

Women Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation in Portugal: Life narratives

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Abstract

This paper describes a qualitative research about women trafficking for sexual exploitation in Portugal. The life experiences of a group of Brazilian women were characterised through the use of a comprehensive methodology – life narratives. The evidences found in this study, analysed and interpreted discursively from a feminist critical perspective, show us an unmistakable and intricate articulation between gender issues and poverty and social exclusion. Those conditions seem to establish themselves risk factors for victimisation and sexual oppression.

Key Words: Migration, Women trafficking, Intersectionality.

1. Introduction

Social and economic instability and gender discrimination leads millions of women, around the world, to migrate to *developed* countries, hoping to improve their life quality. Throughout all Europe, women experience situations of great vulnerability and are frequently faced with situations of oppression and domestic and institutional violence (Freedman, 2003). Unemployment and poverty in origin countries reinforces the tendency to *feminization* of migrations (Castles & Miller, 2003) or, as other authors prefer to call, to *gender transition* (Morokvašić, 2010), one of the main features of the present era of migrations.

Migration dynamics are very complex and depends on identities belongings like ethnicity, gender and age (Crenshaw, 1991), as well as other conditions such as the educational level, occupation, marital status and political and economical pressures associated to certain geographical areas (O.McKee, 2000). Theory of intersectionality, proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1991, assists us in understanding how racial, social and economic marginalization makes women more vulnerable to racial and sexual oppression. The concept of intersectionality is essential to a multi-dimensional analysis of belonging simultaneously to more than one identity group, without subordinating one to another (Langevin & Belleau, 2000). Women trafficking for sexual and/or labour exploitation are forms of intersectional oppression and discrimination. Trafficking, as well as migration, entails multiple social inequalities (Langevin & Belleau, 2000). Quoting Makkonen, in 2002,

(...) trafficking and rape during armed conflicts are often mentioned as prime examples under the rubric of intersectional or multiple discrimination, while there is much else than just discrimination involved. For instance, trafficking, along with its various sidephenomena, violates the right to life, the right to dignity and security, the right to just and favorable conditions of work and the right to health. There is no reason to reduce trafficking to “mere” discrimination (p. 10).

Notice intersectional discrimination thus invites us for an analytical strategy that values a bottom-up analysis. We begin to question how women live their lives and continue to analyze the various influences that shape the lives and life changes of marginalized women (Crenshaw, 2000, p 12). As Janice Raymond (2002) pointed out we can learn much about trafficking for sexual exploitation by examining female migration patterns, because there are several points where migration and trafficking intersect. This paper reflects about those intersection points, taking into account the narratives of four Brazilian signalled as victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation.

2. Women trafficking for sexual exploitation in Portugal

Smuggling and trafficking of migrants is a relatively new phenomenon in Portugal (Peixoto, 2005). Portugal is a destination, a transit and a source country for women, men and children trafficked from Brazil (and other origin countries – like Ukraine and Nigeria) for commercial sexual exploitation and forced labour. According to Trafficking in Persons Report 2010, by U. S. Department of State, authorities identified 272 potential victims during 2008 and 2009, confirming 48 as official victims during this two year period.

Women, due to several reasons, are more likely to become victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation than men. There are many factors that can explain this socially determined vulnerability (Neves & Nogueira, 2010; Nogueira, Saavedra & Neves, 2006; Oliveira, Neves, Nogueira & Koning, 2009). Several forms of forced labour resulting from migration processes reproduce unbalanced gender social relations and patriarchal gender ideologies (Moghadam, 1996; Nolin, 2006). Gender inequality emerges and become the centre of specific social patterns that oppresses women not only in their origin countries but also in host countries (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2005). Many women get involved, voluntarily or not, in trafficking in human beings networks trying to escape from social and economic uncertainty (Gajic-Veljanoski & Stewart, 2007)

In 2004, João Peixoto and colleagues promoted a research project named *Migrant Trafficking in Portugal: Sociological, Judicial and Political Perspectives*. Trafficking of immigrants from Eastern Europe and Brazil, including that of women for sexual exploitation, was the main focus of the study. This revealed that the great majority of the trafficked women came from Brazil and that the trafficking in women networks include Portuguese owners of bars and night clubs, elements in Brazil, very often women and other elements in Portugal, generally connected with the sex business or owners of apartments. Regarding the profile of these women, it is believed that they come from low or middle classes and from poor regions in Brazil. African women are also victims of trafficking in human beings networks, as well as women from Eastern Europe. It was found that the proportion of Brazilian women as far greater than other nationalities. The next most numerous group comprised women from Eastern Europe (mainly Russia and Ukraine, and more recently, Romania) and from a few African countries.

