



**ISET WORKING PAPER 17**

**THE PSYCHO-SOCIAL TRAJECTORIES OF ALBANIAN AND  
ROMANIAN 'TRAFFICKERS'**

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June 2010

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author, and do not represent the collective view of ISET.

## **ABSTRACT**

This report will summarise the results of a recent (2008) pilot research undertaken in Italy and Albania on the psycho-social profile of men involved in international sex work as agents. By drawing on original research material – 34 in depth interviews with international sex work agents from Albania and Romania - the report will analyse the socio-cultural underpinnings of their life trajectories and migratory projects, with particular reference to the way these impacted on their specific involvements in the international sex industry. The findings of the research problematise the Manichaeic way in which the trafficking paradigm explains migrants' involvement in the international industry according to a polarised scenario of victims (women) and exploiters (men). They also point to the necessity for future research and social interventions to explore the socio-economic, cultural and affective underpinnings of people's modes of involvement in the international sex industry, including when a woman is managed by a man.

The research evidence highlights the existence of a separation between trafficking and the involvement of migrant workers in the international sex industry. The variety of life trajectories and experiences gathered show clearly how extreme forms of exploitation and abuse are a specific and increasingly marginal outcome of the nexus between migration and the international sex industry, rather than the reality for the majority of migrants. The research findings show that there is a high degree of fluidity and ambivalence within the relations between the men and women involved. They underline individual and socio-economic aspects of vulnerability and resilience which could inform the basis for more efficient initiatives of social intervention.

By engaging with the life histories of migrant men working as agents in the international sex industry, the research embeds them within wider socio-economic and cultural transformations. Selling sex abroad became relatively 'normalised' in specific socio-cultural and economic settings 'at home' and emerged as a way to both challenge and reproduce existing gender and class based limitations to social mobility. The findings of the research highlight the need to engage with the individual mix of vulnerability and resilience of each migrant involved in international sex work. They also question the usefulness of profiling when understanding the diverse life experiences of people working in the international sex industry, whose life choices reflect ambivalences and contradictions which are shared with the societies of origin and of destination brought together by their migratory journeys.

## **KEY WORDS**

International sex work, trafficking, migration, victimisation, social intervention, ambivalence

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## INTRODUCTION: THE PILOT PROJECT AND ITS AIMS

The 'trafficking of human beings' provoked much research and polemic and is currently a very 'hot' topic in public as well as academic debates. On the one hand, many authors have attempted to distinguish outright exploitation and abuse from consensual migration and engagement in sex work (Andrijasevic 2003; Agustín 2007), while others do not recognise this difference, thus arguing against the possibility of (female) migrants consenting to sell sex (Kelly 2000; Hughes 2002). The problem with this latter perspective is that it simplifies the complexity of the decisions and pressures migrants have to face according to a polarised scenario of 'villains' and 'victims', which does not explain the socio-economic and cultural dynamics shaping the nexus between migration and the sex industry.

The research will distinguish 'trafficking' from the arrangement and management of sex work across international boundaries<sup>1</sup> as a way to distinguish between exploitative/coercive practices and other arrangements characterised by different degrees of agency and consent on the part of both the person selling sex abroad and the person enabling her to do so and/or managing her. In this paper, 'traffickers' will be referred to as 'agents' and their work will be described as 'management', rather than using terms such as 'pimp' or verbs such as 'to control', which imply the existence of coercion and exploitation. The use of the morally neutral terms such as 'agent' and 'management' is not meant to underestimate the way in which some of these relations can be exploitative and abusive. It aims at setting a more 'neutral' discursive space within which the plurality of professional and personal relations developing between men and women working in the global sex industry can become more visible. Distinguishing between practices characterised by different degrees of will and autonomy is crucial to understand the mix of necessities and desires fueling the migratory project of people selling sex or arranging for/managing other people to sell sex abroad. It is only if we tap into this complex nexus between desire and necessity

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<sup>1</sup> This will also be referred to more simply as 'international sex work' or as 'involvement in the international sex industry' in the report.

that we can understand the psycho-social underpinnings of trafficking and international sex work and that we can identify and promote effective and sustainable social intervention projects targeting both.

In recent years, a number of publications and studies have attempted to identify a psycho-social profile of the potential female 'victim' (i.e. Lăzăroiu and Alexandrescu 2004). However, to this date, there have been few attempts to undertake a parallel task with their male partners/agents. The few available attempts to profile traffickers are based on secondary sources, rather than on interviews to people directly involved in the arrangement and management of international sex work<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, as they adopt a crime-reduction perspective, they tend to describe the techniques adopted by 'traffickers', a term used to identify all men arranging and managing international sex work, rather than analyzing their social and migratory trajectories.<sup>3</sup>

Drawing on original interviews conducted with men involved in the arrangement and management of international sex work, as well as in trafficking, this research aims at completing the information regarding the psycho-social dynamics underpinning these interlinked but separate phenomena. Its findings will point to future research directions and will hopefully be used to inform concrete and targeted measures aimed at strengthening the effectiveness of local responses, particularly in the countries of origin.

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<sup>2</sup> For an example of this approach, see Levenkorn 2007.

<sup>3</sup> For an example of this approach, see Transcrime Reports n. 9 and 8, available online <http://transcrime.cs.unitn.it/tc/417.php>

## **SAMPLE AND METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH**

The main aim of the project was to gather 30 interviews with men involved in the arrangement and management of sex work across international boundaries in order to outline their psycho-social profile. Another important aim was to produce a research tool (semi-structured questionnaire) and indicate a methodology which can be suitable to the elaboration of such profile. Overall, 34 interviews were gathered.

Of the 34 interviews undertaken with people implicated in the arrangement and management of international sex work, 33 were with men and 1 was with a woman. 19 interviews were with people currently detained in Rome (2) and in Albania (17), while the remaining ones were with non-detained people who were or had been involved in the arrangement and management of sex work in Rome (8) and Tirana (7). As far as nationality is concerned, 10 interviewees were Romanian, while the remaining 24 were Albanian.

The number of interviews gathered reflects the exploratory and qualitative nature of this pilot project. The qualitative approach is based on the recognition of the value of subjectivity in understanding social phenomena and on the critique of the positivist concept of objectivity. In other words, qualitative research starts from the assumption that objectivity can only be achieved by taking into account the way the subjectivities and power positions of the interviewer and of the interviewee are interacting during the gathering and analysis of data. In line with its qualitative approach, the research combined the collection of semi-structured interviewing with the ethnographic observation of the interview settings and dynamics, in order to understand the way the process and context of the research influences the analysis process.

