

# Latin American female migrants' negotiation of sex work, international borders and internal barriers in Istanbul

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## Abstract

Based on participant observation, numerous informal conversations and ten semi-structured interviews, this paper explores the complexities of Latin American female migrants' mobility towards Europe via Turkey. By analyzing ethnographic data accounting for their life stories, interactions with 'traffickers', experiences in Istanbul, and the difficulties to reach their destinations, it deconstructs dominant perspectives about human trafficking and sex work. Their narratives dislocate mainstream discourses that homogenize international migration under institutional categories, predetermined experiences and subjectivized ontologies. Upon arrival, unforeseen circumstances truncated previous plans, encapsulating them within Turkish borders where finding means to survive and continue moving turned challenging. Meanwhile, they must deal with internal barriers, including gender relations, gender-based violence and sociocultural, linguistic, economic, political and legislative hindrances that exacerbate precarity and risks. These journeys can become entangled with sex work, either induced or independently exercised with the intention of opposing immobilizing border regimes. Despite exposure to violence and abuse, these women continuously negotiate their own subjectivities, while dealing with unfamiliar and hostile settings, demonstrating tenacious expressions of subjective and collective agency that assist them in surviving and pursuing their life projects.

## Keywords

Critical anti-trafficking studies, international borders and internal barriers, Latin American female migration, precarity and agency, sex work

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## Introduction

What we experience here are things that women suffer a lot. I've never had a life like that in my country; I've never had it, never. I felt helpless as a kid, when I saw my family suffering because they didn't have enough to feed me (...) When I think of my old job I cry, because I quite enjoyed it, although salary was meager. I couldn't foresee a future, and here I am now, on this sinking boat. Nonetheless, I'm half-way already, and it's painful thinking about going back with nothing, since my family did many efforts to help me paying for the journey (...) I've fought a lot, always trying to send them something, but what I earn is nothing. I must move forward. If I stay here or return, I'll never be able to help them. I must keep moving. (Flavia, Istanbul, October 2019).

Flavia is a 25-year-old Colombian from Medellín. She is the only daughter of a caring family who wished to send her to study medicine, but faced financial problems that left the household bankrupted. Flavia's voice was breaking as she narrated having entered a clothes factory as a teenager while leaving her own aspirations aside. Despite the relative stability she could achieve, she relates being unable to meet good living standards. Some of her neighbors emigrated to Spain after crossing from Turkey irregularly. Flavia left everything behind following her friends' pathway, but unluckily her local contact fell in prison, leaving her abandoned and without support. As her savings came short, she engaged in sex work to ensure survival and achieve enough money to pay for an irregular crossing.

Similar stories were recounted by women from Bolivia, Paraguay, Brazil, Colombia, and especially the Dominican Republic while we were conducting fieldwork in Istanbul in the fall of 2019. These stories are all unique, mirroring diverse life-trajectories and pathways towards Turkey, a country they initially considered as a bridge towards Europe, which rather became an unescapable trap. As a shared feature, precarity was part of the engine that induced them all to leave everything behind, as well as a search for a different future elsewhere. They hailed predominantly from low-middle-class backgrounds, originating from rural areas or small towns. Their ages ranged from 18 to 50 years. While some displayed distinct indigenous features, others were white. Diversity also extended to marital status and motherhood; some had left their children behind to undertake the journey. While a minority had recently arrived, many of them had been stranded in Turkey for over 2 years. Most identified as Christian, with even those who did not subscribe to formal religious beliefs often referencing spiritual notions and higher beings.

This paper offers ethnographic accounts of their experiences, highlighting their subjection to numerous forms of oppression and the strategies they develop to negotiate their complex existences as Latin American female migrants in Istanbul. Their narratives challenge traditional definitions of trafficking, rising a call for more attention onto their demands for right, safety and opportunities. While acknowledging the limitations of an academic paper to directly alter the life circumstances of these women, we aim to bring attention to a marginalized social group that has been neglected by academia, NGOs, international bodies, and even the embassies of their respective countries. By drawing on Turkish and international scholarship to analyze their experiences, this paper not only sheds light on an invisible population but also develops knowledge by focusing on women who do not view Turkey as their intended destination. As part of a broader contribution to the country's literature, this paper integrates analyses of various systems (border, prostitution, gender) to explore their interconnectedness and mutual reinforcement, thereby elucidating their impacts on foreign women sex workers. Furthermore, it juxtaposes discourses and policies on anti-trafficking with the lived experiences of these women, critiquing state-centric and narrow definitions that fail to benefit their mobility projects and overall existences. In terms of potential impact, we aim to inspire future

scholars to delve deeper into these overlooked narratives as a way to influence both public perceptions and policymaking.