In 2005, with the publication of the work *Immigration and Ethnicity - Experiences and Trajectories of Women in Portugal*, complementary visions to the study of 2004 are put forward in order to obtain a better understanding of the phenomenon of female immigration and women trafficking on Portuguese territory. The study weaves valuable considerations about the networks operating in Portugal and their characteristics, stressing once again the significant presence of Brazilian, African and Eastern European women in these circuits. Wall, Nunes & Matias (2005) have reinforced in their study *Immigrant Women in Portugal: migration trajectories, main problems and policies* that the three nationalities with the largest presence in Portugal, regarding immigrant women, are the Cape-Verdean, the Brazilian and the Ukrainian.

Between 2005 and 2007, Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra, conducted the first Portuguese study on trafficking in women and sexual exploitation, titled *Trafficking in Women in Portugal for Sexual Exploitation*, by Boaventura de Sousa Santos and his team. Commissioned by Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality, this research concluded that the phenomenon is still shrouded in opacity, and the true extent and dynamics behind it was still unknown. Findings previously identified were reinforced by Santos's research, especially the results related with the origin of victims and trafficking dynamics. Since 2007 a few studies were conducted to intensify the knowledge about phenomena. The research that will be described subsequently was one of the studies that brought into light some of the specificities of women trafficking to sexual exploitation, particularly about life experiences and their relation with intersectional discrimination.

3. Victim's narratives of human trafficking – Empirical study

Four Brazilian women accepted to be interviewed individually to this study. They were contacted by Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras (SEF), a security service organized vertically under the Ministry of Home Affairs. Two were from Goiás and two from Tocantins. Their ages ranged from 21, 33, 36 and 47. Coming from rural environments, socially and economically underprivileged, these women had very diversified educational levels. The youngest had left school when attending the equivalent of the Portuguese 9th grade, the 33 year old one had finished high-school and took the exams for enrolling in a Law school, the 36 year old one finished the 3rd year of Dentistry in a University and the 47 year old one also finished high-school and took the exams for enrolling in a faculty of medicine. Three of these women, the oldest, had children, all of them living in Brazil with family at the time of these interviews. The 33 year old woman had a 14 year old teenage daughter, the 36 year old woman had two sons with 16 and 19 years of age, and the 47 year old woman had a 19 year old son.

An interview protocol was elaborated for conducting the life narratives. The areas on which the protocol focused were the following: life story and history of current victimisation (associated with the trafficking phenomenon). The conduction of the interview followed international guidelines on good practices for dealing with victims of trafficking in human beings and the principles of feminist research.

The interviews were analysed according to a discourse analysis methodology, which is epistemologically compatible with the feminist critical thought (Nogueira, 2001a). The major basis of the Critical Discourse Analysis is the identification of language patterns with related practices, showing how these are important aspects of the society and the individuals within it (Taylor, 2001 as cited in Nogueira, 2001b). The evidences found in the life narratives of these 4 women signalled as victims of trafficking in human beings for sexual exploitation reveal similarities in some areas and differences in others.

Two of these women consider that they had a happy childhood, the other two mention that their childhood was unhappy and difficult. In this period, as in their adolescence, they all lived in social and economical difficult conditions, the main emotional references identified by the 4. The nuclear families, consisting of a wide range of elements, resided in rural areas, where the main activity was agriculture (the "roça"). The religious principles seem to have been very present in the life trajectories of these women, which is common in view of the values of the Brazilian culture. The relation with the Church and its practices is very present in their childhood experiences. Another relevant element in the speeches of these women has to do with the fact that their family education had been marked by an evident rigidity and inflexibility regarding the gender roles. The matter of the difference of the gender roles is reflected at the level of the existing stereotypes on the notions of femininity and masculinity, and on the activities supposedly suitable for each sex. One of the interviewees actually mentions her desire to be a man, since this would enable her to perform activities that are not suitable for women (related to agriculture in this case).

