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Spaniards in Geneva: the mobility routes of sex workers

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a study on the intra-European mobility of sex workers, a little-researched topic, which considers mobility as capital, mobile subjectivities, and the hopes generated by such mobility. It is a strategy to improve their working conditions that can be carried out within the same industry (in brothels, apartments, hotels, etc.) or within the same context, through national or international travel. This article explores the mobility trajectory of Spanish sex workers in Geneva (Switzerland). It delves into the reasons that lead them to move to another country, the knowledge they had before embarking on this mobility process, and the possible existence of exploitation or coercion. The ethnographic work was carried out in the city of Geneva, where observations and interviews were collected with Spanish sex workers, owners and managers of sex businesses, and members of an NGO. The results obtained refer to the safety conditions and benefits that sex workers obtain from this mobility, as well as the policies and measures relating to sex work that are applied in both countries.

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Introduction

This article exposes the trajectory of Spanish sex workers' mobility to Geneva to improve their working conditions and benefits in sex work. The Spanish context regarding sex work is one of great legal instability because the socialist government wants to pass abolitionist legislation that would criminalise men who pay for sex and eliminate paid sex businesses. So far in the Spanish parliament, this proposal has not been approved by a majority. Sex workers, faced with the climate of insecurity, take more advantageous mobility trajectories. The aim of this paper is to show these circumstances of mobility in sex work, paying attention to the motivations and meanings that this mobility entails for sex workers. We understand that there is a spatial mobility limited in time, with the aim of achieving social ascent for sex workers (Sheller 2014; Sheller and Urry 2006), as well as transnational connections, especially European ones, which can facilitate these mobilities (Hannerz 1996).

Background

Some authors have already shown that most sex workers engaging in sex work in Spain are foreigners (Sanchís 2011) and NGO reports share the same observations (del Mundo 2022; Asociación In Género 2021). Within the different spaces that offer sexual services, the profile of

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the person who provides these services is generally young, foreign, and woman, in a variety of social situations (Meneses, Rúa, and García 2022). After the end of lockdown due to the COVID 19 pandemic, one of the authors resumed the ethnographic work she had been carrying out before the pandemic in different commercial sex venues in Spain. One of her site of field-work is the most select businesses in the city of Madrid. She has been doing was the place for observations and contact formal and informal conversations with informants on a weekly basis. In this establishment, the presence of 'native Spanish women'¹ was one in every ten women before the pandemic. However, when the establishment reopened after the end of lockdown, the ratio had increased with 4 'native Spanish women' for every ten women. This change led us to reflect and ask a series of questions: Why did the number of 'native Spanish women' increase substantially after lockdown in these places? Did the pandemic drive somehow 'native Spanish women' to engage in sex work? Or are there more 'native Spanish women' just in this establishment, thus creating a bias in the overall appreciation of the proportion of 'native women' working in brothels? What are the waves of Spanish women migrating to Geneva to work as prostitutes? These were some of the questions that initially arose and were reported in the field diary. As other researchers have stated (Taylor and Bodgan 1984), one thing is to observe an event and another to know why it is happening, and this requires interaction and communication with the informants. When 'native Spanish women' were asked why they were now working in Spanish brothels and to a lesser extent before the pandemic, the majority replied that before the pandemic they had carried out sex work in Switzerland, especially in the city of Geneva (although other cities such as Zurich or Lausanne were mentioned). Additional questions immediately arose: do certain number of 'native Spanish women' usually carry out sex work in European countries but not in Spain? If so, why does this occur? What motivates 'native Spanish women' to go to a another European country, or even beyond Europe, to engage in sex work? Are they exploited while engaging in sex work outside of Spain, as it is often the case with foreign women working in Spain (Author) These are some the questions that motivated this investigation. These questions led to the design and implementation of an ethnographic study in the city of Geneva, which will be presented below.

Literature review: sex worker mobility

Mobility refers in this article to a temporary displacement from one place to another, unlike migratory mobility, which has a claim to greater permanence (Bell and Ward 2000). Mobility has different dimensions such as frequency, distance, mode of transportation, motives, seasonality, and duration of travel. Mobility research, framed within the mobility paradigm (Sheller and Urry 2006), focuses on the constitutive role of movement in social institutions and practices, which are culturally regulated to determine who can move, how, where and under what conditions (Sheller 2018). Instead of focusing on stable forms of sex work – such as those carried out on the street, in brothels or red-light districts, which represent a sedentary view – we observe in this case the emergence of new mobilities in the practice of sex work (Sheller and Urry 2006). Today, sex work leads its workers to a more mobile life, albeit with certain limits of movement (Sheller 2018) as not all have the same opportunities. This mobility implies abandoning methodological nationalism and incorporating new methodologies in line with the study of mobility (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). Studying sex work in EU countries requires a different perspective, as sex workers themselves have questioned this methodological nationalism, given that their mobility transcends borders. Several investigations have suggested that the mobility of sex workers has often an economic motivation. Besides income, they have highlighted other motivations such as getting to know new places, enjoying spaces of well-being and comfort in industrialized countries, and getting to know new people and customs (Agustín 2002).

During her research in the Netherlands, Siegel (2012) reported on the important mobility of women sex workers in the paid sex industries of this country. Initially she noted a greater

presence of women from Russia, Ukraine, or Albania, who were later replaced by other nationalities of origin, such as Polish or Romanian women and – finally – by Hungarians. This demonstrated the existence of mobility routes of sex workers coming from Eastern Europe and heading to Northern European countries, particularly those which have legalized sex work. The author suggested that this mobility was due to the economic crisis and also to socio-political changes in EU member countries. She also distinguished between horizontal or geographical mobility, and vertical or organizational mobility (within the paid sex industry). Concerning geographical mobility, she differentiated between local mobility (within the same country) and international mobility (within different countries). Following this line of different mobilities, Kaufmann, Bergman, and Joye (2004) coin the concept of motility, to refer to social and spatial changes that modify social structures and shifts towards a more just society. The mobility of sex workers can place them in better social positions and lead to a social ascent that would not be possible without mobility.