The methodology of this research is inspired by the self-reflective developments of contemporary anthropology, which seeks to acknowledge the contribution of the subject of the research by incorporating, wherever possible, the words of the person observed in the text describing the person. In this respect, the role of the author becomes that of

an interpreter of texts and relations s/he established and through which the research takes place. One of the most important implications of this approach is that the ethnographic material becomes an essential part of the 'text' which interprets it. For this reason, the report will give ample space to quotes from interviews.

One of the most important implications of the adoption of a qualitative approach is that it does not engage primarily with statistical representations as a way to explain and understand the phenomena it examines. This remark is very important in the context of this pilot report whose 34 interviews do not allow any degree of statistical representation of the population under examination. However, the research will outline some of the main dimensions and directions of the social and psychological trajectories of the young men (and women) involved in the management and arrangement of sex work. These dimensions and directions should constitute the basis for further research in the future, as the final section of the report will explain in more detail.

The psychological dimension of the research was limited by important constraints, including the fact that it was only possible to meet interviewees once, often in detention, and the relative 'normalisation' of international sex work in recent years (see Section 3.1). The convergence between these factors prevented us from sketching out a psychological profile of male agents of international sex work. Nevertheless, the material gathered allows the formulation of some explorative hypotheses which should be further examined in a full-scale psycho-social project in the future.

Each interview was undertaken following the questionnaire elaborated in the context of the research. The questionnaire was showed to subjects to reassure them that the interview was part of a research and not of any police investigation. This clarification was particularly important for detained interviewees, some of whom needed to be reassured several times about the confidentiality and non-judiciary nature of the research. Moreover, the questions to ask and the topics to be addressed during the interview were discussed and agreed between the researcher and the interviewee, to encourage his engagement with the process. In most cases interviewees refused being

recorded (or recording was not allowed, i.e. in prison) and notes were taken, which were subsequently transcribed into electronic format.

Most interviewers remained suspicious and their answers remained generic during the first phase of the interview. For these reasons the first initial questions often had to be repeated in the final phase of the research, when a higher degree of trust and empathy was established between interviewer and interviewee. Family relations was the area interviewees were mostly reluctant to talk about, as their involvement in international sex work often put them in conflict with their families and the associated practices and values.

Interviewing people in jail posed specific methodological challenges, as the majority were not available to talk about their involvement in the arrangement and management of international sex work. Most detained interviewees did not accept their convictions. They saw the interview and the interviewer as an occasion to reassert their innocence. In these circumstances, the interviewer listened to the story of the interviewee and tried to elicit indirect information on the phenomena of trafficking and the arrangement and management of international sex work more in general. A minority of detained interviewees accepted some of the reasons why they were sentenced. They were willing to talk openly about their social and personal circumstances and their interviews were very helpful when analysing those of the people who adopted a more defensive attitude. In all of the cases it was possible to gather substantial information about the socio-economic background and the life history of the interviewee.

A very different attitude was encountered with people who were not detained. Not only they were all available to talk about their social and personal circumstances, but in the majority of cases the interview became an occasion to reflect on their life choices and priorities. These interviews were arranged through gatekeepers working for international NGOs assisting migrant sex workers and unaccompanied minors. The possibility of interviewing people who were or had been involved in the arrangement and management of international sex work and who were not in detention was crucial for the



completion of this research. The information gathered in these interviews enabled us to better interpret the omissions and the discourses characterising the interviews of detained people who did not accept their convictions.

## **THE EMERGENCE AND EVOLUTION OF INTERNATIONAL SEX WORK**

### **The post-communist transformation, migration and trafficking**

The main aim of this section is to provide a quick overview of the socio-economic and cultural transformations which encompassed the emergence of international sex work and trafficking since the 1990s. The section will also sketch out a brief history of the emergence and evolution of these phenomena and of their interpretation from the early years to the present day. These observations and analyses will constitute the background for the following sections, which will discuss the findings of the research in relation to the scenario presented here.

#### *The post-communist transformation, migration and trafficking*

Trafficking and migration must be analysed jointly as two different but tightly related aspects of the complex process of transformation in which Albania and Romania found themselves after the end of communist rule in 1991 and 1989, respectively (Lăzăroiu 2003: 33). In the process, entire productive sectors and their employees became redundant, sometimes overnight. This meant that traditional figures of authority, such as fathers in the capacity of the main economic providers for households, became unable to fulfill their role and that all family members had to re-invent their skills and resources in order to survive. At the same time, this deep socio-economic transformation has been characterised by psychological dynamics of removal and idealisation.

On the one hand some of the values, rules and models which have belonged historically to Albanian and Romanian culture were challenged because of their symbolic association with the authoritarianism of the communist state and of 'tradition'. In particular, the post-communist transformation was characterised by a strong emphasis on the individual dimension of personal and social life, which was a reaction formation to the oppression of communist collectivism. On the other hand the process of cultural construction of Western Europe as a potential destination of the migratory project started from the narrative and visual material disseminated by western media. These originated from very different social, cultural and economic contexts, whose own

contradictions and predicaments were made meaning of starting from experiences of material deprivation and socio-political authoritarianism. As a result, many young men and women in Albania and Romania associated capitalist democracy with an individualised and utopian world of freedom and luxury where 'everything was possible', in a context in which established moral boundaries and values became increasingly fluid and disputed 'at home' (Mai 2001). This condition of socio-economic and cultural fluidity and uncertainty is the scenario within which the interlinked phenomena of migration, international sex work and trafficking took place; this is the only context through which the reasons underpinning the different choices and opportunities of the subjects involved can be fully understood.

Albania and Romania's post-communist fascination with the West must be read against this crisis of established figures of authority and the models of personhood they represented. The clash between enduring ideologies of masculine responsibility for the economic survival, an economic landscape characterised by poverty, uncertainty and unemployment; and the growing aspiration to individualised lifestyles led to new forms of social vulnerability and resilience. As a result, in Albania and Romania there has been a proliferation of young men and women which found themselves in a situation of heightened socio-economic and cultural vulnerability and fluidity. Many were expelled by these socio-economic contradictions into an unknown world, guided by individualised and confused expectations of utopian self-realisation, entitlement and pleasure.

