Sexual Humanitarianism: understanding agency and exploitation in the global sex industry

Results in Brief

How interventions on sex work tend to legitimise increasingly repressive, racialised and extreme forms of migration control

Drawing on original ethnographic and interview data with 240 migrant sex workers in Australia, France, New Zealand and the United States, SEXHUM is breaking down stereotypes with new insights into the lives of migrant sex workers.

Are anti-trafficking institutional and non-governmental interventions in Europe really working as intended? Judging by SEXHUM findings, whose work was supported by the European Research Council, there is certainly room for doubt.

Since October 2016, Nicola Mai, project coordinator, has been studying the trend of ‘sexual humanitarianism’: A sociocultural process defining some migrant groups and individuals as vulnerable with regards to sexual behaviour and identity. “Our project focuses on the perspective of the people concerned. It involves ethnographic observation, semi-structured interviewing and collaborative ethnographic filmmaking,” Mai explains.
From Auckland to New York, via Sydney and Paris

The project’s work covers four countries and eight cities in Europe, Australia, New Zealand and the United States. By doing so, it attempts to reflect the main global migration fields, sexual industry environments and policymaking frameworks related to prostitution: criminalisation, regulation and decriminalisation.

The project gathered 240 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 221 sex workers and trafficked persons. These cover the experiences of people with different ethnicities, areas of work, sex-gender identities, classes and experiences of racialisation.

“We also purposely oversampled racialised participants to reflect how they are disproportionately targeted by anti-trafficking, migration and law enforcement authorities,” Mai adds.

Some 80 interviews with stakeholders, NGOs and government bodies and 45 additional interviews on COVID’s impact on migrant sex workers were undertaken across the four national sites of the project.

The research findings challenge widespread stereotypes. For the vast majority of research participants, sex work is actually not a form of sexual exploitation. It is rather a way to avoid the more exploitative working conditions migrants meet in the ‘regular’ jobs available to them.

Mai also shows how humanitarian interventions can legitimise repressive, racialised and extreme forms of migration control. “As sexual humanitarian policies and interventions tend to be based on racialised assumptions of vulnerability, they fail to match the realities of the people directly concerned and do not offer adequate support to those in need.

Moreover, anti-trafficking and other sexual humanitarian interventions often result in anti-sex work and anti-migration law enforcement. This exacerbates the actual socio-economic vulnerabilities of migrant sex workers,” he notes.

Sadly, Mai also demonstrates that more criminalisation of migrant sex workers leads to less ability for these workers to access justice and assert their rights.

Migrants in the United States, where both purchasing and selling sex is criminalised, and in France, where clients are criminalised as a strategy to abolish the so-called ‘prostitutional system’, were in more precarious situations and more vulnerable to violence and abuse. This included abuse from law enforcement officials. Workers in decriminalised contexts such as New South Wales in Australia were not so
All in all, SEXHUM findings strongly suggest that the repeal of all repressive laws criminalising both the sale and purchase of sexual services is the most appropriate and least harmful policymaking framework for sex work.

Anti-trafficking interventions should separate themselves from anti-migration and anti-sex work law enforcement if they want to reduce the vulnerability to exploitation of the people they aim to support.

Policies and social interventions can only have a chance of succeeding when including the prospective and actual legal right of migrants to access the international and national labour markets.

Other policy recommendations include the defunding of non-governmental organisations and institutions, including law enforcement, promoting anti-sex work and anti-migration policies and social interventions, as well as the consulting of workers’ rights organisations and communities ahead of new policies and interventions targeting sex workers.

SEXHUM’s creative and collaborative methodology involved migrant sex workers in the writing and production of creative documentary films (ethnofiction) telling and disseminating their own stories and perspectives. Hopefully these films will raise awareness amongst citizens, too. These include CAER (CAUGHT) – a 61-minute ethnofiction. This was written, produced and edited in collaboration with the TRANSgrediendo Intercultural Collective of Latina trans women in New York City. They also made Plan B – a film produced in collaboration with the Roses d’Acier association of Chinese cis women in Paris.

Keywords

SEXHUM, sex workers, migrant, trafficking, sexual exploitation, prostitution

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