As Gilmore stated, the mobility and flexibility of sex work is a very attractive factor for women working in indoor commercial sex (Gilmour 2016). Mobility happens from one place to another, but also from one sexual offering sector to another one (apartment to brothel). It is a strategy for improving working conditions (Gilmour 2016), or to get more clients and earn more money (Meneses-Falcón 2023).

However, other very important factors influence the decision of mobility, such as avoiding stigma and criminalization (Ham and Gerard 2014; Duff et al. 2017; Amram et al. 2021). For some authors, mobility is actually the main strategy for combating the social conventions regarding prostitution (Finger 2016). Indeed, sex workers do not live alone. The vast majority of them have families, children, partners, and friends from whom they hide their activity, thus leading a double life that causes significant stress (Rössler et al. 2010; Acien and Resina 2023). Since sex work does not follow a rigid schedule and is a flexible activity, it that allows caring for children, studying, or other activities, (Shewly et al. 2020).

Mobility among sex workers, however, can also generate also unwanted situations such as changes in health status, exposure to new infections or diseases, different behaviours, and less safe working conditions, etc. (Espinoza et al. 2014). The impact of mobility has especially been highlighted in relationship with the exposure to HIV (Goldenberg et al. 2014), and this higher risk has been related to other related risks such as physical or sexual violence from the clients or partners. A study estimated that sex workers have a 25% higher risk of being infected with HIV compared to sex workers who do not travel (Hendrickson et al. 2021).

Mobility is also a strategy for hiding sex work from the police where it is illegal, or when there is a chance that community members will socially penalize it. As pointed out Shewly et al. (2020), mobility is part of the strategy of invisibility that is an essential tool for sex workers who carry out their work, tackling stigma and avoiding police interventions. In certain contexts particularly hostile to sex work, invisibility is a key component in order to continue working. While allowing work, his invisibility of sex workers achieved through mobility hinders their recognition as citizens and prevents them from expressing their demands for commercial sex to be recognized as work (Ham and Gerard 2014), leaving their voices unheard. Other circumstances – positive and negative – are generated for women: a) it prevents many sex workers from registering in harm reduction programs (Goldenberg et al. 2014) or implies having worse access to health services; b) it makes it easier to locate the safest social work spaces, with less risk of suffering violence (Goldenberg et al. 2014; Hendrickson et al. 2021); c) it provides anonymity, being one of the important tactics of marginalized or stigmatized groups (Shewly et al. 2020), especially when they want to avoid state control; d) it implies the invisibility of violence against sex workers, abuses, and exploitation, and that sex workers report injustices. The social and legal context in which sex work takes place will allow for greater or lesser visibility and mobility.

Mobility can be voluntary or forced, but the boundaries between the two are often blurred. Forced Mobility – which is of course illegal in the latter case – is usually carried out by trafficking networks that recruit women to practice prostitution in other countries with high demand for sex workers and/or prospects of substantial profits. When Mobility is voluntary, it may be motivated by a variety of circumstances, among which the changes in local or national legislation impacting sex work play a big role (Siegel 2012). In each case, mobility or immobility has different meanings and purposes and is articulated according to the needs of visibility or invisibility (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013; Shewly et al. 2020), from enhancing benefits and avoiding stigma in the case of voluntary mobility to preventing the police from identifying possible forced victims.

Following Sheller and Urry (2006), studying mobility means collecting discourses, practices and infrastructures. It is about systems of mobility that connect with globality, with new markets and opportunities. In this sense, forced or voluntary mobility has been found in sex work in the last century, but new communication and transport technologies have produced a different global scenario (Hendrickson et al. 2021). The mobility of sex workers can also be a form of greater inclusion in a consumer society that would not be achieved from a sedentary position.

In this sense, mobility is importantly shaped by the legal context in which sex work takes place. In this regard, Europe is extremely diverse: there are a variety of different legislative measures throughout the region – from total or partial prohibition to the regulation of the activity or the decriminalization of sex work (Oliveira et al. 2023). It has been suggested that, in countries with more tolerant legislation, the health and development conditions of sex work are better than in those countries where there are prohibitionist abolitionist policies (Shannon et al. 2015). Furthermore, it has been highlighted that in countries with prohibitionist legislation on paid sex, there is also greater violence against sex workers (Deering et al. 2014).

The spatial mobility of sex workers also entails the circulation of images, capital and information (Sheller 2014) that leads them to assume a more mobile life associated with sex work. This generates a culture of mobility in sex work that increases the power of sex workers who embark on these displacements, making them more cosmopolitan while at the same time avoiding global discrimination or local stigma (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013).

Spanish sex workers' mobility between Spain and Switzerland: some elements of context

In Spain, sex work is neither regulated nor penalized. In Spain, there are different types of businesses that facilitate paid sexual services, but the two main ones are: (1) venues or hostess clubs that have a bar and hostel license to rent rooms, the clients being both the sex workers and the men who pay for sex. (2) The other modality is the apartments or chalets that do not have a license and that can be organized by sex workers independently, in a group or by third parties (Meneses, Uroz, and Rúa 2017).