The post-communist individualist and utopian interpretation of capitalist modernity and democracy, together with the vanishing of communist economics and ethics, were very important factors behind the emergence of criminal behaviour in Albania and Romania. On a general level, the disembedding of patriarchal roles and values from the collective group dimension released onto the social scene a new hyper-individualised subject, that potentially finds in the fulfilment of his/her own needs the only ethical measure of his/her social behaviour (Fuga 1998). As a consequence of the reaction to the obsessive collectivisation of public and private life which characterised the communist period, the post-communist period was marked by the resurgence and re-elaboration of

personalistic and authoritarian values, roles and practices. In particular, the implicit politicisation of material culture; the criminalization of private entrepreneurship and the inefficiency of centralized economies produced widespread and para-legal forms of entrepreneurship, based on the manipulation and transgression of official procedures (Prato 2004). Another implication was that consumption acquired a politicized quality, as acquiring western goods and watching western TV channels became a way to build new alternative identities (Mai 2001). These dynamics led to a criminalization of everyday life around issues of economic survival and consumption. To this one must add the arbitrariness with which many people were able to achieve a position of power and privilege according to political allegiances rather than merit and the rhetoric of egalitarianism and collectivism characterising state policies. As a result, many people in early post-communist times developed the perception that anyone was theoretically entitled to anything according to individual initiative, personal contacts and will, rather than according to skills, ethics and knowledge.

If this fluid and transforming socio-economic and cultural milieu can be seen as potentially conducive to the emancipatory challenging of established forms of power and domination, it can also be seen as potentially allowing a situation in which individual power and desire define new moral values and practices arbitrarily. In fact, these dynamics were full of consequences at a social level because the interconnection between a personalistic and corrupted political order and local power brokers controlling strategic resources and trafficable goods achieved an almost complete monopoly on the legitimate use of force, particularly in early post-communist times.

At a broader social level, in the post-communist context, 'making money' emerged as a key discourse and priority for young men and women. Besides its obvious economic meaning, 'making money' became a new set of normative discourses and practices, including migration, through which young men and women could achieve autonomy from established figures of authority and upward social mobility in a context characterised by poverty and the necessity to survive. It is within this complexity that the emergence of migration, international sex work and trafficking emerged as social, economic and

cultural practices. Moreover, it is within the interplay between this complexity and the individual life trajectories of each single young migrant that the aspects of vulnerability and/or resilience of their life choices and trajectories can be identified.

The engagement in international sex work needs to be seen as a social, economic and cultural practice within which young men and women both challenged and reproduced established gender roles and figures of authority, while seeking to improve their social and economic conditions, at times of rapid socio-economic and cultural change. Within this practice one needs to distinguish deceptive, exploitative and violent arrangements, such as those defining trafficking, from those characterised by a higher degree of awareness and agency for all the men and women involved. In this respect, the recourse to 'agents' needs to be seen as both an opportunity and a predicament for prospective (female) migrants who can not count on family/friend-based networks and other forms of social capital (Davies 2009) when migrating.

### **A short history of trafficking in Albania (and Romania)**

As far as Albania is concerned, in 1996 IOM carried out a study on the trafficking and sexual exploitation of foreign girls in Italy (IOM 1996). Of the 50 women interviewed, 26 were Albanian. According to the results of this research, the typical profile of the Albanian trafficked woman is that of a very young, unmarried girl who was taken to Italy by a male relative, often a fiancé, under the promise of marriage or of a good working opportunity. In comparison with sex workers coming from other countries, Albanians were amongst the youngest, the majority being between 14 and 18 years old. According to interviews carried out in Italy, the large majority of the trafficked girls were not aware that they were going to be selling sex in Italy. Even those who knew were totally unaware of the conditions of aggressive and violent exploitation that they would have to face once there (Campani 1998 and 2000). Finally, analyses of the national differences in type and scales of trafficking organisations underlined how 'Albanian traffickers were often young criminals attracted by the possibility of earning easy money by exploiting

women/girls who were friends, neighbours or schoolmates from their home villages' (Salt 1997: 477).

Perhaps the most characteristic aspect of these early analyses of the phenomenon of the trafficking of young Albanian girls for the purposes of exploitation is their insistence on degree of their physical and psychological subjection to their protectors and exploiters. Compared to sex workers of other nationalities, Albanian women were seen as the group the most strongly subjected to the power of their protectors and exploiters, as they were followed at a distance even when they were with a customer, and were subject to constant threats addressed both to their own lives and towards their family back in Albania (UNICEF 1998, p. 86). Compared to girls coming from other countries, Albanian sex workers were also seen as being the ones with the highest level of psychological dependence. According to an enquiry made in 1995 by the Department of Social Affairs of the Municipality of Venice, 'the majority of Albanian women left Albania with only a vague idea about the actual purpose of the migration. Their relationship with their exploiters is very complex, as it seems to be tied both to a romantic dream and to a relation of psychological dependence on men. They seem to delegate to the man (the dealer) the necessity of taking care of themselves. Even when they are facing systematic physical or psychological violence, when they are forced to work the streets, they end up by accepting their fate in order not to lose the entitlement to male protection' (Brussa 1996). In all the respects summarised in this quote, Albanian girls were found to be in a more vulnerable, exploited and dependent position than those from other countries.

Whereas the scientific literature and the very few data available on the phenomenon focus on the features and life-histories of trafficked subjects (Campani 2000; Kelly 2002: 42), very little is usually said about the role and conditions of the traffickers and exploiters. According to a World Bank report on Albania which analyses 'the new conditions of social weakness suddenly created by the turmoil in society, which are qualitatively different from poverty', the examination of the process of post-communist transformation in Albania has identified two main conditions of vulnerability: social

exclusion, which marginalises people via the mechanism of rejection from mainstream society; and gender abuse which marginalises women via the threat and use of violence (World Bank 1999, pp. 1-2). According to the same research, at least 25 per cent of young men aged between 18 and 25 years of age would be engaged in criminal activities (World Bank 1999: 20). At highest risk of being attracted to the possibility of making fast money through trafficking human beings and weapons are uneducated and unemployed young men in the peri-urban areas of coastal cities and the capital and in the mountainous interior. In these areas the state is less able to control criminal activity, because the well-established 'defensive suzerainties' controlling local 'manipulative resources' (Humphrey 1991: 10) and traffickable goods (mainly drugs, people and weapons) have a robust control over the use of force.

