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## Freedom of choice or force of circumstance? Eastern European sex-workers in the Republic of Cyprus

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### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on Eastern European migrants who, since the beginning of the 1990s, are entering the Republic Cyprus as “artistes”. This is a visa permit status as well as an euphemism for short-term work permits in the local sex industry. In addition to exploring the migrational experiences of these women and their living and working conditions in the Republic of Cyprus, the paper reconstructs, empirically and analytically, the connection between immigration and the local sex industry. Here, several categories of social actors and institutions in Cyprus are actively involved. The rhetoric of government representatives, entrepreneurs and clients in the sex business on the one hand is contrasted with the discourse of local NGO representatives concerned with immigrants’ rights on the other hand. The paper comes to the conclusion that all of these discursive positions ultimately do not do justice to the complex process of decision-making that women undergo who migrate into the sex industry. Either, freedom of choice is emphasized – such as by entrepreneurs and the government – or the domination of women – as in the public statements of the NGO. In order to analyze the ambivalent tension between freedom of choice and submission to force by which the women’s decision is characterized, the author employs Michel Foucault’s concept of governmentality, which describes forms of political regulation that use the individual’s freedom of action as an instrument to exercise power.

Keywords: agency, migration, trafficking in women, sex industry, Cyprus, governmentality

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## Freedom of choice or force of circumstance? Eastern European sex-workers in the Republic of Cyprus<sup>1</sup>

Three years ago Alexandra came for the first time from Belarus to Cyprus. She is thirty years of age, was married and has a seven-year-old daughter, whom she left with her parents in Belarus. Alexandra is a professional dancer. *“In Belarus I used to dance in a folklore group. As I was not earning much money there, I decided to go abroad.”* Before she came to Cyprus, she had already worked in some other countries as a dancer. To Cyprus Alexandra came as member of a dance ensemble. Impresarios had promised heaven on earth to her and the other five women of the ensemble: *“We expected five star hotels and, of course, work as professional dancers.”*

However, when the women finally arrived in Cyprus, they ended up in a nightclub in Nicosia, where they were expected to dress provocatively, do striptease, keep the customers company and encourage them to order drinks. For each drink the customers ordered, the women received half a Cypriot pound (approximately ninety Eurocents). In addition, they were paid the statutory minimum wage of ten Cypriot Pounds per night (approximately eighteen Euro). But this was not all: *“We were expected to go out with customers after hours.”* That means, they were expected to prostitute themselves. *“Something like that never happened to us before. In order to escape, we tried to find a nice customer who would come again and again and go out with us, so that we did not have to go out with others.”* Their accommodation had been equally bad. *“In the first two weeks we cried a lot.”*

Alexandra and the five other women of the ensemble therefore decided to break off the job. *“Our boss refused to pay our last week’s wages since we had broken the employment contract and because he had to pay for our travel costs.”* Short of their return flight, the women succeeded in finding a job at some other place. They negotiated directly with the owner of a music restaurant. Alexandra assumed that he paid a transfer fee to their former boss. *“In our new workplace we could do proper dancing and were not forced to go out with customers. Our new boss always asked us, when a customer expressed interest to go out with one of us, and we could decide by ourselves. In addition, we were paid better.”* To sum it up Alexandra said about the situation of migrant women in the Greek-Cypriot sex business in general: *“They are treated like animals.”*

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on fieldwork conducted in Cyprus in summer 2001. The study was submitted as a Master’s Thesis in Cultural Anthropology and European Ethnology under the title *“An der Außengrenze der Europäischen Union. Arbeitsmigration und die Sexindustrie in der Republik Zypern“* in July 2002 at Johann Wolfgang Goethe-University Frankfurt/Main.

### **The Greek-Cypriot sex business**

Since the beginning of the nineties an increasing number of Eastern European migrant women have come to Cyprus and other southern European countries as “artistes”, which is an euphemism for short-term work permits in the sex industry. These work permits are clearly to the disadvantage of the “artistes” because they grant far-reaching opportunities for control over them to employers and government officials. Employers usually have to pay a certain amount of money to impresarios (employment agents who are specialised on foreign “artistes”) for the procurement of women for their nightclub or bar. In addition, employers or impresarios respectively are obliged to guarantee with their money for the departure of the “artistes” upon expiration of their work permits. Against this backdrop, they are interested in making sure that the women do not change their working place, work independently, get married in Cyprus, or just disappear. Therefore, they usually monitor them around the clock.