In Switzerland, sex work is legal. In this federal state, some cantons (states) opted for having a law on prostitution, while others don't. This creates a fragmented regulationist landscape, where what is allowed in a given canton may not be in another. In Geneva, a prostitution law was approved in 2009 (LProst). This relatively brief law regulates prostitution. It stipulates that settings where more than two persons work must be registered as 'parlours', but that a person may live and perform sex work independently in his or her flat without having to be registered as a 'parlour'. Indoor paid sex businesses are predominantly 'parlours', which can be apartments or premises with direct access to the street. In Geneva, 'parlours' tend to be relatively small, and venues with more than 10 women working are rare. This contrasts with the situation in Spain or northern Switzerland, where many premises accommodate up to 20 or 30 women (or even more). In Geneva, all 'parlours' must be registered as sex industry businesses by the police, and have to allow external teams to enter their premises in order to assess the working conditions of sex workers. Anyone willing to work in Geneva as a sex worker has to register at the

police, and before that has to attend to an information session organized by the sex workers' support NGO *Aspasie* in its premises.

The victimisation of sex workers in migration and mobility trajectories occurs throughout Europe (Meneses-Falcón and Tellería-Pérez 2024). Women from developing countries outside the European Union are recruited and exploited for the purpose of sexual exploitation, and Spanish legislation provides for high prison sentences for trafficking networks. However, few women are identified as victims of sex trafficking each year, despite an abolitionist social discourse that confuses coerced prostitution with prostitution by choice.

This article aims to contribute to this body of work on mobility in sex work. It focuses more specifically on the mobility of Spanish women who travel to Geneva in order to perform sex work there, and aims to: (a) highlight the reasons that lead Spanish sex workers to engage in this mobility; (b) document the knowledge they have of the sex businesses in Geneva prior to their travel; and (c) assess the question of exploitation that can occur around these mobilities to Geneva.

Methods

Design and sources of information

A qualitative design has been carried out using ethnographic method and formal and informal interviews. This methodological design was chosen because it is best suited to the study of mobility using the researcher's own mobility and ethnographic work (Sheller and Urry 2006; 2014), since both the informant and researchers are immersed in mobility. There were three main sources of information: (1) Data collected from participant observation carried out in 2020 in a paid sex hotel in Madrid, starting at the end of the Covid 19 lockdown (May 2020) and going on until 2022, through visits that involved approximately 80 hours of observation and interaction. (2) Data collected during the first visit to Geneva of one of the author during 10 days (29 August–3 September 2022), through participant observation in different commercial sex venues located in the redlight district – in parlours or establishments – and at the headquarter of the main NGO supporting sex workers in the town, called *Aspasie*. (3) Data collected during a two-month stay in Geneva (April and May 2023), where ethnographic work, observation, and interviews were carried out with the support of the Centre for Gender Studies of the University of Geneva.

Participants

Observations were carried out in two middle-upper class sex businesses in Geneva for 64 hours, with prior permission from the owners of the premises. The observation in these premises consisted of being with the sex workers while they waited for their clients and establishing informal conversations that were recorded in a field diary. The NGO *Aspasie* was also accompanied on its outdoor and indoor visits in the town, and notes of what has been observed were taken afterwards. In total, about a third of Geneva's paid sex businesses were visited. Informal interviews were conducted with women and informants during these interactions and visits. More specifically, 2 business owners, 2 managers, 4 'native Spanish women', 4 women of Latin origin with Spanish documentation, and 4 members of the NGO *Aspasie* were included through in-depth interviews (Table 1). All participants have been given a pseudonym to maintain anonymity.

Procedures

All informants were informed about the research, and the interviews arose in the context of observation. Two types of interviews were carried out – one more informal and shorter, that arose in the context of participant observation – and another in-depth in which the experience

Table 1. Interviews.

Informant	Characteristics	Comments
Esteban, 45–50 years old	Business owner	3 Business in Spain, 1 in Geneva
Tadeo, 50–55 years old	Business owner	4 Business in Geneva
Talia, 40–45 years old	Business manager	Spanish of Colombian origin
Mabel, 40–45 years old	Business manager	Spanish Majorcan
Mara, 47 years old	Sex worker	Born in Madrid
Delia, 41 years old	Sex worker	Born in Sevilla
Inés, 28 years old	Sex worker	Born in Sevilla
Celia, 42 years old	Sex worker	Born in Barcelona
Lola, 32 years old	Sex worker	Of Ecuadorian origin
Vicky, 42 years old	Sex worker	Of Venezuelan origin
Valeria, 22 years old	Sex worker	Of Argentinian origin
Marcela, 43 years old	Sex worker	Of Colombian origin

of the informants was recorded based on a conversation. All the information was collected in the field diary, as detailed as possible, distinguishing between observations, conversations, and reflections or evaluations. These distinctions are essential to avoid bias in the data and to meet the rigor and quality criteria of qualitative research. (Jootun, McGhee, and Marland 2009).

Analysis

A qualitative, categorical, and interpretive content analysis of the data collected was carried out with the support of the New Nvivo computer software. Analysis categories were developed based on the objectives of the research, and were then identified in the data during coding. The main codes were: Reasons, previous contacts with Geneva, travel, stay in Geneva, exploitation, clients. After the coding process, the excerpts in which manifest or emerging content corresponding to the central themes were identified, and extracted in the form of verbatims. Finally, interrelationships between the different concepts, categories, and themes were highlighted during the analysis.

Ethical requirements

Participants were asked for informed consent to collaborate in the investigation, following the criteria that were established by the University Ethics Committee. For interviews, they were given a written confidentiality commitment, which stated the commitment to maintain anonymity and to respect the decisions of each of the participant to collaborate or not in the research. Almost all participants agreed to audio recording for formal interviews. When the person did not accept the recording but still agreed to participate, notes were taken. The interviewee was given the opportunity to interrupt the interview at any time. Anonymity was maintained throughout the entire process and participants' personal information was coded.

Results

The mobility of Spanish women for sex work in Geneva was diverse according to the profiles of Spanish women found, those who were younger, under 35 years of age, and those who were older than 35 years of age. These variables are fundamental in the exercise of sex work, as well as the accumulated experience.