As far as Romania is concerned, Romanian and Moldovan girls substituted Albanian girls after the phenomenon became more known within Albania and the 'traditional' patriarchal figures of protection (fathers/brothers) became more aware of the risks incurred by their migrating sisters and daughters<sup>4</sup>. In his study 'Who is the next victim?' (2004), the Romanian sociologist Sebastian Lăzăroiu equally contextualises Romanian girls' involvement in trafficking within the fluidity of the moral and economic scenario which followed the communist period and within the wider phenomenon of migration. In this perspective, the victims of trafficking could be considered as 'social innovators' (Lăzăroiu, 2004: 21), who took more risks than others in responding to a transforming socio-economic environment within which migrating abroad became a widespread livelihood strategy. Lăzăroiu (2004: 22-23) argues that compared with other migrants, girls who are victims of trafficking are 'more independent, rather open to experiments, and willing to accept uncertainty and risk'. (...) They do not feel close to their family and they do not believe that the family is the most important thing in one's life. They do not value education as a means to succeed and (...) have a high propensity to break rules'.

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<sup>4</sup> A more comprehensive analysis of the development of international sex work and human trafficking in Albania can be found in: Arsovska J. (2006) 'Albanian crime laid bare: the development of Albanian organised crime groups in the Balkans', *Systematic Transnational Crime, Jane's Intelligence Review*, 19(2), 36-40.

Could the observations made about 'trafficked women' also refer to men involved in the arrangement and management of international sex work? In what way are these young men equally challenging and reproducing established gender and authority roles by working as agents in the international sex industry? Interviews undertaken in early post-communist times showed that Albanian men involved in the management of international sex work simply considered the women working for them, whether they were their wives, fiancées or relatives their own private property and business. Most of them failed to understand why the police should be interested in their private economic activities at all (Ballauri 1997). This could be because their re-adaptation of established patriarchal roles and values in a context in which democracy and capitalism are understood as a world of luxury 'without rules' fully authorised them to dispose of 'their' women as sources of income for the accumulation of their own capital. However, the process of post-communist transformation has since then brought about a higher degree of ambivalence towards established gender and authority roles, which was exacerbated in the context of international out-migration. Given the extent of these transformations, trafficking, coercion and exploitation should be considered as one re-traditionalised and individualised modality to understand and manage gender and authority roles in the context of international sex work, rather than the only one.

These last observations are particularly relevant for this research, as later post-communist times were characterised by a transformation of international sex work towards less exploitative and more consensual practices (Leman and Janssen 2008). These transformations coincided with a tendency to renegotiate the work relation between working women and their male agents within the terms of a romantic relationship. Altogether, these changes brought about new sets of vulnerabilities and resiliences which call for a less Manichean interpretation of the subjectivities implicated in international sex work and of their ambivalent and complex relations. As we will explain in the conclusive section, the acceptance of these ambivalences and of the possibility of voluntary engagement in international sex work, also under the management of a man, should inform new initiatives of social intervention. These should not be restricted to people corresponding to 'trafficking' profiles or engaged in extreme cases of abuse and



coercion, but should address more diffused forms of psycho-social vulnerability and resilience.

Overall, the research shows that violence and coercion are no longer the prevailing techniques used by young men to manage their sex working partners and that women engaged in international sex work are much more likely to do so voluntarily than in the past. This is a consequence of:

- processes of individualization taking place in the societies of origin;
- the transformation of gendered values and sexual mores amongst young people; and
- the introduction of anti-trafficking legislation in Italy and in other EU countries allowing women to denounce their work and romantic partners if they feel they are being exploited.

This pilot research constitutes a first attempt to analyse the specific psycho-social trajectories of men involved in the arrangement and management of international sex work. In the next section of the report, we will engage with the research evidence and with the context outlined above to produce a complex picture of their specific socio-economic and cultural trajectories.

## **ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH FINDINGS**

### **Socio-economic and educational profile of interviewees: focus on structural factors**

As far as the economic dimension is concerned, the majority of the young men interviewed came from 'relatively marginalised' families, whose economic arrangements were particularly destabilized by the collapse of the communist state-command economy. Their life trajectories and those of their parents were deeply affected by these transformations and by the consequent transformation of established forms of authority that accompanied the post-communist phase. The consequences of the collapse of the communist economic infrastructure on young men's life trajectories is particularly evident when they compare their working lives with those of their parents, who could rely on secure employment in communist times.

My father used to be a policeman and mother a housewife. Now they own a fruit stand at the market and they own a new house, which they bought through a mortgage. (Albanian, not in detention, in Albania)

My mother and my mother used to work at the town hall (Albanian, in detention, in Albania)

Both my mother and my mother were working in the State oil plant (Albanian, in detention, in Albania)

The devaluation of education and the fragmentation of school provision and attendance accompanying these processes are also important factors, as many interviewees, and particularly those managing international sex work predominantly through the use of violence, had a poor educational achievement record. In many cases, interviewees had decided to abandon their studies, under the pressure of the fascination with a high consumption and high cash lifestyle which could only be achieved by prioritizing 'making money' in the short term over a longer term investment in education. The following quote from the interview with a young man from a small city in northern Albania shows these dynamics at work.

I liked school, but then I started to smoke cigarettes...and all of my mates were gambling... So, I started taking money from my parents until I got in trouble with them... This is how it all started, I then had to leave home and school. I got a driving license instead. My parents did not agree with me... They kept asking 'Why did you leave school? And I told them 'I did not leave school, school actually left me! (laugh). (Albanian, not in detention, in Albania).

There is a clear relation between the level of education, the consequent ability to challenge patriarchal values and traditional gender divisions, the technique of sex work management adopted and the degree of success in achieving the desired economic target without having problems with the law. While we will address this interplay more specifically in subsection 4.3, here it is important to underline how the majority of interviewees with less than 8 years of schooling had resorted to violence as a way to manage sex work, whereas those with more years of schooling were more able to manage sex work in the context of a romantic relationship. As a consequence, the level of schooling of detained interviewees was significantly lower than that of those who had never been detained.

Another important general factor is age, as most interviewees were first involved in the arrangement and management of international sex work between the age of 19 and 20. In many cases, interviewees defined their participation in management of sex work as a 'childhood mistake'.