Based on participant observation, ten semi-structured interviews and numerous informal conversations conducted with Latin American women, this paper explores their stories to create a better understanding of the dynamics characterizing their migration and engagement in sex work from their own standpoints. Data collection involved careful methodological planning and some serendipity. We randomly met a couple of Latin Americans at an Istanbul fruit market, and our cultural affinity swiftly consolidated our relationship, bringing us to move in the flat they were renting out. Once our rapport was established and the reasons for our stay in Turkey were fully understood by our close social circle, they were enthusiastic to share their stories with us and to introduce us to trustworthy acquaintances. Through this network, we quickly gained access to a wide range of Latin Americans living in Istanbul through snowball sampling. Word spread within the community that researchers were interested in hearing their stories and bringing attention to the injustices they faced. Remarkably, the women featured in this study were among the first to reach out, claiming that the world needed to know about the migrant experience in Turkey. However, their irregular migration status and criminalized work made them susceptible to detention, forcing us to meet up and carry out interviews in an extremely discreet way. While ensuring everyone's safety required us to avoid public gatherings, meeting in private settings allowed for meaningful conversations, shared meals, and the exchange of stories. We were initially hesitant about entering the sex work conversational terrain due to our positionality and concerns about the eventuality of retraumatizing or revictimizing these women. Surprisingly, they usually initiated discussions about life in the streets, as that was a pivotal facet of their experience, a reality they wished to denounce, and something they wanted to speak out as a way of releasing frustration and sorrow. As our conversations often delved into sensible topics, we prioritized maintaining a human connection over strictly adhering to our researcher roles, upholding professional and human ethics while approaching interactions with sensitivity and empathy.

Through these women's stories, we aim to deconstruct and move beyond mainstream rhetoric representing female migrants from ethnocentric, patriarchal and patronizing perspectives that portray them as passive subjects whose misfortunes are created by 'heartless traffickers' who benefit from their ingenuousness (Fitzgerald, 2012). While anti-trafficking politics and rhetoric have been employed to shape specific demarcations of national sovereignty (Yea, 2020), they also transcend such limits through extraterritorial border governance and control (Lee, 2013). Thereby, particular migration regimes flourish and multiply across borders, developing entangled coercive systems that attempt to dictate migrants' mobilities and lives en route (Jahnsen and Skilbrei, 2018). Despite multifarious bordering processes impacting upon women's existences in their everyday lives, the redefinition of their selves appears as an opposing power that struggle for self-emancipation and transformation (Laurie et al., 2015). In this sense, trafficking borders create terrains where restriction and negotiation cohabit in a tense relationship of coproduction and contrast (Bhagat, 2022; Pickering and Ham, 2014). Through the following ethnographic accounts, our article focuses on the ways borders and internal barriers shape these migrant women's subjectivities and interpolate with their constrained agency whilst en route. Their stories provide insights upon the need of moving beyond patronizing discourses on trafficking, focusing instead on the upholding of their rights and opportunities in support of their mobility projects.

## **Accounting for human trafficking in Turkey**

Scholarship addressing human trafficking and sex work in Turkey has spanned a variety of topics, focusing on the historical developments of its legal and policy frameworks (Ersan, 2013), as well as the relationship between Turkey and international agencies (Sever, 2018), or the European Union

(Toktas and Selimoglu, 2012; Yıldız, 2018). Some studies have explored the social, mediatic, and political discourses concerning the subjectivized representation of foreign women, especially since the ‘Natasha’ phenomenon that arose following the USSR’s fall and the increase in female migration from its former republics (Coşkun, 2020; Erder and Kaşka, 2003; Gülçür and İlkaracan, 2016). The intersections between the regimes of migration and prostitution have also been object of inquiry (Coşkun, 2020; Zhidkova and Omer Demir, 2016). From a different viewpoint, some studies have reflected on matters of agency and negotiation of sociocultural, economic and institutional structures (Bloch, 2003; Demir, 2010; Demir and Finckenauer, 2010; Gülçür and İlkaracan, 2016).

Most of these studies address Turkey as a destination country, a nation of circular migration, or a terrain of deportation-reentrance practices. However, Latin American women featuring this research were all unwilling to remain in Turkey, as they foresaw their stay as a short spatiotemporal interlude between origin and destination; a mere gateway to Europe. This particularity has broad implications for the aforementioned literature, as it dislocates its conventional research focus and makes our research unique. For instance, the issue of consent in sex work engendered debates due to discrepancies between international law frameworks and the way it is incorporated within Turkish legislation, which made the dichotomy forced-voluntary a crucial issue in determining who deserves ‘protection’ and who is deemed as a criminal who must be persecuted (Coşkun, 2018: 91–92; Doezenia, 2010). Regrettably, national and international policy frameworks address protection in terms of a patronizing humanitarian border that ‘rescue’ victims of trafficking to ultimately send them back to their countries, under the argument that they will allegedly be better off there (Pallister-Wilkins, 2022: 53–90; Sharma, 2003: 54; González and Villa Camarma, 2006: 181–182). Most women who are deemed subjects of protection as victims of trafficking in Turkey will sooner or later be deported, whereas only a few acquire a residence permit under international protection grounds (Baykotan, 2014: 18; Coşkun, 2015: 346–347; Williams and Coşkun, 2020: 241–242; Zhidkova and Omer Demir, 2016: 132). As none of these options mirror the life-projects of Latin American women who do not wish to remain in Turkey, they escape this intellectual debate and policy framework, while autonomously looking for pathways towards the realization of their goals. This is not to say that these women’s engagement in sex work resembles a ‘free choice’ in liberal terms, considering that although none of them was working under the control of pimps, the structural factors surrounding their journeys often represent compelling circumstances inducing them to enter the sex-work market, despite all risks and suffering implied. The modern slavery rhetoric is thus distant from representing these women’s experiences (O’Connell Davidson, 2015). To recall the definition proposed by Kaya and Erez (2018: 2916), the character of these women’s agency: “far from being a binary of voluntary versus coerced, is contingent, fluid, and changes over time. It is shaped by economic and cultural considerations, political events, and legal reforms, which in turn affect foreign women’s conditions of work, their preferred destination country, and degree of freedom at work”. Even though this research does not pretend to enter the debate between abolitionism and regularization, it seems complex to escape these contrasting conceptual and political frameworks, as even the use of particular terminologies implies determined positions and perspectives. We chose to employ the terms ‘migrants’ rather than ‘victims of trafficking’, ‘mediators’ rather than ‘traffickers’, and ‘sex workers’ rather than ‘prostitutes’. The intention is highlighting the conscious and willful component that these women’s social actions encapsulate. Even though deception and persuasion often connote their stories, the decision to emigrate and enter the sex market was presented by them as a coping strategy to endure and overcome the precarity of their living conditions back in their countries and en route. Since sex work is a palpable reality in Turkey and worldwide, its criminalization fosters agendas that further endangers these women, rather than looking for solutions to uphold their rights and improve their working conditions (Gülçür and İlkaracan, 2016: 419).