Some of the Spanish sex workers, the younger ones, had little experience in sex work and were unfamiliar not only with sexually transmitted diseases but also with the functioning and organisation of paid sex. Two of them came to Geneva with only one week of experience in sex work in Spain. During the information sessions at the NGOs, the Spanish sex workers' lack of knowledge about commercial sex became apparent. They had come to Geneva with few references from other sex workers but without much information. New comers are informed

about sex work in Geneva, receive advices on preventive and protective measures for health, practical tips, and receive information for emergency situations. At the end of this briefing with the NGO, it was a good time to talk to the Spanish women. Afterwards they had an appointment with the police to get their sex work licence. Some of the sex workers who arrive are unaware of many aspects of sexually transmitted diseases. We confirmed this with a 25-year-old Spanish woman at a parlour we visited.

“Before coming, I was at Aspásie. I had no idea about the diseases - no idea. I had no idea what that world was like, and I found out that, for example, they could be infected through saliva,” Irene tells me. (Field Diary, 26 April 2023, conversation in the parlour)

After attending the information session, the person gets a receipt and can then go to the Geneva police in order to be registered – and allowed to work in the canton., which will be for 90 days², although there are other types of licenses of longer duration.

According to Aspásie’s annual report (2022), around 40% of sex workers who go through the informative services are Spanish (both ‘native’ and Latinas with a Spanish passport). As a former social worker of the NGO states, Latinas with Spanish passport arrived first after the ‘opening up’ of Swiss borders with the European Union territories. There were followed by ‘native Spanish women’ after the economic crisis of 2008:

Yes, Switzerland opened up in 2007, and people could come to work. Before, it was possible, but it was more difficult. Then, more foreign women arrived. And of course, we saw quickly, yes, more quickly that there were many Spanish speakers and that they spoke Spanish and there were many Latin Americans, the majority, and I always thought that they all had a Spanish passport, but they were not Spanish. Then I saw... I’ll say it like this, when am I going to see a Spanish woman? That’s what I thought, and I remember that, later, I saw the first Spanish woman. I thought, wow, they’re here! and then they arrived little by little, but more like 2010 or 2012. Perhaps the Latin American women were older women, with families in Spain, and the Spanish women were much younger. (Former Aspásie Social Worker, Interview, 26 May 2023)

As we could see in more than one occasion during the information session, many of the ‘native Spanish women’ arriving in Geneva in order to engage in sex work were young and with little or no previous experience in sex work.

She is the third young Spanish girl, who looks like she is no more than 23 years old, to come to Geneva to work in sex work without previous experience in Spain. One was only in Madrid for a few days, and she was from Toledo, the other from Seville who came with two friends, who have worked previously. She tells me: “if I go to bed one day with a hookup at the club for free and I don’t see him again, then I’ll do it here and I’ll charge him” (Field Diary, conversation after the information session at Aspásie, 19 April 2023)

It appears that the mobility route of Spanish women to Switzerland opened up in the early 2000s, but was firstly mainly used by Latinas. The presence of ‘native Spanish women’ became obvious only few years later, in the aftermath of the economic crisis of 2008 which hit particularly hard southern European states. These mobilities of sex workers between Spain and Geneva were interrupted with the closure of the borders due to the COVID pandemic, and resumed afterwards, as the ethnographic work conducted both in Spain and in Geneva confirmed. As we could observe in 2023, for some ‘native Spanish women’ Geneva was the entry point in the industry, and they were entering the business at a quite young age.

Reasons for mobility

In the interviews carried out with Spanish sex workers and managers and owners of sex businesses, a series of reasons were pointed out behind the decision to come to Geneva to engage in sex work.

The first reason that the Spanish women mentioned for their trip to Geneva was because sexual services have a better price than in Spain – they are paid in a currency with a higher exchange rate, and therefore the economic benefits are higher. Since life is more much more expensive in Geneva than in Spain, sexual services are also more expensive in Geneva, which allows for comparative advantages. The following sex workers discussed these differences they found between Spain and Switzerland.

For me, an hour is €300, and if it is submission, it is €400, €450. Of course, in Spain for one hour of submission you charge €200, no more. (Mara, 'native Spanish', 47 years old)

So, let's say that the clients I meet here in Switzerland already know the rates and pay them - €300 per hour - but in Barcelona it was €200 per hour. (Lola, Spanish, Latin origin, 32 years old)

I do shifts in Valencia, but in Valencia, for me recently, it was already getting complicated because there were too many girls, and the prices were very low. In order for me to be making 6,000-7,000 euros a month, I had to work shifts, from Monday to Monday, that is, if I took the day off once a week, it was already overwhelming me. There are a lot of girls - there are 40 women - so I came to Switzerland. (Valeria, Spanish, Latin origin, 22 years old)

Another aspect mentioned by the sex worker in the last excerpt is the great supply of women in paid sex businesses in Spain. Prices drop when there is a lot of competition, and more time has to be invested to obtain the same income – which before was achieved in just a few hours. Finally, our interviewees underlined that the commission taken by sex businesses in Geneva were lower than in Spain: between 30% and 40% – while in Spain it is usually 50% in apartments and hotels.

Furthermore, all materials and products needed for the sexual services (condoms, sheets, etc.) were provided by the business in Geneva, while in Spain, the percentage of 50% only included the use of the room (Meneses 2023).

The third aspect mentioned was safety when engaging in sex work. The fact that sex work is regulated in Geneva gave women greater protection against unpleasant episodes, which sometimes occur during sex work. If any event occurred, they called the police, and Spanish women felt more protected than in Spain. Mara's experience as a sex worker for many years in Geneva was common to other sex workers interviewed.

