

## Contributing to 'Development': Money Made Selling Sex

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Earlier this year I was in Ecuador talking with poorer women who sell sex and who might consider travelling to another country to do it. Politicians in wealthier countries talk about 'economic migrants' as though their desire to make money were a bad thing, and in many such countries migrants have a better chance of being allowed to stay if they present themselves as victims (refugees, asylum-seekers, 'trafficked women') than as people who have just arrived and are willing to do whatever work is on offer.

This prejudice against economic motives is ridiculous, since we live in a world where individuals are not only expected to make money but where success in life is judged on how *much* money they make. And economic motives are entirely acceptable when migrants find jobs in the so-called 'formal' sector of the economy, which refers to businesses that governments have decided to recognise (and regulate, tax, inspect and so on), even if these businesses pay workers miserably and provide neither decent working conditions nor fair workers' rights. Only jobs said to be in the 'informal' economy are considered *unacceptable*, despite the fact that nowadays there are probably more jobs available 'informally' than formally. *Note*: No one knows the numbers here, since businesses and people that are not registered anywhere cannot be counted.

The term informal economy or sector was invented in the early 1970s to describe income-generating activities not protected by labour legislation in poorer countries.

At the time it was presumed that the informal sector was a transitory phenomenon associated with lower levels of economic development, something that would disappear as development occurred. This presumption has however been proven incorrect. A greater number of workers than ever before are now working outside the 'formal' economy and they are engaged in an increasingly diverse range of activities and situations (ILO 2002: v).

Now, however, the categories informal and formal are increasingly accepted as descriptions of economies in wealthier countries, too. Businesses said to be formal, simply by being recognised by bureaucracies, are said to be 'real', 'productive' and normal. Informal economies are called grey, black, submerged, underground and often thought of as bad, undesirable, temporary, not serious or not productive. To workers, however, the technical status of a business may not matter, a secretarial or factory job pretty much consisting of the same tasks in both licensed and unlicensed businesses.

Informality produces unjust working conditions and rampant opportunities for mistreatment of all workers, but at least non-migrant workers may fall back on the basic rights, protections and benefits that citizenship provides. Migrant employees' safe standing, on the other hand, depends on the *personal* relationships they are able to develop with owners, managers and other employees. If something goes wrong, these workers cannot appeal to government authorities or ask for help in criminal-justice systems. Why? Because they can be dismissed at bosses' will and, if they are migrants,

easily harassed or deported back to their home countries. Workers who enjoy citizens' rights are, however, increasingly subjected to temporary and informal contracts and poor working conditions (Precarias 2000-6).

So, informal jobs sound like something to be avoided, right? But migrants without official permission to work in formal-sector businesses are *glad* to get them. Companies that are not officially recognised and licensed employ people without official permission to work, which explains the vast number of migrants working in countries that will not issue them visas and work permits. Restaurant, construction, domestic, factory, agricultural, caring and sex workers alike share this 'clandestine' situation. Without work permits, migrants cannot regularise their status, become documented residents or enjoy normal rights, *but they can make money*. The word informal makes these businesses *sound* small, temporary, unstable or even benign, composed of street traders and vagabonds, but this is far from the truth. Industries that are highly evolved and very large are called informal only because they are not (yet) formally recognised. The sex industry, which takes in both licensed and unlicensed businesses and many operating under non-sex licences (like bars), generates billions of dollars worldwide and uses sophisticated, high-technology equipment and business methods. Informality provides opportunities for businesspeople to operate outside government rules and make large profits, and for workers to accumulate more money than they could any other way, if they are willing to use sex. This applies to legal citizens and undocumented migrants, whether they have a lot or little formal education and whether they are women, men or transgender.

'Flexible workers' is a term referring to those who, rather than following a classical career-path or staying within a set profession their whole lives, change jobs according to the demands of markets and the information they receive from personal networks. Flexible workers go where the jobs are, and, if they are to succeed, they need to be adaptable. Sex workers are prime examples, flexible in where they work and what they do. And although some people have no moral objections to selling sex, others do but become *morally* flexible, suspending their objections in order to make money. This applies to most migrants, whose priority is on making as much as possible as fast as possible—sometimes to pay off debts contracted in order to travel, sometimes to be able to continue travelling and sometimes to send or take home.

Money that migrants send home is called *remittances*, and in some countries they are a major source of income. Records of these payments, through banks and services like Western Union, show which country the remittances come from but not what kind of work produced them. Given the enormous difference between wages for selling sex and most other jobs, it's obvious that a large proportion of remittances must come from sex work.

A lot of people have thought that remittance money goes to buy only basic survival and consumer items (food, refrigerators, jewelry, DVDs), but recent studies reveal how money sent home by migrants finances important social and structural projects known as 'development' (O'Neil 2004; Sørensen 2004). This goes for money made picking strawberries, carrying building materials, giving babies baths and selling sex. It doesn't matter whether this money comes in the form of coins, bills or credit lines, the amounts mean the same no matter how they were earned, and they are used to finance construction projects, small businesses and cooperative agriculture for families,

communities and whole regions. Besides, the buying of a consumer item like a stove, which means the ability to boil bad water, can make the difference between unhealthful and healthful lives for people who then are able to work on larger projects.

In Ecuador, a lot of negative comments were made about women who sell sex abroad. I was told they 'force' husbands to find other sexual partners, that they withhold mother love from children and that they ruin traditional family life. Social workers talk about migrants as a problem when they return home, as though their new knowledge were worthless and as if they had become strange and 'different'. Since remittances from migrants represent the largest source of income outside of petroleum in Ecuador, these ways of thinking are extremely disturbing, implying that *money* is acceptable but the people who provide it are not. Migrant workers become sources of 'development' while not being either thanked or included in its benefits, just another socially marginalised and stigmatised group in their own countries. No wonder many of them don't want to return once they've been away for a while.

'Development' itself has been the object of enormous criticism for some time, as richer countries continue to impose 'aid' and 'progress' on poorer ones (Harrell-Bond 1986; Escobar 1995). Nevertheless, most cultures do have their own visions of developing, and migrants who send money home contribute to the realisation of those visions, including the millions who sell sex.

Societies that allow sex businesses to flourish and proliferate could include them in government accounting. This decision would subject businesses to conventional government controls: a) norms for permits to operate (eg, safe construction, proper compliance with zoning); b) requirements that health and safety standards be met in the workplace; and c) normal labour protections for employees, including inclusion in the states' social-security systems whether they are migrants or not. Recognition of this economic sector is not identical to traditional notions of 'regulation' associated with commercial sex, which consider only 'prostitution' and arrange workplaces for the convenience of business owners, management and clientele – never workers. I agree with the ILO that the only way to protect those employed in sex businesses is for governments to recognise their existence (Lim 1998).

This article is centred on the theme of this edition, money, and therefore does not expand into the many related themes conventionally addressed: whether sex work can be considered 'dignified' labour and the myriad ways that workers can be mistreated. By always returning to moralising issues, however important they may be, research on commercial sex has become narrow, reductionist and repetitive. Elsewhere I have written about how research reveals that the *meaning* of buying and selling sex is not always the same but rather depends on complex socio-cultural contexts (Agustín 2005; 2006). Money is a cultural as well as material object and alternative moralities exist in considering money's uses and benefits.

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