The Turkish legal framework discriminates these women based on nationality and gender. On the one hand, only Turkish citizens can obtain permission to work in licensed brothels under strict governmental control, leaving foreigners in informal settings where abuses are easily perpetrated by members of society and authorities. Moreover, when authorities simultaneously detain sex workers and their male clients, the latter are liberated without facing any issue (Sever, 2018: 37), while women are forced to undergo health examinations that would cause deportation, in case any Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD) is diagnosed (Coşkun, 2018: 87). While individuals from numerous countries face deportation for practicing sex work, Latin Americans are detainable, though indeportable migrants. Since Turkey does not cover the expenses of long-distance repatriations, these women frequently enter recurrent circles of apprehension, confinement and release, as their liberation is not accompanied by migratory regularization (Lenti, 2023). Significantly, literature on Latin American migration in/through Turkey is currently unavailable, as the limited size of the community has rendered this social group invisible to academic studies, national and supranational statistics, and the work carried out by NGOs. Latin American female migrants in Turkey are not supported by government and most NGOs, as assisting people on irregular status is punished by law with fines and even imprisonment (Üstübcü Öney, 2015). Meanwhile, the experiences and realities of these women are left to oblivion and remain unknown to the public eye. The relatively small number of women partaking this research does not allow a comprehensive analysis of this particular social group's experiences; numerous questions remain unanswered, and various considerations could take a different shape if the number of participants was higher. Hence, this research offers partial and situated knowledge from an anthropological approach and aspires to highlight a gap in the existing literature, hoping to induce further explorations of this terrain to suggest policy recommendations in support of this social group's mobility and wellbeing.

### **Borders, barriers and sex work en route**

The following ethnographic accounts, and the subsequent analyses drawn from critical border and anti-trafficking scholarship show how these women's life-stories become entangled in the dynamics of border regimes and neoliberal capitalism. These circumstances paralyze their transit and encapsulate them in a spiral of precarity that led many of them to engage in sex work to subsist and continue moving. Their experiences show the mistake of conceiving migration as a linear trajectory in space and time, representing transit countries as ephemeral bridges lacking experiential and emotional content (BenEzer and Zetter, 2015; Yıldız and Sert, 2019). Instead, these journeys are frequently characterized by uncertainty and interruptions, since transit can become a trap whose duration and even certainty of survival are unknown. Simultaneously, the stuckedness of these women in Turkey is characterized by encounters with new and unexpected realities whose impact leads to irrevocable transformations in their subjectivities and ontological perceptions. Upon arrival, several of them were induced into sex work by their mediators, others were simply abandoned, and those who arrived autonomously found themselves in a hostile and difficult context. All these women discovered that getting a job in Turkey was virtually impossible or extremely exploitative, so that sex work remained as one of the few options to generate means of sustainment. However, this activity exposes them to psychological and physical harms that distress them on a day-by-day basis. In Turkey, they must face power relations that constantly endanger them, especially when they are commodified and treated as women who do not deserve any compassion for being foreigners, following a different religion, and practicing sex work. Additionally, most of these women complained about their clients' threats to report their migratory status to the authorities, leaving them even more vulnerable to abusive power relations, in a country in which they are already exposed to state-sponsored violence and corrupted authorities who often demand bribes and sexual favors from them (Coşkun, 2018: 91; Gülçür and İlkaracan, 2016: 413–416; Şenses, 2020: 58–59).

The overlapping forms of discrimination and oppression these women experience in Turkey highlight the relevance of adopting an intersectional perspective when researching on migration, since homogenizing the experiences of different migrants could result on simplistic representations that deprive them of their subjectivities, whilst perpetrating expressions of epistemic violence (Anthias, 2006; Magliano, 2015). These women's emotional universe is impacted upon by these experiences, since they develop feelings of guilt, shame and regret that emerge from their cultural and religious values, disrupting their lives in various ways (Laurie and Richardson, 2021). On the other hand, their narratives highlight resilience and tenacity, since they constantly create networks of support, security measures and collective knowledge to survive the barriers and sufferings that characterize their stuntedness in Turkey and entrapment in sex work.