I've been here for seven years - it will be seven years in May. I haven't had any problems with any client. I have never needed to call the police (...) And here you call...The other day, a girl, the client came and told her that he was going to be there for an hour, he was there for 15 minutes, and he told her: "No, I won't pay 100, I have been there for 15 minutes." She called the police and within 5 minutes the police were here. You call the police and say that a client has not paid you, that he gave you 300 and then he was only going to give you 100 for 15 minutes, and the police tells him... So, I don't have that security in Spain. (Mara, 'native Spanish', 47 years old)

This protection that the Spanish women perceived and detected was motivated by the legality of sex work in Geneva. Since it is regulated, it is not clandestine, and the law is what protects them. Many Spanish women were clear that prostitution is an activity that provided them with many possibilities and that criminalizing or hindering its development put them in danger and at risk. It was not understood that Spain was moving towards an abolitionist policy that criminalized sex work. The workers could not understand how Spain could adopt a criminalising policy, as they saw neither reasons nor need for this legislative change.

There are a lot of lifelong Spanish women, because prostitution is the oldest thing in the world. That's very old, don't think of it as anything else, but everyone has to eat. They are taking away your right to eat and choose how you earn your money. And instead of going to a nightclub to fuck seven or eight for free, you get your money. In addition, more condoms are used here and more safety. (Delia, 'native Spanish', 41 years old)

Fourthly, sex workers reported that the relationship with clients, and their behaviors, were very different in Geneva compared to Spain,

Spanish sex workers stated that the clients in Geneva were more polite, did not haggle over prices, were cleaner, and that they complied with the established negotiation – aspects that were not common in Spain.

For example, look at my last job, the hour, I took home €80 in Valencia, and here you get 180. It's a lot of difference, a lot. Second, what I can say about this type of client, here the men are more polite, they are more affectionate, I'm not saying all of them, to generalize. I have noticed that they are more polite around here, like they know the limits more. Do you understand? What I see more in Spain, which is not everyone, no, because I have served wonderful people, but you have many who want everything at the same rate. And of course, I'm not his girlfriend (Valeria, Spanish, Latin origin, 22 years old)

There was a category among some clients to differentiate native Spanish women from those of Latin American origin. This is what one of the Spanish sex workers interviewed told us when she connected with her clients by phone.

Because they say, "I am Spanish" (in the advertisements) and when they come, they may see that they are Colombian, Dominican, Ecuadorian, and they tell you: "No, but are you 100% Spanish? "Are you authentic Spanish?" Yes." Okay. But you aren't Colombian?" No, no, no. It's not that you're white. No, no, no. And when they call you and say, "Let's see, talk to me to find out if you are or are not." (Mara, native Spanish, 47 years old)

According to some of our interviewees, Swiss clients distinguished between Spanish women, preferring those who were originally from Spain over those who came from Latin America. Latin American women were older and available in greater numbers than the native Spanish women, who were much younger and less abundant.

Fifth, Geneva Spanish sex workers the possibility of anonymity, that is, of not being recognized while carrying out sex work. The chances of meeting someone who knows them were reduced in Geneva. Therefore, stigma decreased, although it was not eliminated (Weitzer 2018). All Spanish women interviewed, except one, said that the people they knew in Spain were unaware that they were carrying out sex work in Geneva. They were telling to their close ones that they were moving to Switzerland in order to work in hospitality or care services, or in tourism settings. Distance favoured the concealment of sex work.

I mean, of course, they don't work for fear of their family. It's because of fear of family, friends, acquaintances... you know how this is. Here it is more difficult, here you have more anonymity. (...) But they come here because in Spain it is all mafias. They go to work in a club, and they are afraid that they will be caught, they are afraid that the police will come and blackmail them, as has happened with some girl I know. They tell you: "I continue here because I can do it peacefully. In Spain, they are extorting you. If not, I'm going to tell your family". (Mara, native Spanish, 47 years old)

On the other hand, because of the price, which in Spain is 50% for the house and then, it was very bad, to be honest. Also, because there (in your city) you can meet people, so it gives me a little... you know me, you know? Because I'm in another country. (Inés, native Spanish, 28 years old).

While Mara referred to her perception of insecurity in the development of sex work in Spain, due to the possible identification of sex workers by acquaintances, the lack of security offered by the police in the face of violent events or extortion by the owners of sex businesses, Inés pointed to other circumstances: the high commissions of employers.

Getting to Geneva, getting to know about Geneva

Knowledge about how and where to carry out sex work in Switzerland – especially Geneva – is usually transmitted between peers, from Spanish women who have already some experience

in Genva to newcomers. Spanish workers would recommend the places where they had a good experience and did very well – where they earned well – to the ‘new’ Spanish women.

Everything works fine here. Starting with it being legal, and there are rights. That’s why the situation in Spain or Italy makes me so angry.

How do the girls know the house? (Interviewer)

By references between them. I hardly ever publish ads – they give the site references. All those who come to me do so because of the other’s experience. Spaniards come, but since I’ve been there for a long time, among them they say that they were at Tere’s house. They give them my number and we talk. I tell the girls that for me coexistence is very important, that they have good character. Because this work is very intense to have a terrible coexistence. (Field Diary, interview with a Spanish parlour owner, 30 August 2022)

Others obtained information from their own clients, with whom they established a certain personal relationship over time. Some clients from Switzerland suggested to work there, as was the case for Lola, who told us:

Because I worked in Barcelona and one of the clients was Australian and then I always asked the clients what the issue of prostitution was like in their countries, if it is legal, if there are houses like this, if they are only an agency or if they are only independent and such, so they tell me and talk to me a little, usually the rates that they pay, some tell me that it is very expensive here, others tell me oh, you charge too little here, so I looked at that and I went to Australia (Lola, Spanish, Latin origin, 32 years old)

Lola asks her foreign clients how sex work is organised in their country, and they provide her with information that she makes use of later. In this way she had worked in different European cities and even outside Europe, such as in Australia and the United States. During interviews, business owners and managers were also asked about sex trafficking or exploitation during the recruitment process. One of the owners mentioned that a woman who worked in his business for a long time was actually pressured by a mafia. Once trust was gained and when he found out, he reported it to the police.