You need to take into account that I was only 19 when I got into trouble, I consider it a childhood mistake. (Albanian, in detention, in Albania)

I left for Italy when I was a kid... I was 18 and she was 17... We met in 1996... (Albanian, in detention, in Albania)

Perhaps, the most important conclusion from this analysis of the structural factors is the relative ordinariness of the socio-economic and educational profile of most young interviewees, except for the lower degree of schooling, when compared to the average population. In the post-communist context, most families in Albania and in Romania had to reinvent their livelihoods in a radically changed socio-economic context. These observations highlight the social rather than the individual nature of the phenomenon.

As the following subsection will analyse in more details, it was the visibility of peers managing international sex work in the neighbourhood of origin and the normalization of sex work management in the youth culture of specific neighbourhoods that made that possibility visible and acceptable. In some cases, the family background of interviewees was relatively privileged, rather than disadvantaged and peer pressure played a greater role than survival in interviewees' life choices at the time:

My mother completed 12 years (of school) and is a housewife now, she used to be a secretary before. My father completed 10 years of school and was a builder... My family was seen as a lucky family because both of my parents work... That was the main difference back in the neighbourhood, having a job or not having a job... I completed 8 years, I wanted to become a welder but then they (the police) got me for theft and I ended up in a re-education centre until I was 15. I did not do anything in particular, everybody was doing it... We used to steal biscuits, money, sweets... Once, I still remember, we were all at school and this friend came with 500 Lei... We all went: how come you have money?! 'I stole them', he said. And we said: 'we want it too!' So we left home and with the money we bought lots of sweets and cigarettes. Then one day a friend of mine came back from Italy, he had great clothes and he told me: 'why don't you come with me...?' We left together, it was 2004 (Romanian, not in detention, in Italy).

Particularly interviewees who were not detained, which also tended to have better education, seem to be motivated by the desire to maintain a relatively privileged status for their families, rather than by poverty, as the following two excerpts show.

My parents used to work for the state, which was a great thing, as they had a job and they were not forced to go and work in a factory in another city... And I worked in a factory, which was also quite lucky... I went to one of the best schools of my city...and I almost completed the university. (...) In Romania you need a lot of money to live...not only to survive but to prove it to people. Sometimes your life is shit, but from the outside they see you as somebody who is doing well. You always have to prove to somebody that you are doing well... My family is ok, they don't depend on me or anything, but we managed to send enough money to refurbish their house and to start building a new one for ourselves... (Romanian, not detained, in Italy)

My mother and father were ok, they had a food stall at the market, which now became a supermarket, thanks to the money I sent them. They were always respected in the neighbourhood as they were allowing family to pay in installments for food... When I used to see those young people, my same age, working in the countryside, I felt lucky... At least my parents were selling vegetables, we did not have to pick them and sell them to a shop like they did. And now my parents are respected also

because of me... Because I started helping people go to Italy, when I was very young. They used to come to my place in their dirty underwear... Through me they got the chance to change their lives. I helped many people and now everyone respects me and my family. So when I was a young boy I used to live from my family's reputation, while now they live from mine. (Albanian, not detained, in Italy)

## **Entry into international sex work**

The possibility of managing international sex work established itself as an informal practice through which many young men achieved early psychological and economic autonomy from the family and were able to negotiate a position of 'success' within their peer group at home. The exposure to a 'fast cash' peer culture in the neighbourhood of origin is the factor most interviewees mention as the main reasons behind their involvement in the management of sex work. Many referred to the existence of a 'making money' male subculture revolving around expensive venues (bars and clubs) and casinos within which it is possible to talk openly about the management of sex work (particularly in Albania) and to show its economic advantages.

I left school to be with my friends from the neighbourhood... I started smoking...drinking and going out and about. That was it, really. I was the only one still in school... And I liked the life they led... Some of them were respected in the neighbourhood... They had great cars and clothes... They were doing what they wanted... They were streetwise kids, gangsters... (Albanian, not in detention, in Albania)

There are so many young men working with women... It is competition that pushes them... I used to have a small bar...which we opened with my family with the money we did abroad... And we were struggling to make ends meet... Then you see them coming home with a wonderful car, good clothes, lots of money... And they come from the same place you are from... So you feel less than them and ask yourself: 'what have they got that I don't have? Is he better than me?' And you start doing it as well... (Albanian, in detention, in Albania)

Besides the key role played by peer pressure, the material gathered in interviews also highlights the existence of a variety of entry points into the management of sex work, ranging from: being born within a family network already engaging with the business; recruiting women in the country of origin; and considering the possibility once in the

country of emigration. The following quote exemplifies a combination of some of these prevailing possibilities.

I joined my family in Italy when I was a kid. After I finished school in Italy I tried to work as a builder, with my father...but it was a very hard work... And I was undocumented, I was always dirty. So I began to do other things for a living... I used to tell my father that I was going to work, but while I was at work I met a group of Italians that were involved in these things. And they told me: 'why are you gardening? You are young, why don't you do something for your future...' At that time I had very little money, I was always stuck in the place with my parents, like a dog...with no money. Then I started going out with them. They used to ask me to drive these women around...and that is all I did until I went to Greece to be with my uncle. Initially I started working with the other guys at the workshop, until one day he took me to [place] and I felt uneasy as I did not want him to pay for me all the time. It was then he said he had plans for me and took me to a warehouse where there were 16 women... I was shocked; I had not even imagined this until then. He told me pick one and go... And so I did... (Albanian, in detention, in Italy).

In many cases, the management of sex work was chosen as a strategy of economic self-advancement alongside and after a string of regular jobs, with the hope of complementing the low wages available to undocumented migrants with the high income available through the management of sex work, as the following quote shows.

I thought I was going to get paid more in Italy and to be treated better... They beat me up a couple of times...for no reason. In the beginning I worked with my friend, on the beach...I used to get 30€ per day plus tips... But I used to steal shoes and sell them to others... I used to send all the money to Romania... I used to earn 500€ working and 2000€ stealing. I wanted to buy a house for me, to be independent, and to open a shop... But I ended up sleeping rough with two friends of mine for a month and decided to go home... I started working as a builder, with my father, but then this friend of mine who was working with girls kept telling me: I earn much more than you...the girls works and you live together...you will buy a house together, you will earn 5,000€ each month... (Romanian, in detention, in Italy)

### **Work arrangements and relations: gender, sexuality and love.**

The research findings confirm previous research (Salt 1997; Leman and Janssens 2008) underlining the 'amateurish' and informal small scale dimension of Albanians' involvement in the management of sex work. These considerations apply also to the Romanian cases investigated in the context of the research. However, one should keep

in mind that we were only able to interview people working at the lower end of a bigger phenomenon, which could be characterised by a higher degree of organization. The only exceptions to this general finding were the two interviewees who were born into families involved in illegal activities. In both of these cases, the scale of operation of the family-based system is much wider, encompassing drugs as well as managing sex work. In this wider context, the two interviewees were being trained up to become part of the management structure of the network. The following quote refers to one of these two cases and also introduces the main topic of this subsection, which will focus on the relations between men and women involved in sex work.