The “artistes” may change their employer at the earliest after two months and only once during the maximum six months' stay in Cyprus. They can hardly take action against their employers in case of abuse, if they don't want to be sent back to their country of origin. It is safe to assume that night club owners and police often cooperate. If an “artiste” complains about her employer, the police see to it that she is quickly deported. Hence, it can be said, that impresarios, employers and government officials together constitute a system of control that leaves only little scope of action for “artistes”.

My research did not only focus on the perspective of the migrant women in the sex business themselves, but also on the perspective of Greek-Cypriot social actors like impresarios, pimps, clients as well as government and NGO representatives who in one way or another all contribute to restricting and monitoring the residential and working situation of migrants in Cyprus. I have decided to include all these perspectives in order to avoid the pitfalls of ethnography which all too often focuses only on the social practices of the marginalized and subaltern actors and groups and excludes more powerful actors from their account even though these are clearly very important for the structural context.

### **Freedom and force as rhetoric figures**

In the following, I will compare the rhetoric of impresarios, nightclub owners, clients and government representatives with the discourse of NGO representatives. While the former underline “freedom of choice” in order to characterize the working conditions of “artistes” in Cyprus, the latter compare the employer-employee relationship of these women with slavery and therefore emphasize the aspects of compulsion and exploitation in describing the working conditions. Even though taking opposing stances in their assessment of migration in the context of sex work, what both discursive positions have in common is that they obviate the actual ambivalence that is experienced by the women who engage in this practice. It is the point of this paper that neither of the positions adequately describes the situation of these women. In the course of neo-liberal globalization processes, migration decisions and employer-employee relationships are characterized by a specific form of interaction of the freedom of choice and the force of circum-

stance. This particularly applies to migrant sex workers as I will show in the following. This will then lead me to formulate questions that research in cultural anthropology should address when concerned with mobility and migration.

Impresarios, nightclub owners and clients give the economic conditions in the countries of origin as the main reason for East European women to work as prostitutes abroad. Structural constraints experienced by migrant sex workers are thus addressed to the countries of origin. By contrast, regarding the employer-employee relationships of the “artistes” in Cyprus, it is the freedom of choice which is being underlined and any kind of constraints are being denied. Impresarios, nightclub owners and clients emphasize that the women can give up their job and leave the country any time they like. The decision of the “artistes” not to return, but to work under the circumstances in Cypriot nightclubs and bars, is interpreted as voluntary, thus serving to legitimize the exploitation of the women. The employers supervise the “artistes” around the clock in order to prevent them either from working as self-employed prostitutes or from simply walking away from the job. These measures of supervision which restrict the personal freedom of the “artistes” extremely, are declared to be measures of protection. To underline the necessity of these measures, the “artistes” are characterized as being too naive to look after themselves while in other contexts they are contrarily described as crafty and cunning.

The alternatives for the women are obvious: either prostitution under the circumstances defined by impresarios, employers and authorities, or return to the country of origin. Even though their space to maneuver is extremely limited, the fact that there are alternatives makes it obvious that their relations to their employers is one based on different degrees of power, not simply submitting to pressure and constraints. Impresarios and employers in the sex business legitimize the exploitation of the women by drawing on this freedom of choice. This is also why government officials do not see any need to intervene. They also harp on the freedom of the “artistes”, at the same time consolidating their dependence on employers and impresarios by promoting measures of supervision.

Emphasizing the “artistes” freedom of choice must be regarded as a strategy of government representatives to legitimize the state’s inactivity regarding the exploitation of the “artistes”. They, however, get caught up in contradictions in their lines of argumentation. On the one hand, they maintain that the work of the “artistes” in the nightclubs has nothing to do with prostitution, on the other hand, the “artistes” are treated like prostitutes, when the protection of the Cypriot population against infectious diseases is concerned. The fact that only a few women succeed in resisting the pressure to work as prostitutes in the nightclubs and report their employers to the police is ironically interpreted as a proof of the fact that women are only rarely forced to prostitution. Government officials claim that if such an exceptional situation should occur, the victims would receive every sort of protection by the police. However, the measures taken by the state to protect the women are questionable insofar a considerable number of policemen in charge of protecting the women seem to visit the nightclubs regularly as customers.