All this information, even the girls who come here, when they see that they have this security, even if they are... as happened with this one, who was... when she saw that over time, because it takes a few days, even we create a binding, that she can be freed from this. So, here I have never seen these mafia things. When it was the case, I spoke directly to the police, they intervened and arrested the network that had brought her and was forcing her... (Tadeo, business owner)

References to sex trafficking or coercion generally pointed towards Spain. One of the sex workers, who began working in Spain and then settled in Geneva, told us what she heard from Spanish colleagues while she was on holiday in Spain.

Irene: It saddens me because it was Spain where I arrived and where I started, my second home is Spain, every year I go to Alicante. Now I have detected people who bring girls and exploit them. They bring two or three girls and distribute them to work in different houses.

Interviewer: Where do they bring them from?

Irene: Well, my last information was from Ukraine, eastern countries, and Brazilians. I tell you what I have seen and heard, because I love whoring, I love sex, and I love money. In Colombia, they offer them and take a percentage for bringing them. The owner of the apartment is not to blame, she just gives them work. The girl pays her 150 a week and whatever the girl does is hers. I know many girls – they are girls who are moving.

Interviewer: Does that happen here in Geneva?

Irene: No. Here it is reportable, we are very protected, we have rights, and they help us, we have a normal job. Of all the countries I have known, the best is Geneva. (Field Diary, 29 August 2022)

Key informants told us that the regulation of prostitution prevented – or least constrained greatly – the development of trafficking networks. Since prostitution businesses are legal and regularly visited by the ‘milieu’ police, detection of trafficking is made more easy. However, some chains of paid sex businesses were under suspicion by the police and NGOs in Geneva due to some of their exploitative practices.

Finally, we collected data pointing to trafficking during interviews. Two women had started sex work in Spain after having been trafficked from Latin America. However, both outlined that the continuation of sex work, and their move to Geneva in order to work, was their own decision.

Marcela is 43 years old. She told me that she came to Spain from Colombia 20 years ago and that she was brought by a human trafficking network who she paid for bringing her. She doesn’t remember the money because she says she thinks it was in pesetas – but nothing more – it wasn’t a trafficking network. She clearly differentiates it because at the time she paid the debt, and she no longer had any relationship with them. She was working in a club in Galicia until she paid the debt she owed and then she was free to do whatever she wanted. (Interview, 20 April 2023).

In the club. They brought me from Venezuela to a club, in Vigo, on the outskirts. The one who wanted to escape, walked three hours, and came back because she couldn’t find a road. We found neighbours who did not... They spoke only Galician, and we believed that it was another language, that we were in another country. We.... We swore we weren’t... The police went up and down with us, and anyone who thought of crying got a good one, the police were friends of the owner... in those days, it’s not like now. We were 70 women. (Vicky, 42 years old, Interview, 17 April 2023)

While Marcela’s case could be described as smuggling, Vicky’s situation was one of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation. In the latter case, the abandonment of the trafficking network did not mean the cessation of sex work, since then she has continued to work according to her needs. This aspect has been referred to in other studies (Acien 2021).

High mobility regimes and some of its pitfalls

Many of the Spanish women working in middle-upper class parlours in Geneva were working based on the ‘90 days procedure’. This working possibility has followed the ratification by Switzerland of the Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons (AFMP) with the European Union. According to the ‘Posted workers act’ adopted by Switzerland following the ratification, any European citizen is allowed to work in Switzerland up to 90 days per year without having to ask for a proper work permit. This form of ‘posted work’ implies that the person working in another country remains ‘attached’ to his country of residence in terms of rights and entitlements³. It allows the Swiss economy to benefit from a flexible workforce for a relatively short period of time without having to pay any taxes related to social welfare in return, and is widely used in tourism, agriculture, and care services (including sex work).

In Geneva, many sex workers with a European passport rely on this 90 days procedure, This allows them a great flexibility, and makes it possible for them to work within a high mobility regime. Spanish women explained how they were organizing those ‘90 days’ based on their needs. Those who were mothers used to come one week a month, thus obtaining the money they needed to live comfortably during the month. Others arrived in Geneva with the goal of earning the money they needed for their projects, and when they had achieved it, they left for the next objective or need.

I arrived here in January, and in four weeks, I paid for my trip to the Caribbean, I gave money to my son, how much did I earn in January? 7,000, I think. (Delia, ‘native Spanish’, 41 years old)

In this high mobility regime of posted workers throughout Europe, Geneva was also sometimes a destination which was chosen after having visited other places and not having had good experiences.

(Starts talking about Holland), In Amsterdam?... I won't go back there even to get paid. In Amsterdam I returned home with barely enough money, €1,200. (Delia, native Spanish, 41 years old)

She tells me that she has never worked in Spain – always in Europe, in Scotland - Glasgow and Edinburgh. "I have worked very well in those cities, in winter, and in Ireland, in Italy, in Croatia," she tells me. I tell her that I'm interested in her international experience. She tells me that she is leaving on Sunday, that she doesn't know which flight, the 9:00 or the 12:00, but she is going to Barcelona. She tells me that she has also been working in London. I ask her if she has been in contact with NGOs there, and she tells me that she has not, that she has always worked independently and has never contacted NGOs. "Always independent, renting on my own, Booking or Airbnb, it depends on the area where you are, when you have been there for a while you meet the girls who have apartments, and you prefer to work in an apartment that you already know is for girls, and it is better, to have no problems or fewer problems. When I arrive, I'm going to New York." (Celia, 'native Spanish', 42 years old)

This mobility was greater among European cities, but other destinations outside the EU were also mentioned (London, Sydney, New York, Dubai, Qatar, Tel-Aviv). Although these places were more dangerous because of sex work being partly of fully criminalized, sex workers mentioned that the risk was often economically worse taking it.