My cousin...I don't really want to work with him...he has a different style... He is very bad and... But really bad... He has... You know... Lots of women and drugs and... But not like me you understand... Like... Very bad and he told me: 'Ok, I get you to Belgium, but you... You have to sweat your own arse... I only help you to get there, but don't let me down... It is your responsibility...' (Albanian, not in detention, in Rome)

We interviewed young men who resorted to different ways to manage sex work, from outright violence to the manipulation of romantic relations. Interviewees with lower levels of schooling, those who started working in the management of sex work in early post-communist times and/or interviewees from areas characterised by a particularly conservative patriarchal ideology (for instance Northern Albania) tended to rely on violence and coercion to manage women. Only three interviewees openly reported having been involved in situations matching the trafficking paradigm, whereby the woman is unaware or unwilling to sell sex and is forced to so in various ways.

In the majority of cases, and particularly in Albania, detained interviewees tended to explain, by denying or minimizing, their specific involvement in the management of sex work, by resorting to three main discourses. The first, which we might call 'the fragmentation discourse', enabled the interviewee to present himself as completely innocent, by focusing on his involvement in a fragment of a wider plan of actions actually fitting the trafficking paradigm. Typically, when resorting to the 'fragmentation discourse', the interviewee claims that he was only doing a favour to a friend, either by accompanying his wife or fiancée from one city to another or providing them with

accommodation. In the process, the friend is blamed for any wrongdoing; while the interviewee presents himself as 'only helping a friend' and as having been 'caught up' in a trafficking dynamic 'by chance'. The second discourse, which we might call the 'I only helped her' discourse, emphasizes the agency of women involved, by claiming that they were willing to sell sex and that the interviewee was only facilitating them in getting what they wanted, in exchange of money. The third discourse, which we might call the 'jealousy fit' discourse, displaces the focus from the economic dimension of the interviewee's involvement in the management of sex work, by claiming that the woman who denounced them did so prompted by jealousy, as a way to avenge having been left behind and/or betrayed emotionally. All of these three discourses were further corroborated by a fourth broader one, which we might call the 'corruption discourse', which is used to de-legitimise the judiciary and the police, particularly in Albania, and to emphasise the willingness to sell sex of the women accusing them. Typically, the 'corruption discourse' describes magistrates and policemen as unjustly accusing interviewees and forcing women to denounce their friends and lovers in order to extort money and advance their careers.

The main challenge in interpreting these discursive practices is that they could not be analysed against the grain of the judiciary evidence, which was not accessible to the research. This lack of information was partially complemented, in Albania, with informal conversations with the judiciary personnel of the jail, which allowed us to access the public sentences of some interviewees as well as information about the kind of evidence informing the cases. Another important source of complementary information were the interviews, both in jail and outside, in which respondents decided to talk openly about their own lives and to comment on the reticence from the part of many interviewees to talk more openly. Often, the most important source of information emerging from the interviews were the gaps and contradictions emerging from the interviews themselves, particularly around issues of gender roles and the way these informed the relations between men and women involved in international sex work. By analyzing all interviews in the light of these contradictions and complementarities we were able to form a complex picture of the arrangements and relations characterising the international



management of sex work. We will provide an analysis of two interlinked key aspects of this complexity below.

The first aspect of complexity refers to the cultural construction of gender roles and of the related sexual activities. In most interviewees' accounts, the main symbolic opposition differentiating potential working partners from potential romantic partners was their unwillingness to sell sex and the fact that they had never sold it.

The difference between a good woman and a whore...the good character...a good woman would never work in the street...all the women who work in the street they want to...I mean they are pushed by poverty and the desire of a different...better life... (Albanian, in detention, in Albania)

In a few limited cases, which seemed to reproduce more closely the trafficking paradigm, this was held to be true even when interviewees admitted that they forced the young woman to sell sex.

The difference between whores and good women is that whores sold sex... That they would do it...  
-Yes, but in the cases you presented before it seems like they were not really free to choose, I mean, who chose?  
I did, I tried to see which girls would do better on the job, whether they were beautiful, and then I chose, but still they did it, so they were whores. (Albanian, not in detention, in Albania)

According to this very typical patriarchal Madonna/whore symbolic dichotomy only virgin 'good' girls are worthy of being loved, whereas non virgin 'bad' girls are only good 'to have fun with'. This symbolic dichotomy also has direct sexual and lifestyle implications, as the kind of sexual practices and lifestyles which are deemed appropriate to share with a good girl are much more restricted than those which can be enjoyed in the company of a 'bad girl'. For example, going clubbing, taking drugs or oral intercourse would be activities that would be seen as completely unacceptable to share with a 'good girl', but not with a 'bad girl'. These differentiations put a different light on the cultural and social significance of the engagement in the management of international sex work, which can be seen as a strategy through which many young men navigate between

very contradictory sets of needs, pressures and expectations. In the process, complex affective and economic arrangements are negotiated with good girls at home and with bad girls abroad, characterised by the reproduction and challenging of the boundaries and dichotomies sketched out above. Within this contradictory situation, it can happen that people transgress established discourses and practices and end up by loving (and wanting to marry) the 'whore' and by disrespecting the 'wife', as the following excerpt shows.

While I was working in Italy I used to see many girls that were earning between 400 and 1000€ each day... While I was really struggling to survive, with a regular job. Which is why at some stage I said, 'I will do it too!' One day, while I was coming back from work, I saw a 16 year old girl on the street, you could tell she had nowhere to go. She started doing this job after six months, she wanted money too and decided to do it... In the beginning I only wanted to help her, then the situation developed gradually and we agreed to share the money in half. I used to love her and I think she loved me too. It was different with her...compared to my wife back at home... The sex...and the rest...the jokes...we used to drink together...it was great fun... I was also tempted to marry her, but only the thought of my family stopped me. (Albanian, detained in Albania)

From this last excerpt and from the cultural and discursive repertoire reviewed above it emerges how trafficking and/or the management of international sex work can be seen as social and cultural practices through which young men negotiate a individualised lifestyle within a cultural, economic and social setting characterised by relative poverty, low education and the prevalence of prescriptive, patriarchal and authoritarian gender roles.