We begin unfolding these women's experiences by presenting the story of Penelope, who we had the opportunity to meet twenty months after her arrival in Istanbul. During our interview, she reiterated the length of her stay numerous times and with evident frustration, as her transit was supposed to last for only a week. Penelope is a 27-year-old mother of an 8-year-old boy who remained with her partner in the Dominican Republic. She appeared as a jovial and smiling person in public contexts, although she admitted wearing a perpetual mask in front of her friends. Her intention was to hide the immense suffering she dared to share throughout our interview, underlining the relief she felt towards the end of it. Back in her country, Penelope had two part-time jobs, but her income was insufficient to cover her household's expenses and those of her parents. Her brother lived in Spain, and he hoped for her to join him with the intention of immigrating his brother-in-law and nephew at a later stage. Penelope submitted a fairly strong visa application which was rejected without further justification. The hope for family reunification was renewed by someone who told her brother about clandestine travels to enter Europe via Turkey, which were organized for \$6,000US. Upon arriving in Istanbul, Penelope's mediator confiscated her passport with the excuse of needing it to allegedly process fake documents that could allow her legal entry into Europe. Penelope's mediator claimed more and more money from her by saying the document was expensive, while also demanding contributions for paying rent, bills and food, in a context in which it was difficult to get work, especially due to her unfamiliarity with Turkish language and sociocultural traits. Even though she was never forced into sex work, the confiscation of her documents meant that her official identity and freedom were abducted. Enduring the pressure from her mediator and the deep precarity of her living conditions induced her to take the streets for survival, and as a strategy towards life change. Penelope did not only have to deal with a broken promise, but also confront the difficulties posed by the abuses, discrimination, irregularity and precarity. From that point in time, to her engagement in sex work the step was short, but its aftermath continues hammering her mind and soul.

I used to cry every day. I'd just get in the bathroom without being noticed, look at my image in the mirror and think, "Oh my God, but why me? Why?" (...) It was a very big thing for me the first time I did that. I felt it was the end. My whole body was shaking, I felt nervous, totally anxious. When that man touched me, I felt I was the dirtiest woman in the world. I was always thinking deep in my mind: "Oh my God, please forgive me". I didn't dare to talk about it with my family and that's a huge burden on me. Nobody should know and will ever know about it. I've lived the most painful things that can be thought of... The worst one is when you must be with any man, while there are already others awaiting to be with you. This kind of thing is what marks the woman, and it has fractured my existence for the rest of my days. (Penelope, Istanbul, November 2019).

This testimony provides insights to better understand how sex work impacts and transforms irreversibly the inner self of these women, since the words, gestures and tears that amalgamated within Penelope's narrative share several elements with many other testimonies. The emphasis on

refraining from unveiling the suffering she was experiencing reveals how sex work can be perceived depending on the sociocultural context and moral values that dictate which are the accepted traits of social decency in any given country (Laurie and Richardson, 2021; Pecheny, 2014; Saunders, 2005). In the Latin American context, stigma and dishonor are social factors that reinforced Penelope's fears upon the judgment of her close social ties. These stigmas also originated personal dilemmas, as Penelope's present realities contrasted with the moral and religious teachings that accompanied her upbringing. In this sense, shame becomes a wound that corrodes the individual from the depths of the self, evolving into a mixture of suffering and resilience that is hard to bear (Nussbaum, 2016). During the interview, Penelope was continually seeking the forgiveness of God and herself, although that implied great distress. In this context, she emphasized a saying from her country among loud cries, which got engraved in our memory, due to the intense symbolism that encompasses many of the stories we collected in Istanbul: "necessity has the face of the heretic". These words suggest that taking risks such as engaging in sex work or getting involved in trafficking situations do not always represent options among many, but the only ones available or the most suitable ones in complex situations. Thereby, migrants should not be thought of as naïve individuals who inadvertently enter the lion's den but rather, as subjects who consider and frequently accept certain risks by virtue of the preponderant circumstances, their particular needs and the objectives they pursue (Hernández-Carretero and Carling, 2012: 413; Mainwaring and Brigden, 2016; Spener, 2009).

Penelope also emphasized that the traumas she experienced in Turkey is something that will accompany her forever in time and space, as it constitutes an indelible memory in her body, mind and soul (Lacapra, 2006: 83; Le Breton, 1999: 39–40; Uribe, 2008: 184). However, she demonstrates a persevering transnational willfulness: the hope that induced her to leave her country despite the restrictions imposed on her international mobility (Agustín, 2007; Andrijasevic, 2010; Andrijasevic and Mai, 2016; Sharma, 2003, 2005), and the tenacity that sustains her throughout her tribulations in Turkey, which helps her keeping alight the hope of turning her imaginary into a reality (Jackson, 2013: 212; Lindquist, 2006: 4–8).

## Universes of precarity and oppression

The story of Fedes, a 25-year-old Dominican who left her country, family, work and studies in Philosophy while following promises similar to those that seduced Penelope offers understandings about Latin American sex work in Turkey. Fedes was born in a rural area, and her father was a peasant who stopped working due to compromised health conditions. The family gradually accumulated debts, and Fedes was approached by an alleged travel agent who offered to organize a journey towards a country in which a well-paid job in finance was awaiting her. She thought this was a great opportunity to improve her family's living conditions and secure a more promising future. She disposed of her life-savings and the money her parents could borrow through mortgaging their land in order to pay \$3.500US to the journey's organizer. After arriving in Turkey, she discovered that the travel agency did not exist and there was no job awaiting her. Despite her initial desperation, Fedes managed to put her mind at rest, and began looking for work to gather enough money to cover the costs of an irregular crossing into Europe. As many other Latin Americans, she complained about facing enormous barriers complicating work hunting, such as language impediments, the lack of employment rights deriving from her irregular migratory status, and diverse forms of workplace discrimination and harassment. This reality leaves many of these women with little choice but to engage in sex work. However, practicing this activity in Turkey implies institutional discrimination and exclusion, since it is carried out in a shadow zone and within a different sociocultural context where certain patriarchal norms, racializing patterns and governmental denial of women's rights foster gender-based abuses and sexual violence (Baykotan, 2014: 17; Küçükalioglu, 2018).

