

The Market for Migrant Domestic and Sex Workers

A project jointly undertaken by COMPAS and the Department of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Nottingham.

Synopsis

Paid domestic work in private households and commercial sex have much in common but continuities and discontinuities between the two have not been subject to systematic empirical or theoretical attention. This project examines empirical, theoretical and policy questions about domestic work, commercial sex and trafficking by investigating the market for migrant labour (including the labour of those aged under 18) in these sectors, and tracing connections between this demand and socially tolerated attitudes towards gender, race/ethnicity, age and sexuality. It builds on pilot research to produce and analyse quantitative and qualitative data on prostitute users, employers of domestic workers and third party beneficiaries in six countries, supplemented with ethnographic research on the market for migrant sex and domestic workers in Tenerife.

Background

Paid domestic in private households and the commercial sex trade are both largely unregulated spheres of economic activity relying on a predominantly female workforce. Working conditions are often very poor, and workers are at risk of various forms of abuse and violence. In Europe they are both important sectors of employment for migrant women, and the markets have been strongly affected by global economic and social changes. Both are associated with the phenomenon of “trafficking in persons” that is now the object of intense national and international policy concern. Despite the many parallels between domestic work and sex commerce and their policy relevance, the similarities between the two sectors have not been systematically investigated or theorised. This project examines practical, theoretical and policy questions about domestic work, commercial sex and trafficking through a focus on the market for migrants’ “reproductive” labour in the two sectors.

Aims

The project aims to

1. Make a significant contribution to the development of theory on reproductive labour, concepts of sexual exploitation and the position of migrants within this;
2. Accumulate data on demand for domestic work and sex work and in particular demand for migrants in these sectors
3. Develop comparative quantitative and qualitative methods for use in further research on reproductive labour;
4. Facilitate evidence based policy making in the areas of female migration, trafficking and the impending shortage of caring labour in the European Union.

The ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford conducts high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform public opinion and contribute to policy debates on migration.

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Methods

This project builds on methods and data developed in a pilot research project on the demand for sexual services and domestic labour in four countries (Sweden, Italy, Thailand and India). Findings from this pilot study are available at: http://www.iom.int/DOCUMENTS/PUBLICATION/EN/mrs_15_2003.pdf

It extends this project to two sites, Barcelona and London. It involves in depth interviews with a non-random sample of ten users of migrant prostitutes, ten employers of migrant domestic workers and between five and ten third party beneficiaries of migrant prostitution or domestic work in each city. The interviews are structured around a standard set of topics and examine respondents' attitudes towards gender race/ethnicity and domestic work/commercial sex. Interviews with representatives from a range of organisations and experts in the UK and Spain allow us to contextualise data. We have also developed a small pilot survey on the more general demand for commercial sex and domestic work. This serves as a check on the information obtained from the interviews and allows us to pilot questions and evaluate possibilities for using the same survey in different cultural contexts. Data has also been gathered from Tenerife, where tourism is the primary motor behind the demand for migrant prostitutes in particular.

Work Completed and Underway

- 35 qualitative interviews with clients of sex workers, third party beneficiaries of sex workers and sex workers themselves in Spain (Barcelona and Tenerife);
- 10 qualitative interviews with employers of domestic workers in Spain (Barcelona)
- 8 qualitative interviews with employers of domestic workers in the UK (London)
- A survey of Spanish and British tourists in Tenerife: attitudes to sex
- A survey of students in Barcelona: attitudes towards and experiences of commercial sex
- A survey of employers of domestic workers in the UK (London)
- A survey of employers of domestic workers in Spain (Barcelona)

Interviews with sex workers' clients in London, employers in the sex sector, and survey of sex sector establishments are currently in progress.

Publications arising from or drawing on this research include:

- Anderson, B (2003) "Undocumented Domestic Workers in Private Households: An overview of demand and state response" in PICUM (ed) Undocumented Migrant Workers Brussels: PICUM
- Anderson, B (2004) "Sono Straniere, clandestine e Molto, Molto Modeste" in I Confini Della Liberta: Per un'analisi politica delle migrazioni contemporanee Milan: Derive Approdi
- Anderson, B (2004) "Migrant Domestic Workers and Slavery" in van den Anker, C (ed) The Political Economy of New Slavery London: Palgrave
- Bott, E (2004) "Working a Working-Class Utopia: Marking young Britons in Tenerife on the new map of European migration" Journal of Contemporary European Studies, Vol 12 (1) pp57-71
- Bott, E (2005) "Too Close for Comfort? 'Race' and the Management of Proximity, Guilt, and Other Anxieties in Paid Domestic Labour" Sociological Review Online, Vol 10 no 3
- O'Connell Davidson, J (2003) "'Sleeping with the Enemy'? Some Problems with Feminist Abolitionist Calls to Penalise those who Buy Commercial Sex", Social Policy and Society, Vol 2 (1) pp 55-63
- O'Connell Davidson, J (2005) Children in the Global Sex Trade Cambridge: Polity Press

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