Mobility was also happening within Switzerland, as sex workers said they worked in different Swiss cities – and within Swiss cities – sex workers changed locations or businesses in the same city. For the mobility inside a given city, several reasons were expressed: looking for more clients, changing owner because the relationship was not adequate, or because of the inappropriate environment among the sex workers and them not feeling 'comfortable' anymore where they had been working.

Some of the negative consequences of this high regimes of mobility surfaced in the data collected. One of them was access to healthcare in a situation of emergency.

Valen is 20 years old, was born in Spain, and lives in Zamora. She was working in an office before the pandemic and with the pandemic she was fired. She wants to work in prostitution to make money, but she has only worked for a week in Madrid, in an apartment, and one of her girls was the one who told her about coming to Geneva. I saw her as so inexperienced that I gave her my phone number in case she had any problems. At 3:00 a.m. I find a message from her on my phone. She didn't put the condom on one of her clients correctly and it stayed inside her vagina. She managed to get it out, but she is very nervous. I messaged her to reassure her. It is Saturday and the services that provide her with prophylaxis at an adequate price are closed, but she must administer it within 48 hours. She spoke on the phone in the morning, she is still very distressed and has decided to return to Spain to have the prophylaxis administered. (Field Diary, 3 September 2022)

Arrived relatively recently in Geneva, Valen did not know much about the health system in the city and how to access the proper service she needed on a week-end day. Since the only service she knew about was closed on week-end, she opted for going back to Spain where she knew where, and at which conditions, she could get access to the care she needed.⁴

Discussion

There are clear differences in the development of sex work between Switzerland and Spain, which attracts Spanish sex workers to take mobility routes to this country in order to locate the best working conditions in paying sex. Switzerland had two attractions for Spanish women – sex work is regulated and with greater protection from third parties, and they obtain greater economic benefits. Similar to those of other studies, our results indicate that Spanish sex workers act freely and rationally, choosing the best opportunities for the performance of sex work (Goldenberg et al. 2014; Gilmour 2016). Following Sheller and Urry (2006) paradigm of mobility,

the mobility of sex workers is an emerging fact that entails new research methodologies, from a different perspective that incorporates the researcher's own mobility or through mobile techniques such as interviews in motion (Go-Along). The networks of communication of information about sex work development that are central to determining relocation: good clients, better conditions in sex work, and safety and protection from the law, aspects on which we will articulate the discussion of the results.

Getting good customers with mobility

However, in Finger's study (2016) of Hungarian sex workers who moved to Zürich, mobility was a strategy for coping with marginalization and economic and social exclusion. In the case of Spanish sex workers, it is a strategy for social and economic advancement in the social context in which they live in Spain. This motility that Kaufmann, Bergman, and Joye (2004) suggest is not the same for all sex workers, not all sex workers have the same capacity to be mobile, with autonomous sex workers having greater motility capital, especially in social climbing, than those from other regions. In this sense, differential mobility is constructed by ethnicity, gender or social class (Sheller 2018). Practicing sex work in Geneva offered her a series of economic possibilities to fulfil her personal projects (buying a house, starting a business, paying for her children's studies, or living comfortably without giving up consumption). Undoubtedly, the type of client they encountered in Geneva is a fundamental aspect of sex work. While other studies suggest obtaining a greater number of clients compared to the starting point (Davey 2019), for Spanish sex workers it was not the number that was important but the quality of the relationship with the client. This is understood as the price of the services, the unreserved acceptance of the negotiation, and the security of providing the sexual services without unpleasant or violent incidents. However, our findings are not consistent with what was found by Davey et al., regarding the reasons for traveling with clients, or to places where there were relatives – both aspects have not been found in the interviews with Spanish workers.

In Finger's (2016) study in Zürich, the high mobility of Hungarian sex workers around Switzerland was to avoid violence from clients, an aspect not highlighted in any of the interviews and information collected between Spanish workers and other informants. It is possible that this discrepancy can be explained by the type of sector where the sex work takes place. Spanish sex workers were looking for safe paid sex businesses with good clients and they located them based on the social network information they had about other Spanish women, promoting mobility (Salazar and Smart 2011). It is possible that – depending on the levels and sectors of paid sex – the presence of violent events or violent clients is greater or lesser. Some studies have suggested that violence is not the same depending on the sex work industry and that many sex workers have encountered few episodes of violence (Bungay and Guta 2018). However, the results are similar in the assessment that the Spanish women interviewed had about safety in sex work, legal permission, and the infrastructure developed to carry out the activity in Geneva.

Improved working conditions

The transmission of information between peers was the main source of knowledge about Switzerland, along with web advertisements, but the latter did not offer them aspects that were essential to know the working conditions – the house rules, the commissions they obtained for the sexual benefits, the climate and atmosphere of the place among the workers, and the relationship with the manager or with the owners of the businesses. This knowledge was only obtained through the transmission of information between Spanish workers, which produce a

promotion of mobility as a normality, with resistance to a sedentary lifestyle (Salazar and Smart 2011).

Our results are similar to those of other studies carried out, although the contexts of sex work are very different and, therefore, mark differential aspects in mobility and working conditions. The work by Richter et al. (2014) pointed out differences between sex workers based on their travel, such that those who cross-border earned more money per client, had a better educational level, and worked part-time. However, this aspect is different in our study where Spanish sex workers work intensely – almost 24 hours – in a short period of time, almost without rest, to cover their earnings goal and return to Spain as soon as possible. This model of sex work and mobility is similar to the third pattern exposed by Finger (2016) in her study in Zürich. Only the Spanish women who lived in Geneva had a less intense day. Therefore, Spanish sex workers made various trips throughout the year until the working days of the license they obtained for sex work were used up. Measuring the frequency and duration of trips would be a pending issue in the future from a quantitative methodological approach.