"I wanted to be a man. I saw my brothers... we are 3 girls and 7 men. (...). I was very attached to my father and wanted to do with him the same things my brothers did". E3

Also the games played and the rights they had reflected the gender differences:

"He (brother) didn't want to play the same type of games a woman would play and I would... sometimes I would ride horses, make races and I liked to hunt". E4

"We are 9 brothers, but I am the only daughter, the only woman, and because I was a very beautiful girl, really beautiful, (...) he was jealous of me (...) he would always chain me by the leg and lock me in a room, you know? (...) So that I wouldn't leave the house (...)". E1

Two of these women, the ones that mentioned they had a difficult and unhappy childhood, were victims of sexual abuse, one on the part of her father, the other on the part of a priest, who impregnated her and later became the father of her daughter. The reports of these women also demonstrate the existence of violence directed to the mothers by the fathers, mainly psychological and physical. Adolescence seems to have been a troubled period for all these women, insomuch that one of the women mentioned not to have even experienced this stage. Their reports point to the fact that the adolescence of these women has been characterised by an intense desire to quickly become adult, to escape the insecurity, lack of freedom or the dependence on their families. The point that marked the beginning of adulthood for these 3 women was motherhood. Once they arrived to adulthood, their lives began meaning "experience", "war" and "suffering", instead of the expected liberation.

2 of these 4 women were married and the both were victims of domestic violence.

"So in the beginning he treated me very well. It was, you know, like all men (laughter), in the beginning it was all flowers, then it starts (...)". E1

"My husband wanted me to seduce men out there and have sex for him to see and feel pleasure. And I couldn't stand it anymore, I couldn't bear any more of that, I just couldn't... I lost my love for him, I was out of love, I didn't have any more feelings for him, nothing". E3

None of these women was, in Brazil, involved in the sex business. They made the decision to emigrate for economic reasons and 2 of them wish to return to Brazil when they gather the necessary conditions for that.

"I was unable to pay for a house. My family has no conditions, it's a low class family. I came here to work because of that, but I never prostituted myself here. I work in a drinking house, it has nothing to do with prostitution". E3

"I was in a jam (...), I had no home, it was hard, hard". E4

"I wanted to work, earn my money, you know? So I could get there to Brazil and have something more dignifying for me". E1

They all gave their consent to come to Portugal and none was informed that they would come to work in the sex industry. The ones that were forced to prostitute themselves (3 out of the 4) expressed they did it against their will, having been target of coercion. All of these women are against prostitution.

"To have to endure those men...you are not aware of what it is like to have to go to bed with a man that you never saw before for money. Disgusting, revolting. (...) I don't know how some can do it, I can't." E1

These 3 women travelled to Portugal after having been allured by people in Brazil that bought them the tickets and loaned them money, which resulted in a considerable debt. This man was known in the region for recruiting young women to travel to Portugal, with the promise of work and dignification of their living conditions.

"I came here innocently, I felt very humiliated in my family's house and then I met this person who said that he would give me a job in a clinic for elderly people and that I would fulfil all my objectives. It was all a lie. And then they got me into prostitution". E1

"They came here and they never really say what they came to do. I came to work, you know that people emigrate a lot... many people have dreams, have their ideas... because all that came and returned had a better life, they could buy a good house, but what they came here to do they didn't say. I didn't know... the house I was coming to was really for prostitution". E4

"I didn't know what I was coming for. If I knew she was bringing me into prostitution I wouldn't have come. I never did that, it never crossed my mind to sell myself, never. She said that I was coming to work in a restaurant". E2

The woman that states she never prostituted herself came to Portugal through her sister. The conditions of this woman in particular, concerning her coming to Portugal, is in everything dissimilar to the other women trajectories. Her sister lived in Portugal, welcomed her to her house until she could find a job and it appears that there never was any contact with individuals linked to trafficking networks. The professional activity this woman performs in hostess bars has distinct contours from the activities of the other women, not being forced or subject to any type of violence. According her the situation she lived doesn't constitutes, therefore, a situation of trafficking for sexual exploitation¹, but a rational choice to migrate to a country that might give her better opportunities.