Besides the Madonna/whore symbolic opposition, however contradictorily applied, two other main discourses were present, allowing for a range of more fluid and 'in between' positions for women. The first one was the discourse of 'economic survival', which ambivalently (morally) legitimized women deciding to sell sex because of economic necessity. This discourse was usually restricted to women seen as having to sell sex in order to secure the survival for themselves and their families at home. However, its legitimizing effect has also been extended, especially by young men not using violence to manage their female work partners, to women who simply wanted to improve their economic situation.

They were good women, many of them divorced or separated...they were between 27 and 30 years old... Most were working to maintain their children and their families. I remember a Moldavian teacher...when I asked her why she was doing this job, she said: 'it is better so...I earn a lot of money, for my children. What else could I do?' (Albanian, detained in Albania).

With the exception of the few people who admitted recurring to violence, all interviewees underlined a change in women's attitude towards working in the sex industry in the last ten years. Whereas in the past it was rare to encounter women available and willing to sell sex, this was now presented as the prevalent scenario both in Albania and in Romania. In particular, many interviewees presented themselves as having accepted to help young women who wanted to work in the sex industry and as having greatly contributed to the improvement of their economic situation.

I helped her as a friend, I did not ask her money...only to give me back the money I had given her for the trip. Maybe in the future I would have asked her to give me half, but not at that stage, when they arrested her...and me. And it was not with that end that I decided to help her. I did not want to get myself into this kind of things, but she had already escaped from home and got in trouble with guys in Albania. She kept calling me in Greece, asking me to help her find a job there, and she was clear about what she would have gone to do, as she had already worked as a prostitute in Albania. (Albanian, in detention, in Albania).

I met her in Albania, she was not doing well...her family...they were all poor; if it weren't for me they would still be eating raw fish. They were really not doing well. She had 3 younger sisters, so basically thanks to me... I could save 6 lives. I met her and I brought her to Italy. She knew what she was going to do, we were in agreement from the very beginning, I did not lie to her. (Albanian, non detained, in Rome)

These observations should be analysed keeping in mind that managing sex work is very stigmatized and that emphasising the agency of women implicitly de-responsibilises men managing them. However, these observations are also in line with recent analyses of the evolution of international sex work and trafficking, which emphasise the higher degree of awareness and agency of women involved in trafficking (Leman and Janssen 2008; Davies 2009).

The second interrelated aspect of complexity refers to the nature of affective relations and economic arrangements between the women and men involved in international sex work, which also impacts on the management techniques used. These aspects greatly influence the life trajectories of interviewees. More specifically, all interviewees who had actually resorted to violence to manage women selling sex were denounced by their partners and subsequently convicted. On the other hand, all of the interviewees who were not or had not been convicted referred to having predominantly worked only with a girl at the time and described the main nature of the relation as romantic. The economic and romantic dimensions appeared to be inextricably merged in non-convicted men's accounts of the relations with their work partners, whom they often described as their girlfriends. In these cases recourse to violence happened on a relatively low scale and was presented as part of 'normal' relations of love and affection. In a few cases, recourse to violence was sometimes seen as necessary to corroborate in the female partner the feeling of being cared about and loved. The following long excerpt is an example of the complex way in which solidarity, love, need and sexuality characterize the relations between men managing international sex work and their female working partners.

I have to save money for when I go to Albania... It is now three years since I have last been... I must have at least 5,000 Euro when I go back there, you understand? What do I do...ask my father 30 Euro to go out with my friends after all of these years in Italy? What do you think? I go there to have fun...not to look poor...cousins, relatives, a present to grandma, one to my parents, to my sister... Also...I want to treat my friends well... I want to go places... I told R. that she can come too. We make 5,000 Euro and then she can come and meet my family... You know, she wants to marry me... But I don't want to...I swear she is crazy about me... She is very generous... She works in the streets all night and then wants me to take the money... It was more her than me to start this game... She says she needs a man in her life and it is true that we have a good time together... When she has money we go out, take cocaine, eat in the best restaurants of Rome, you know. We take the most expensive things on the menu, we get drunk, and who gives a fuck... Everybody is kind to you, when you have the money... She is a very good girl... We have been together for a while, when I have I give, when she does she gives...it is a bit like this. She is afraid of nothing...got her pictures out on an ad magazine, she is making a lot of money... I am there when she picks up the phone, you should see how she speaks to them and how many people phone. Sometimes when they start fucking around or insulting her, she hands the phone over to me. I

tell them to come here and tell it to my face, if they have the courage...  
(Albanian, not in detention, in Italy)

In other cases, 'romantic love' was presented in less ambivalent terms: as a strategy of control of their female work partners. In these circumstances interviewees presented themselves as rational and calculating agents, carefully following different phases in order to secure the loyalty of their partners, from the initial 'falling in love' to the consolidation of the relationship into a fully formed couple. However, some of these 'managed' relationships lasted for years and led to marriage, while the instrumental nature of this romantic commitment was sometimes in apparent contradiction with the specific aspects of the relationship and of the power relations embedded in it. Although many interviewees accepted to talk openly about their relations with their female work partners described these techniques as part of their presentation as 'men in control', the degree of instrumentality and control which emerges from these interviews is very inconsistent. In many cases men seemed to be torn between contradictory masculine roles and sets of expectations, such as the honest and adult migrant providing for the wife at home, and the mischievous young man having fun with his girlfriends abroad. When asked to compare the relationships they had with their wives with those they had with their girlfriends and working partners, the following answers emerged:

I have two relationships in this moment, one with the woman with whom I work and another with a woman from my country, whom I am going to marry. I love them both, the only difference is that one woman is helping the other to be better, economically. One woman is my lover, with whom I make money, the other is my future wife, who is happier than me? With the woman from my country I build my family, while with the other I build my future for me, for her and for her future family. (...) When I met her (the lover) I really liked her... She told a friend we have in common that she was looking for somebody to take her to Italy, and I took her. Now I am very fond of her, like a sister who helps me, well, we actually help each other. Of course I have to fuck her as it is part of the job, to show her I love her, but the truth is that I am really fond of her, here we feel free, if one night we want to go out to have a good time, we do it, she does not go to work, we get out and get drunk, we dance and then go home to fuck, like a normal couple. (Albanian, not in detention, in Italy).