As in other investigations carried out (Ham and Gerard 2014; Shewly et al. 2020; Amram et al. 2021), the mobility of these workers is associated with the search for better conditions for sex work and a fundamental axis is legalization and security in paid sex, since both aspects are related. This regulation allows for two important aspects – on the one hand, less exploitation in sex work and, on the other, greater control and detection of sex trafficking. Since sex work is legalized and regulated in Geneva, the levels of exploitation tend to be lower than in Spain, as perceived by the sex workers and key informants interviewed. However, the invisible mobilities raised by Shewly et al. (2020), as a strategy to avoid stigma and state interventions contrast with a visible mobility shown by Spanish workers, being in a context where mobility is allowed for them, as it comes from the European Union, as well as sex work being allowed (Sheller 2018). Visibility and invisibility is a continuum in sex work that accompanies mobility.

If a sex worker shares 50% of her profits with the apartment in Spain, in the indoor industry, parlour, or premises, in Geneva this percentage is higher for her, given that 60% of the profits were for the workers. In addition, the manager or owner of the premises or parlour made available everything that the worker needed to perform the sexual services, including condoms. In mobility, the best benefits are sought while avoiding the negative aspects when there is freedom of movement (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013; Sheller 2018). The mobility enables benefits (higher income) or mitigates disadvantages (the stigma of being recognized) that is another difference with Spain, since sex workers must have all the necessary material for the sexual services themselves.

Security and legality

It has been evident in the interviews and observations recorded that the decriminalization and regulation of sex work in Switzerland, and especially in Geneva, is a very attractive aspect for Spanish sex workers. Illegality leads to invisibility and therefore to the search for new spaces for sex work.

Safe and secure sex work is an aspect referenced in many studies and a fundamental element of mobility. At a time when in Spain there is instability between the options of legality or criminalisation of sex work, sex workers are looking for safe spaces, and for the protection they need from the police in the face of the risks and dangers that may occur (Deering et al. 2014; Hendrickson et al. 2021). While in Geneva this protection is determined by the context of legalisation of the activity, this is not the case in Spain. Spanish sex workers feel insecure in the development of the activity and mobility to other European cities allows them to achieve it, moving around Europe with a certain cosmopolitan status that those who do not undertake such mobility do not have (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). The information obtained from all

participants points to the few cases of sex trafficking in Geneva, and the few detected were reported to the police.

Finally, and although it was not one of our objectives, as has been pointed out in other works (Reed et al. 2012; Davey et al. 2018), Spanish sex workers encountered obstacles in accessing health services. Although it is true that these difficulties occurred during the weekend and due to ignorance and lack of foresight in their trip.

In this research, we have to make some considerations. First, we do not know the extent of mobility among Spanish sex workers – whether it is a small or larger proportion – given that qualitative studies do not provide these results. In this sense, it would be interesting to carry out a future survey to assess the scope, frequency, and typologies of trips, as other investigations have indicated (Davey et al. 2019). Second, we also do not know the extent of the differences found between native Spanish women and those of Latin American origin, since it is possible that the categorization carried out by clients involves other aspects. Third, many studies have pointed out the negative outcomes of mobility, especially regarding health (Reed et al. 2012), with a strong focus on developing countries. This investigation did not have this issue as its objective and it would be good to analyse the losses and gains of mobility in the future, given that some of the data obtained in the interviews lead us to investigate it. Finally, the study focuses on one type of license for sex work – the 90-day license. However, there are others with longer duration and residence in Geneva that have not been addressed in depth and remain pending study.

Conclusion

In short, compared to Spain, sex work in Geneva was perceived by Spanish sex workers as being safer, less exploitative, and more financially beneficial, and we understand that some of these advantages are due to the system of legalization of sex work, or as it was perceived by Spanish workers. The mobility of sex workers can be an opportunity for learning and benefits, and at the same time present negative effects that must be analysed and combated. Mobility and migration have been a continuum since the appearance of *Homo sapiens* in Africa and they will not be eliminated no matter how many restrictions current societies want to impose to cross their borders, or restrictive regulations to make them unattractive. Many women are crossing borders to engage in sex work – seeking better working conditions – and a challenge for the EU is that sex workers can be served under the same conditions within the European space. The development of policies to reduce risks and harms within the EU for vulnerable or stigmatized groups, with high mobility, is more productive than prohibitionist policies, which have demonstrated negative consequences on the health and well-being of sex workers. This work contributes to the literature on mobilities by offering connections to social networks, the social, political and economic circumstances that motivate these mobilities and that generate ways of understanding and studying them (Sheller 2014). The study of mobility involves research and its methods as Sheller and Urry rightly argue (2006). Describing, observing and interpreting these mobilities of sex workers not only on arrival at the place of supposed destination, but in this case mobility within mobility. That is to say, within the city itself where sex work is exercised, different mobilities are articulated in the various sex businesses, the best conditions of safety, performance and satisfaction are sought, similar to what Shewly et al. (2020) found in their work. This is one of the constitutive elements of sex work, which we could say has a constitutive element in its development in global societies.

Finally, the results obtained in this investigation should make us reflect on the effects of restrictive and criminalizing policies on prostitution or sex work, since far from deactivating sex work it displaces it, sometimes generating greater problems.

Notes

1. By native Spanish women, we here refer to women born and raised in Spain, and having their parents and grand-parents born in Spain too.
2. The 90 days are a special working permit, and is part of the 'free movement of people' in Europe (which Switzerland agreed upon although not being formally a European member country).
3. Kurt Pärli, 'The Swiss Posted Workers Act and Free Movement of Services', in *Switzerland and the EU* (Brill Nijhoff, 2023), 117–41, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004529984_006.
4. She actually would have received the appropriate Post Exposure Prophylaxis at the main hospital of the city.

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