From that point of view, the severe criticism levelled at the treatment of working migrants by government representatives by the Immigrant Support Action Group (ISAG) seems to be well-founded. While government representatives do not see any

need for action in respect to the situation of “artistes” in Cyprus, NGO representatives claim that they lack the opportunity to do anything for these women. Government officials point to the voluntariness of the decision to work as an “artiste” in a Cypriot nightclub thus playing down the situation of the women in Cyprus. NGO representatives, however, emphasize constraints and dependence to characterize the situation of the women. They scandalize the situation of migrants in the sex business to an extent that they even draw comparisons with the conditions in concentration camps. Communication between both sides seems hardly possible, as the government officials’ strategy of playing down and the strategy of exaggeration which NGO representatives pursue are incompatible. Criticism by the NGO can easily be met by entrepreneurs in the sex business as well as by government representatives with the argument that migrant women are free to decide for or against a job as an “artiste” in Cyprus and can leave the country whenever they want to.

### **“Trafficking in women” – a problematic term**

But with its concentration on scandalization, the NGO does not only seem to complicate communication with government representatives, it also once again degrades the women in the sex industry as victims. Conversely, sex workers who are not clearly identifiable as victims of trafficking are not seen as being within the responsibility of the NGO. A migrant who works in the sex industry is not automatically to be regarded as a victim of trafficking, though, but can nevertheless suffer from an exploitative employer-employee relationship, like the above-mentioned story of Alexandra shows.

The term “trafficking” is problematic because it implies a victim status and depicts migrants as unable to act and decide. The economic value of their work, which puts them into the position to support their families is thus made invisible. (cf. Le Breton Baumgartner 1998, 131f.) A simple distinction between “voluntary” and “involuntary” migration, or the concentration on the aspect of fictitious job offers, to define the term “trafficking” is misleading because women may be forced into “being trafficked voluntarily” (cf. agisra 1990, 56), as representatives of “agisra”, a German organisation active against international sexual and racist exploitation, puts it in one of their publications.

Alexandra does definitely not regard herself as a victim. On the contrary, she stresses her own initiative that helped her escape an exploitative employer-employee relationship. It is true that her new job resembles the first one, but it is characterized by much better working conditions and a substantially extended scope of action. Her main purpose was not primarily to find a job outside the sex industry, but to improve her working conditions and to extend her freedom of action.

That women who work as “artistes” in Cyprus consciously and intentionally decide for a job in the sex business was also voiced in many other interviews with Eastern European women migrants that I conducted in Cyprus. The problems that women like Alexandra are confronted with are caused by officially legitimized racist and sexist practices, which bring them in a dependent relationship with their exploiters. In my view, though, to rescue women migrants from conditions similar to “concentration camps”, as NGO representatives suggest, is not what is called for in terms of support of

these women. While there are cases of “trafficking” which do in fact represent relations of force and have to be prosecuted as such, migrants who intentionally decide to work in the sex business are to be considered and respected as labour migrants. In order to strengthen their position in relation to their employers as well as in relation to government representatives, prosecution measures are not the most important strategy, but the legal improvement of their residential and working situation. The main purpose should not be the fight against migration into the sex business as such, but improvements of the living and working conditions which migrants face, in order to extend their freedom of action. What does this now mean for theoretical considerations of action?

### **Theoretical considerations of action**

In his analysis of the cultural dimensions of globalization, the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai claims that the imagination is “no longer mere fantasy (opium for the masses whose real work is elsewhere), no longer simple escape (from a world defined principally by more concrete purposes and structures), no longer elite pastime (thus not relevant to the lives of ordinary people), and no longer mere contemplation (irrelevant for new forms of desire and subjectivity)” but has become “central to all forms of agency” (Appadurai 1996, 31). According to Appadurai, it follows from this that the fact that many people nowadays live in such imagined worlds implies the potential to contest official imaginations. (cf. Appadurai 1996, 33) This brings him to conclude that “culture becomes less what Pierre Bourdieu would have called a habitus (a tacit realm of reproducible practices and dispositions) and more an arena for conscious choice, justification, and representation” (Appadurai 1996, 44).