Once you're here, the last resort to survive, pay rent and eat is to prostitute yourself on the streets, and this can't be anything good for anyone. It's hard to go with men you don't like just for surviving until you manage to get out of here (...) I worked in factories, but they pay very little for many hours of work and take advantage of you as a migrant. Colleagues are bad but bosses are worse, as they just kick you out if you refuse to have sex with them. It happened to me and other fellows; they just wanna use you for sex and then they wanna pay you less or nothing at all (...) Migrating isn't easy, when you work on the streets, every moment can be deadly. Sex work is dangerous, but what else can we do?! (...) I was once in a discotheque and a guy gave me 50 bucks to go to his house. He was too drunk and tired; he just went on and on and he wouldn't finish. I wanted to leave because I was exhausted. He didn't wanna use condom, and I kept telling him that we had to take care of ourselves. When I told him to stop, he wanted to take my money because he claimed that I didn't do everything he commanded. He was infuriated, then he locked me up and broke my phone so that I couldn't communicate with anyone. Fortunately, a neighbor heard the fight and he knocked on his door. The guy kicked me out naked and threw my clothes on the stairs. I had to dress there, and I went out to the street crying, desperately looking for a cab. That was terrifying, who knows if he was sick or drunk enough to stab me with a knife. (Fedes, Istanbul, October 2019).

Fedes' account of these event was rich in gesticulations and facial expressions that portrayed deep frustration and fear, while her voice intonation underlined the story's most painful aspects.

Throughout her account, it is possible to reflect on the transnational nature of exploitation, which is a topic often omitted within discourses about trafficking. Here, we are basically underlining that many women end up being sexually exploited in transit and/or destination countries when fleeing from diverse forms of exploitation in their countries of origin and having no access to safe mobility channels (Agustín, 2007: 8; Andrijasevic, 2010: 10–11; Sharma, 2003: 62, 2005: 96).

Moreover, Fedes' testimony helps understanding how degrading working conditions and the sexualization of female migrants' bodies do not only appear in sex work, but among numerous spheres of their work experience in Turkey (Coşkun, 2018: 89–90). Irregular migratory status exposes them to various forms of systematic labor exploitation, which overlaps with other kinds of discrimination based on different identity variables that produce multifaceted universes of oppression (Hill Collins, 1990; Muñoz Cabrera, 2011). Hence, many of them conceive sex work as a more effective option than selling their labor to exploitative factories in which they would be equally exploited and abused, but earning far less and being less independent than on the street (Agustín, 2007: 7, 10; Andrijasevic, 2010: 15–19). Through Fedes' account, it is possible to perceive how her experiences in Turkey have consolidated feelings that tormented her day-by-day life, as all she wants is to leave that country, but the high cost of crossings forces her to encounter countless dangers. Despite all risks, sex work remains as one of the few avenues to achieve the necessary means to fulfill their desire for transformation and existential reconstruction. This life-stage has had devastating impacts upon Fedes, transforming her as a person and as a woman. However, she emphasizes that “[s]ex work is dangerous, but what else can we do?!”.

The above testimony and analysis help widening the discussion on the tensions between willfulness and coercion in sex work. Fedes voluntarily decided to engage in sex work rather than in factories and she agreed on going to the customer's house. However, does this mean that the contractual, though informal shape of this agreement makes her accountable for her misfortunes? The critiques to libertarianism and social contract theory formulated by Pateman (1988, 2002) can illuminate this matter. Accordingly, the foundational premise of contractual relations posits that individuals maintain ownership over their own bodies and engage voluntarily in commitments and transactions within political and economic spheres. However, this conceptualization predominantly assigns bodily autonomy to men, while women are subjugated to male dominance across various contractual scenarios, including instances of employment and sex work, as in Fedes' testimony. This subordination stems from a framework of sexual control and masculine mastership, characterized by



the possession and entitlement to sexual agency that deprive women of complete and unrestricted ownership of their bodily autonomy.

While Fedes remembered the night she was kidnapped, she highlighted scenarios of direct violence that infused deep terror in her mind. Her anxiety and fear do not only show what might happen during the provision of services, but their eventual consequences in terms of sexual health and pregnancy. This is especially the case when working conditions are precarious and sexist, materializing in clients' reluctance to use condoms and amalgamating with the lack of access to the public health system (Kaya and Erez, 2018: 2972).