The women victims of trafficking describe several forms of oppression and violence directed at them and at other women, of multiple nationalities ("African, Ukrainian, Angolan, Chinese, French, there are all kinds". E3), that experience the same situation.

"Men are real pigs in night environments. Once I told one that he wasn't dealing with an animal, he was dealing with a human being". E4

"I got tired of all the times I had to go to the hospital, I went through serious difficulties. (...) He asked me for money and, since I didn't have any, he went and he beat me up really, really bad. He said he'd kill me and I got scared. I was all bruised and battered and he told me the next day I would be going to work all the same. (...) He forced me to cut my hair, and it was long, just above the hip. I had never cut my hair in my life because that's against my religion and he forced me to wear contact lenses. He told me I looked like a gipsy woman. It was the hardest thing I had to do in my life". E1

"They said you can't quit or they will hurt your family. They never laid a hand on me, but they beat up the other women a lot. I wouldn't give them any reasons to". E2

However, curiously, they consider that contrary to what happened with them, the Brazilian women that are now coming to Portugal already know they are coming to work as prostitutes, knowing the risks they are taking. This consensual position seems to indicate that the issue of consent makes them underestimate the severity of the trafficking situations, admitting, however, its existence.

"Not nowadays, nowadays I think they already come with their lessons learned when they arrive. They know what they are coming for. (...). There are some girls that come here, the club owner pays their ticket, right?

¹ We decided to include this case in this description because it illustrates the usual confusion authorities made between trafficking and sex work. This woman was signaled as a victim by SEF, although she doesn't consider herself as a victim.

They take their passport and lock them in a room, they are forced to work for them, this and that, back there they say one thing and when they arrive here it's some other completely different thing, many are beaten up, others are killed in the apartments. I know a lot of people in this situation. Many meet Portuguese people that help them (...) 30% are still coming on false promises, but not the others". E3

The stigma associated with the Brazilian women and the feeling of discrimination is very prominent in the speeches of these 4 women, especially on the part of the Portuguese women.

"It's very hard here, you are coming to a country that is not your own. All the Brazilian women here are taken for whores, but that's not the case. We are treated like garbage, like we're nobody, home wreckers". E3

"Not the men, but the women feel more jealous (...). Portuguese women, if they see a man and a woman talking they are already thinking that...I think that the Brazilian are more sociable...". E4

"For them we are whores (...) some think it's just work. (...) Others look at us with distrust, those women discriminate us all time". E2

According to them the clients are, many times, the ones who protect and rescue them from these environments, functioning as protectors or friends.

"They feel pity for us". E1.

"Some spend the whole night just talking with us because in some situations we create bonds ". E2

"We are like a night psychologist". E3.

All women imagine spending their middle-age years with their family in peace and with a sense of achievement.

4. Discussion/Conclusions

One of the evidences this study reinforces is that the analysis of the phenomena of trafficking of women for sexual exploitation cannot be made leaving aside the debate on the enormous influence of gender issues, and also of ethnicity, culture and social class (among other factors) in the processes of victimisation against women. If both migration and women trafficking are a feminized phenomena (and therefore genderized), then the understanding about the dynamics and processes of this type of social issues must necessarily contemplate a gender framework. In this exploratory study we sought to know and characterise the experiences of women signalled as victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation, listening to them and giving them voice. We believe we contributed to the understanding of how the dynamics of the incorporation of women in the field of the trafficking in human beings express unequal distributions of power permeated by the relationship between gender and other categories of differentiation that, in turn, influence the exploitation that may come to be installed in these contexts (Piscitelli, 2007; Piscitelli & Vasconcelos, 2008). The life narratives of the interviewees reaffirm the characterization that the studies held in Portugal, in this field, draw on the profile of trafficked women for sexual exploitation in the country. It is possible among the life trajectories of these 4 women to recognise common characteristics, particularly at the level of the precariousness of the socio-economical conditions of their contexts of origin and the vulnerability of their households, which resulted in the decision to immigrate to Portugal in search of employment and stability (in search of the fulfilment of their dreams).

