intersecting transnational social fields and migration spaces: one between the Western Europe

and Eastern Europe and the other between the European Union and sub-Saharan Africa. Nicola Mai chooses the concept of “sex industry” (rather than “sexual commerce”) to address the different experiences of sex work and intimate labor. Just like another sector that absorbs migrant labor, sex industry includes services, practices and establishments that are integral to a sector of economic activity relatively regular and routinized.

Exploring, with autoethnographic lens, the context of male sex work in Italy and Greece (Chapter 2), interviewing migrant sex workers from Albania and Romania, the author finds that, despite their different ethnic and sociocultural backgrounds, they have things in common, seeking “fast-track economic gain in order to afford self representations both as traditional male breadwinners (by remitting money home) and as proficient and individualized late-modern consumers” (p. 42). Chapters 3 and 4 explore the engagement of young male migrants, including minors, in multiple and itinerant forms of mobility, with reference to Moroccan migrants in Spain and Romanian migrants in Amsterdam, while the Chapter 5 analyses the experiences of young men working in the tourist sex industry in Tunisia. Linking the stories of those analyzed in these chapters, the author underlines they attempt to become successful men. Thereby, “addressing their need to migrate only in terms of poverty, vulnerability and irrationality misses the existential resonance that the possibility of going to Europe has within their mobile orientations, within their sense of self” (p. 105).

The following chapters move attention to migrant women working in the sex industry in the United Kingdom. Conducting a previous research project (*Migrant Workers in the UK Sex Industry, 2007-2009*) that produced one hundred in-depth, qualitative interviews with migrant women, men and transgender people working in London’s sex industry, Nicola Mai found that only a minority of migrants working in the UK sex industry (approximately 6 percent of female interviewees) are forced or trafficked. Immigration status and restricted access to the labor market are the most important factors shaping their decisions to work in the sex industry, which is often a way to avoid the unrewarding and exploitative conditions they meet in other sectors. Chapter 6 and 7 analyze the impact of project findings on policymaking and public debates in the UK and discuss the resistance that the research findings met among institutions and organizations that target all sex workers as potential victims of trafficking. The stories of women working in sex industry often highlight the role played by “love” in experience of being trafficked. Adopting participative

ethnofictional methods, these chapters show that the concepts of trafficking and pimping are often confusing in women's understanding of their own and other women's involvement in the sex industry. Their sentimental and economic relationships with those who facilitate their social mobility through migration and sex work are characterized by "a fluid intricacy of love, support and exploitation" (p. 140). These ambivalent personal and professional relations between female sex workers and male third-party agents are analyzed also by interviewing male third-party agents from Albania and Romania (Chapter 8), in order to draw their profile and to understand their diverse life and work experiences in the sex industry.

Taken together, the chapters of this book challenge the usefulness of the concepts of trafficking and modern slavery for addressing migrant sex workers' experiences of agency and exploitation. They suggest that only a labor-migration perspective recognizing and framing sex work as work can explain the complex understandings and experiences of migrant and non-migrant sex workers. The voices, stories and experiences of sex workers which frame this book suggest that decriminalization of sex work (endorsed by Amnesty International in 2015) is the most appropriate and least harmful policymaking framework in order to protect those selling sex from harm and that "any policy and social on sex work, and particularly those embedded in the sexual-humanitarian frameworks of antitrafficking and antislavery, will only have a chance if they are matched with prospective migrants' legal rights to access the labor market, which would reduce their socioeconomic vulnerability to exploitation by the people who facilitate their labor-migration trajectories" (p. 194).