In relation to this point, Fedes and other sex workers referred with despair the heartbreaking story of Carmela, a young Dominican woman who passed away in Istanbul in 2019, due to complications related to an HIV infection. According to various accounts of friends who tried to save her life with all their means, Carmela had been stuck in Istanbul for over 2 years, exercising sex work to gather financial means to leave the country. Her migratory status prevented her from attending sexual health institutions, so that she discovered her HIV infection only when the virus had reached AIDS status and she required immediate hospitalization. In Turkey, antiretroviral drugs are prescribed free of charge only to citizens, residents and holders of temporary protection status (Gülçür and İlkkaracan, 2016: 416). Irregular Latin Americans are thus ineligible and become encapsulated within a discriminatory institutional system that leaves people facing serious medical needs on the edge. Carmela sought urgent help from the Dominican consulate, but the authorities turned a blind eye to her situation, denying any assistance to repatriate and obtain the necessary medicines. Carmela was unable to pay for the costs of her own repatriation, and she passed away short afterwards. Her farewell did not include a funeral and family's last goodbye. The competent authorities placed Carmela's body into a black sac and deposited her in a common grave in the outskirts of Istanbul. If, as Farmer (2004) postulates, one of the terrains where structural violence becomes clearly visible is healthcare, Carmela's story echoes his words, epitomizing some of the dramatic conditions many migrants face when they become excluded and deprived of this right (Flynn and Cannon, 2009). The irregularization of migrants is thus part of a necropolitical system that produces exploitable and disposable subjects who are left to their own destiny, self-responsible of corroding in solitude and abandonment (Gross-Wyrtzen, 2020).

## Agency, knowledge and networks

The stories presented so far depict a shattering panorama that is characterized by extreme vulnerability, marginalization, violence and sorrow, since all these elements connote the experiences of the Latin American sex workers we met in Turkey. However, all interviews also displayed the power of agency, perseverance and hope that conjointly sustained these women through all difficulties and orientated their social actions towards a different tomorrow.

This topic materializes in the story of Meche, a 34-year-old mother of eight children. Her bright smile is unforgettable, as she maintained a cheerful attitude during the whole interview, including when she narrated painful experiences. Meche did not arrive in Turkey by scam, as she left her home following the advice of her sister who had lived in Turkey for few years. She assured Meche that finding a good job in Turkey was easy and, in the worst scenario, the street was an option to get by. According to Fedes' testimony, her sister did everything in good faith and helped her throughout her stay, which shows that migrants' mediators are not necessarily greedy criminals, but they can sometimes be family, community members or 'trustworthy smugglers' (Cuttitta et al., 2020; Demir et al., 2017; Flores, 2013; İçduygu and Toktas, 2002; Mohammadi et al., 2019). When we met, Meche had been in Istanbul for 6 months, but her account shows how well she had integrated to the city's everyday life and the social environment in which she navigates. Following her arrival, she met various Latin American sex workers, with whom she developed important social ties. These

women's linguistic, religious and sociocultural affinities, coupled with similarities in terms of personal circumstances play a crucial role in the consolidation of social networks. These networks provide invaluable support not only for their migration, but for their psychosocial endurance and survival, because they englobe practices of mutual care and collective knowledge, memory sharing and communal wisdom (Agustín, 2007: 10–11; Juliano, 2002; Smith and Mac, 2018: 5–8). The knowledge these women generate in relation to sex work concerns their workplace, the profile of their clients, and the profession's 'good practices'.

Some of the examples from the collected interviews echo previous literature (Gülçür and İlkaracan, 2016). Regarding workplaces, Latin American sex workers in Istanbul tend to prefer hotels, as they can attract the employees' attention by shouting in case of problems, while this is not always a solution when working at private abodes. Another relevant point is the space in which women look for potential customers, as streets offer many possibilities to find clients, but encountering dangerous people or State authorities represents a latent risk. Therefore, many of these women prefer to work in certain restaurants, bars and nightclubs owned by other Latin Americans which function as meeting places, suggesting that sex-work and 'trafficking' are often tight to community networks characterized by shared sociocultural traits, rather than transnational crime groups (Flores, 2013: 98–99).

In relation to customers, there is a widespread preference among Latin American sex-workers for their male fellows or for African men, as they relate that Turkish men are violent and untrustworthy, recalling all instilled terror within these women's collective memory. According to their testimonies, numerous Turkish men mistreat women and become aggressive if they feel their wishes have not been fulfilled as a service they are paying for. They frequently refuse to pay, threaten whistleblowing to immigration authorities, or leave women abandoned on the outskirts of the city, either dead or alive. While these generalizations may arise from the simple fact that Turkish men represent their primary costumers, as well as from the power imbalance imposed by unequal citizenship status, patriarchal norms predominating in the country have been identified as causers and justifiers of gender-based violence and abuses (Küçükalioglu, 2018). Latin American or African clients can also be perceived as untrustworthy when they are under the influence of alcohol or drugs, while Turkish men can appear as safe customers when fellow colleagues recommend them. Whichever their nationality is, these women deem advisable to make well-behaved customers happy and maintain contact, especially when considering the dangers of encountering new people.

In relation to work strategies, participants underlined that it is worth receiving payments in advance, control that banknotes are not forfeited and handing them over to a colleague before moving forward. They also highlighted the importance of giving details about work location and expected time of return to someone trustworthy. Translation apps are considered useful to facilitate intercultural communication, at the time of clarifying the service's terms and conditions. These apps help setting prices depending on the service provided, although Latin American women prefer to start at high rates, in view of tedious bargaining processes. They charge between \$15US and \$20US in average per intercourse, or between \$30US and \$70US for overnight service. It is also crucial clarifying to customers that only protected intercourses are offered, even if men's consent does not necessarily guarantee their compliance. Therefore, these women must constantly make sure that their clients do not remove or break the condom.

Despite these forms of navigating complex structural contexts have been mentioned by most participants, it is essential to underline that women have variable bargaining power and employ different strategies depending on specific situations vis-à-vis their access to social networks, economic resources, subjective characteristics, cultural capital and the length of their stay. Crucially, the empirically acquired insights into migrant life and involvement in sex work are often exchanged among these women, forming unwritten repositories of knowledge and wisdom that serve as

guiding beacons to navigate challenging circumstances (López Marín, 2023: 71–73; Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2012: 19).