Coming from rural and structurally underdeveloped areas of the Brazilian Northeast, these women seem to have had developmental trajectories marked by the need to compensate for a social and economical environment favourable to inequality and discrimination. Wanting to escape from poverty and instability, but also from experiences of family and relational violence, these women found in the promises of a decent future the hope for some form of liberation/emancipation. Although one of these women has not been victim of trafficking (according her), it seems to us that she was a strong candidate for this type of victimisation, since her life trajectory, as well as her socio-economical conditions, placed her at great risk. The story of this woman show us that there still is a misunderstanding between trafficking and prostitution, which can originate some incorrect interpretations about who are the victims and who are not. Socialised in accordance with the values of the Catholic Church and very repressed in the expression of their sexuality, these women have had an education very bound to the traditional system and gender order (Rubin, 1975; Connell, 1987). If we consider the impact that the effects of gender structures has in the construction of individual identity and in the hierarchy of the powers of men and women (Rubin 1975), this question is of particular significance in the analysis of the life trajectories of women.

This research highlights, from the discourses of these women, a pronounced differentiation of the gender roles in the process of family education, dictating different ways of being, which ultimately led to a valuation of the roles of men, in detriment of the roles of women. The experiences of an imposed feminineness are not at all residual in the narratives; in fact, they appear as a very important fact. The experience of being a woman, and of being a woman within a framework of restrict possibilities, strengthens the devaluation of the feminine identities. This issue is patent in the desire to be man or the in desire of doing what only men can do. Gender is, in this sense, added with other identity categories, a social interpellation that constrains individuality.

The gender order - system of social relations of power determinant in the construction of the gender identities - (Rubin, 1975; Connell, 1987) – constrains choices and, in the case of women, restricts the fields of the social actions, as if being a woman, and in this particular case, being Brazilian, being poor and subsequently an immigrant, meant not to be able to escape from a fate of victimisation. The forms of violence endured by these women also have in their origins the inequality and the gender violence, either within the family, or in the immigration experiences, or even in the context of trafficking. We realize, with this analysis, that different belongings intersects and strengthen vulnerability to discrimination and oppression (Crenshaw, 1991).

In fact, regarding the latter, the *objectification* of women and their comparison to marketable and consumable sexual objects, recalls the existence of an unequivocal system of gender hierarchy, which entails different accesses to and uses of power. Prostitution is not, in this particular study, a professional activity practiced freely and autonomously, but a form of sexual exploitation and oppression with the objective of assigning a mercantile statute to women. Sexuality has been one of the most common weapons of repression of women's freedom, and the female body is a territory on which the women themselves seem to have little or no rights (Peniche, 2007). In their experiences of immigration, women report gender discrimination, but also cultural and ethnic discrimination, being the stigma associated with the Brazilian women a factor of inhibition for an effective inclusion and welcoming (Correia & Neves, 2011).

It is interesting to note, in this research, the positioning of the interviewed women themselves in relation to other Brazilian women in similar situations, from the concept they present about the legitimacy of prostitution and what I would call the *naturalisation* of violence. Confusing trafficking in human beings with prostitution, these women believe that the Brazilian women who immigrate to Portugal nowadays do so giving their consent to the practice of prostitution, and there is no mistake in this respect. The violence suffered in the performance of this activity is seen as a *natural* consequence of prostitution. As we know, the matter of consent is irrelevant in cases of trafficking in human beings and even if it is true that women emigrate with the objective of developing a professional activity in the sex industry, it is certainly not true that they consent to exploitation and violence. Once again, the idea that, morally, prostitution is condemnable is implicit, and that once inside it, violence against women is almost inevitable. Here, we can identify an attitude of conformity and resignation regarding "fate". The discourses of resistance are therefore non-existent, and the concepts of rights are diffuse at this level.

Another element interesting to analyse has to do with the strengthening of the faith and religiosity in consequence of the situations of victimisation. The cultural aspect stands out in this case, and the religious belief is a factor of protection regarding emotional stability. The evidences found in this study are a starting point for the understanding of how the gender system/order generates weaknesses and vulnerabilities enhancers of the violence against women. I believe it is clear that we must make women aware of their rights, as well as to deconstruct speeches of "victimisation as fate". For that, it is necessary to make a passage from a state of naive and uncritical consciousness to a process of active critical conscience (Freire, 1997). The abandonment of a moral paradigm on sexuality can perhaps be a strategy for the implementation of women's rights, and it is imperative to make a political distinction between phenomena that are different at their core: trafficking in human beings and prostitution.

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