In view of increasing social inequality in the course of processes of globalization, it is necessary to keep in mind that the opportunities to realize one’s imagination and the freedom of choice are unequally distributed. Therefore, it is not sufficient to celebrate the power of imagination but to analyse the different restrictions of the freedom of action for different social actors. But this approach seems to be short-sighted, too. We have to take into account that the extension of possibilities of choice and action is a central feature of neo-liberal power relations. Thomas Lemke, Susanne Krasmann und Ulrich Broeckling (2000, 30) explain: “The promotion of possibilities of action cannot be separated from the demand to use this ‘liberty’ in a specific way, so that the freedom of action is often transformed into an actual obligation to act or to make a choice.” (translated from German by R.L.)

A substantial prerequisite for the exercise of power under neo-liberal conditions is the freedom of the subjects. Freedom of choice does not mark the limits of power, but is an instrument to control the options of action people have. It follows from this that, in my eyes, actor-oriented ethnographic research has to aim at making the unequal distribution of freedom of action and choice visible and to analyse the points where options of action and choice are transformed into forces of action and choice. This applies in particular to mobility, because under the conditions of the processes of globalization mobility has become one of the most important prerequisites for the ability to act which in turn is the crucial prerequisite to be able to make use of existing possibilities of action. (cf. Brensell 1999, 86)

Ethnographic research is especially suited to explore possibilities for action that individuals have and to show how these relate to differences of class, race and sex since it focuses on the actors of globalization processes placing their practices in the centre of its interest. For anthropological research on globalization which focuses on mobility as a central category, Gisela Welz (1998, 192) poses the following question: „How does chosen, forced, refused, imagined mobility correspond with old and new class barriers, gender and ethnically marked differences? Which social exclusion mechanisms, but also which possibilities of distinction are – today more than ever – related to mobility?“ (translated from German by R.L.)

To answer this question, a concept of agency is needed that does not simply celebrate the proliferation of options of action and choice generated by globalization. Rather, the corresponding restrictions of action should also be taken into account. When an actor consents to a situation, this is then not to be understood as indicating that her or his decision came about in a situation where no force was exerted. Rather, we must reveal the conditions under which people consent or, as Michel Foucault puts it, “take into account the points where the technologies of domination of individuals over one another have recourse to processes by which the individual acts upon himself. And conversely, (...) take into account the points where the techniques of the self are integrated into structures of coercion or domination” (Foucault 1993, 203).

## **Conclusion**

The above-mentioned example of Alexandra made clear that women in the Greek-Cypriot sex industry have an extremely limited scope of action, which nevertheless is sufficient for impresarios, nightclub owners, pimps and also government representatives to differentiate the working conditions of the “artistes” from conditions of force by referring on the women’s freedom of choice either to continue working under given conditions or to leave the country. Like government officials and nightclub owners NGO representatives also do not seem to have any interest in extending the scope of action of the “artistes”. They are, if at all, primarily interested in the prosecution of trafficking in persons with the aim of preventing prostitution altogether. It must be assumed, however, that women like Alexandra are deliberately looking for jobs in the sex business as long as they do not have to suffer under extremely exploitative conditions. But since they have no lobby whatsoever, it is left to their own initiative to open up alternatives to exploitation and departure.

As a consequence of what I have presented so far I want to finally raise some questions which were relevant for my research but seem to also be relevant for other fields of research: Why is migration into prostitution not identical with slave trade? What is the difference between the employer-employee relationship of an “artiste” and a nightclub owner and a relationship of force? When does freedom of choice turn into force and how is this transformation concealed with the argument of freedom? Which possibilities are there to extend the scope of action of “artistes”? Which new power relations result consequently?

Summing it up, it is most important to realize that self-determined decisions do not protect the women concerned from exploitative residential, working or general liv-



ing conditions. It is therefore necessary for the cultural anthropological analysis of neo-liberal globalisation to focus on the points of contact where self-determined decisions are integrated into or formed by structures of force and power.

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