The excerpts presented herein serve as examples to display the two sides of a same coin, because all stories offer accounts of intersecting structural constraints and expressions of agency. Hence, rather than conceiving domination and resistance in binary opposition, they should be understood as co-constitutive, mutually accommodating and frequently colluding (Green, in Farmer, 2004). These women's agency partly diverges from the 'autonomy of migration' discourse, which tends to assume individuals' inherent ability to resist power and structural forces in abstract, ahistorical terms. Instead, these women negotiate with regimes of border, capital and patriarchy in everyday 'embodied encounters' (Scheel, 2013: 282–283). Ethnographic exploration of these experiences thus illuminates the dialogical nature of their responses to oppressive structures, which are enabled by their unrelenting, though coerced agency (Sharma, 2003: 61).

A question constantly arising during fieldwork was whether the power of enduring such circumstances originates within these women's inner agency and willpower, or if their strength comes from resignation and internalization of their reality. Thereby, to what extent does agency shape these women's experiences, and to what degree do structures mold their lives? Most probably, there is no singular answer, as it varies from person to person, from context to context, and from moment to moment. However, the collected stories suggest that, in many cases, it is neither agency, nor structures that move the steps of these women, but hope above all:

My goal is crossing the sea into Greece and on to Spain to look for a different future. I can't go back now, I must struggle for myself, for my children, and for my family. I'll move on, always with God guiding and protecting my steps. (...) After I've suffered so much, I know God has something planned for me. I never thought I'd come to prostitute myself in Istanbul and experience everything I've been passing through. Sometimes you don't have any money and you've to go with whoever just to eat the next day (...) On one occasion, I was about to give up, but then I thought of my children, and I hammered my mind thinking: "Should I go back? No, I must keep moving, I'll go on and cross borders!" I know there's still a long way ahead, but I'm sure I'll be able to reach my objective. I've faith that I'm gonna make it, and I will. (Meche, Istanbul, December 2019).

As in the cases of Meche, Fedes, Penelope and Flavia, many other Latin American women who were stuck in Istanbul left their homes due to multiple, interrelated reasons: hardship, precarity, deceptions, willfulness, and dreams. What they all share is a desire for transforming their living conditions and ameliorate their families' circumstances. Their migration guided them through unexpected paths that currently keep on marking their existences with deep suffering, unbearable shame and inner anger. While attempting to start a new life, their existences were transformed by the context in which they become stuck, leaving them with few options but to engage in a work they had never exercised before, but that will remain as an indelible memory. These realities exposed them to psychosocial traumas and risky physical health conditions. Concomitantly, their mind and soul must keep on struggling with the harrowing of those sociocultural values learned since their early years of childhood. Latin American sex-worker migrants' quest for transformation involves a painful transformation of their subjectivity and ontological perception that gradually develops through experiences of difficulty and grief. However, practices of mutual care and knowledge sharing support their struggle for survival and mobility. The nourishment of their agency and willpower does not solely originate from social interrelations, but also from the strength of their inner self (Arendt, 1993: 50). Even though the Turkish context allows particular forms of agency coercion, these women's stories suggest that their resilience and hope never gets annihilated, as it gives them the strength to keep enduring painful circumstances and look for resources to ameliorate their living conditions anyhow, while zesting the taste of a different tomorrow (Jackson, 2013: 212; Sharma,

2003: 62). The overlapping of these subjective, social and contextual factors often transforms the transit of these women into a condition of stuckedness with unknown timeframe, by which their entrapment in sex work becomes an open-ended issue.

## Conclusions

The fight against trafficking emphasizes the criminalization of enablers, who are usually depicted as ontologically heartless, greedy, violent and abusive men, while those who contract their services are portrayed as naïve victims who lack agency and voice, epitomizing in the figures of women and children (FitzGerald, 2012; Sharma, 2005: 101–102; Smith and Mac, 2018: 13; Weitzer, 2007). This perspective obfuscates the rules of mobility that deny access to international space and legal channels of migration to most of the world's population. Border regimes force countless migrants to use illicit mobility channels as the last resort and only way out of conditions of poverty or violence that have partly been created by the aftermath of colonialism, imperialism and extractivism in countries of origin (Sharma, 2005: 89, 91). Mainstream discussions on trafficking focus on the multiple forms of exploitation that migrants may experience during their journeys, while intentionally overlooking important determinants that leave them with no option but to go from their countries on a quest for life opportunities (Sharma, 2003: 54–55). In this sense, the demonizing rhetoric and criminalization of trafficking invalidate these subjects' agency and the variable ways in which they visualize and construct their own trajectories and life-projects (Agustín, 2007: 8; Andrijasevic, 2010: 10–11; Andrijasevic and Mai, 2016: 2; Sharma, 2003: 62, 2005: 96).

These arguments resonate with the testimonies of most women who shared their story with us, as despite deceptions accompanied the beginning of their migration, their ontological perceptions do not reflect the patronizing prototype of 'victims of trafficking' which has been imposed by international agencies and nation-States. To the contrary, these Latin Americans see themselves as perseverant women, mothers, and migrants who left their homes in search of better existential conditions for themselves and their families, while carrying along their sorrow, nostalgia, will and hope. The abovementioned statements do not disregard the existence of abusive mediators who deplete the vulnerability of those hiring their services. This reality has been reiterated in many of the collected stories, but blaming mediators for all life-loss and suffering seem to be a political maneuver by the West to turn a blind eye to their accountability and the humanitarian consequences created by their own States and border regimes (Mai 2016: 14; Watson, 2015: 39–53; Yea, 2020). When looking at these facts, it should also be considered that the proliferation and increase in trafficking is in great part derivative of the creation of border regimes and the exclusionary systems of human mobility governing the world. Discourses and policies that criminalize trafficking and sex work incur the risk of justifying, legitimizing and perpetuating the implementation of border policies that hinder international mobility, although not always succeeding in stopping it. That is, people continue to migrate as difficult living conditions remain unchanged, journeys have become more expensive and dangerous, and many more people are dying in the attempt. When talking about their envisioning of a future elsewhere, hope often seemed to be strangled by the structural forces that hindered their mobility projects and threatened their survival in Istanbul. However, the passing of time has shed light on variable outcomes, as years after the completion of our fieldwork, most of these women could achieve enough resources to pay for an irregular crossing into Europe or, they managed to repatriate.

Discourses about human trafficking often go hand-in-hand with those about sex work, especially when the subjects to be 'rescued' are women. Within this polyphonic debate, numerous voices originating from politics, clergy, humanitarianism, and some branches of feminism insist on framing sex work as a violent and dehumanizing practice per se. Their attempts to foster the 'empowerment' of racialized female others often result in new forms of marginalization and revictimization

(Agustín, 2007: 5; Nawyn and Birdal, 2014: 79). The politicized moralization of sex work overflows the labor sphere and generates patronizing conjectures about identity and culture, in which the subjectivity of these women is reduced to infantilized stereotypes, especially in the case of migrants who are prototypically conceived as poor, retrograde, oppressed and coming from macho and violent contexts (Agustín, 2007: 179–180; Andrijasevic, 2010: 14–15; González and Villa Camarma, 2006: 178–179; Zhang, 2009). The fact that women have the capacity to make decisions within a narrow spectrum of existing possibilities, as well as the conception of sex work as a resource-generating activity become forgotten, leaving space for criminalizing frameworks that justify white and moralizing salvation crusades (Andreas and Nadelmann, 2008; Sharma, 2005: 101–104).

Sex work was not the first option sought by the women presented herein, but it represented a resource they used when alternative paths had closed. Taking this route required complex decision-making processes and confronting thoughts and feelings. While formulating a critique of State-centric standpoints, this research underlines the relevance of inquiring about the diversity and specificity of every life-story, as well as about the material conditions of sex work, in order to advocate for labor rights and safer working conditions.

By taking distance from perspectives that portray sex workers as helpless victims, it is possible to unveil the ways in which many of them navigate their own realities, as well as how they manage interrelationships with clients, mediators, authorities, laws, NGOs, between themselves and also with their inner self (Andrijasevic, 2010: 15–19; Sharma, 2003: 62). Sex workers' dealings with complex situations, circumstances, and power relations show the adaptive, transformative, heterogeneous, and multifaceted character of their subjectivities, as well as the contextual and dynamic quality of their agency (Andrijasevic, 2010: 17–18; Kaya and Erez, 2018: 2956, 2976–2977; Mai, 2016: 13–14). Similarly, the practices of mutual care and the strategies they design and share to face the precariousness and dangers of the work they exercise provide insights about the tangled systems of gender, capital, border, culture and law crisscrossing their existences (Juliano, 2002; Smith and Mac, 2018: 5–8).

Concerning the Turkish context, this ethnography illustrates a complex environment in which migration policy, work restrictions, gender relations, structural violence, social stigmatization, and the criminalization of sex work coexist and mutually feed off, materializing in experiences of domination and resistance that intersect in women's everyday life. While the overlapping of the Turkish border, gender and prostitution regimes becomes a tangible reality for these women, the international definition of and the politics against human trafficking do not reflect their stories and needs, as they remain instrumentalized by the mainstream fight against unwanted migration.

Far from finding solutions to all forms of violence occurring during various phases of the migratory process, mainstream anti-trafficking perspectives align with colonialist agendas of border security and mobility control at the national and international levels, while perpetuating and even worsening the conditions of precariousness and suffering characterizing these journeys (Gauna Alsina and Juliano, 2017; Nawyn and Birdal, 2014; Sharma, 2003: 55, 2005: 89–90). Rather than pointing the finger at sex workers and migration mediators, this research concludes emphasizing the need to critically examine the nature, impacts and consequences of border regimes that have eliminated reachable channels of legal and safe migration for the populations who were born on the plundered sides of the world's borders. The problems do not seem to be trafficking and sex work per se, but the lack of tangible options that could allow these women to generate an income for their livelihood, their families, and the realization of their mobility projects. Thereby, it can be risky to moralize and stigmatize their decisions in a paternalistic way and in accordance with certain bi-politics that try to dictate what pathways their existences must follow (Agustín, 2007: 10). Hence, social research in trafficking and sex work has a lot to reflect on its positioning, taking seriously the problems and preoccupations of these women, as to avoid becoming an instrument of control and

power (Agustín, 2007: 59; González and Villa Camarma, 2006: 178–179). To the coloniality of knowledge that consciously or unconsciously adopts State-centric positions, this research interposes a call for decolonial epistemologies that lean on migrants' standpoints, knowledge, concerns and desires.

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