I mean, with her (his working partner) it was very different, we could laugh...like with a man. We could smoke, get drunk... And she was very attractive, very sexy... The sex and the company were better with her than with my wife... When you are 21 you have other things on your mind... I used to treat her badly, with words, because a Romanian

woman never leaves you...because they say that a man can fuck a hundred women but a woman only one, otherwise she is a whore.  
(Romanian, in detention, in Italy).

Besides the use of physical violence, the other key difference between men interviewed in jail and those who had never been detained refers to the economic arrangements they had with the women they managed. In general, when the woman is able to keep 50% of her earning and is allowed to have free time and a social life with or without her 'agent/partner', relations do not conduce to denunciation or to a feeling of being exploited on the part of the woman. In a few cases, the perception of being exploited economically is enmeshed with the perception of being subject to emotional disloyalty in the context of a romantic relation, as different romantic arrangements carry with them different economic ones.

My mistake was that I lied to her. I should have told her that I was married and offered her the 50/50 deal. Instead I became greedy and led her to think we were going to marry, so that she would give me all the money. I still remember when she found out about it, that I was married, from a friend. She came up to me and told me 'you are going to pay for this'. Then came the denunciation, it was not about the money, it was because I lied to her. (Romanian, in detention, In Italy)

As it emerges from this last interview excerpt, the fiancée status involves a merging of economic profits which a less binding relationship does not. Therefore fiancées who found out about other girlfriends/sex workers wanted half of the money back and usually also took revenge by denouncing their lover and agent to the police as a 'trafficker'. When the original agreement (whether as a fiancée or as a girlfriend/partner) was kept, the situation did not evolve into a conflictive state conducing to a denunciation.

In two cases, men managing other women were also selling sex themselves. The relations between men selling sex and the women they managed were framed and experienced as a romance by both subjects involved. The synergy between different forms of gender and sexuality-based stigmatisations and marginalisations underpinned both cases, in which young female sex workers rejected by (or running away from) their families received protection and support from male sex workers. In turn, the formation of alliances and relationships with female sex workers allowed male sex workers to survive

as masculine subjects. 'Being with a woman' enabled them to achieve the necessary economic and symbolic capital to perform their heterosexual masculine selves to themselves and in front of their two main 'relevant audiences': the peer group and the family<sup>5</sup>.

As far as relations with their families of origin were concerned, in almost all of the cases families were presented as either unaware of what the interviewee was doing or as having refused all contacts with him (including the possibility of receiving economic support), when they knew he was involved in the management of sex work. This appeared to be the cause of great suffering for most interviewees.

When my father got to know I was here he did not come to visit me for years and refused talking to me on the phone. I hope he will be able to forgive me and that I will be able to return home after this. But he can not accept what I have done. (Romanian, in detention, in Italy)

My father and mother they don't want to know about me... Just think that my father used to be a policeman and...I see red when I see a uniform... They don't even want my money, nothing to do with me. Only my brother comes and drinks a coffee with me every now and then... (Albanian, not in detention, in Albania)

Finally, almost all interviewees were 'married with children', which highlights once more the scenario of contradictory and ambivalent family-centred (hetero)normativity within which the management of international sex work takes place, as it emerges from existing research (Levenkron 2007).

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<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the cultural construction of masculinity of Albanian and Romanian male sex workers, see Mai 2004.

## **JURIDICAL IMPLICATIONS**

The introduction of anti-trafficking legislation in Italy and in Albania impacted on the interlinked phenomena of international sex work and trafficking in multiple ways. The first and most obvious way is that detained interviewees were all in jail because they were denounced for trafficking and exploitation in Italy or Albania. Secondly, the possibility for women to recur to this instrument transformed the power relations between the women and men involved in the arrangement and management of international sex work. Thirdly, the introduction of these protection measures coincided with a transformation of the management strategies adopted by many interviewees, particularly those who had no previous history of detention. Whereas the first dimension is self explanatory, the second and third deserve further analysis.

The introduction of anti-trafficking regulation allowed many young women to exit relations they came to experience as abusive. However, the research evidence highlights a complex picture, pointing to the potential instrumentalisation of anti-trafficking legislation by different actors involved (women, authorities, NGOs) in the phenomenon. This, we argue, is because the Manichaeian scenario of villains and victims engendered by anti-trafficking legislation does not correspond to the complex of the individual and interpersonal experiences involved in the arrangement and management of international sex work, but only to the 'trafficking' situations marked by lack of consensus on the part of the woman and by violence and coercion on the part of men. However, many interviewees presented a much more fluid situation, in which women often wanted to sell sex abroad and approached young men known to arrange and manage international abroad in order to achieve their goal.

In many cases, interviewees underlined the coercion exerted by the police, the family and authorities in Italy and in Albania in order to get women to sign the denunciation of their work partners. Many detained interviewees insisted on the fact that the women who originally denounced changed their minds afterwards and risked a fine and period of detention if they did. When prompted about alternative motives, besides the desire to



escape violence and exploitation, behind women's decision to denounce their work partners, many interviewees indicated that often women were resentful for having been left behind for a younger woman, which was sometimes more generically described as jealousy. In other cases, interviewees underlined how women agreeing to go to Italy under certain conditions, including sharing their profits with their agents on a 50/50 basis, later changed their minds and were ashamed about their involvement in sex work, which then prompted them to denounce. The following excerpt describes these dynamics at work.

All of the girls working in the street, I mean, they are pushed by poverty and by the desire of a better life. Only 10% is forced... The problem is that once abroad they know other people and see another life...and then they start denouncing... (Albanian, in detention, in Albania)

Finally, in a few cases interviewees explained how anti-trafficking legislation became an instrument women use to emancipate from the control exerted by specific men, rather than to exit sex work as such, as the following quote shows.

You know what the problem is, that the girls have become clever and know that they can denounce if they want. So when they do not like the situation anymore, if they find someone they like more...or if they feel unhappy because they are too old to work and they were left behind, they just ring up the police and start inventing stories, while they were happy to do that when things were going their own way. (Albanian, in detention, in Albania)

The difficulty when interpreting the complex scenario presented by interviewees is that it contradicts the interpretations and explanations usually given to these inconsistencies within the trafficking paradigm and its exclusive focus on the exploitation and victimization of women involved in international sex work. For instance, women changing their mind after the first denunciation are dismissed by Albanian and Italian authorities because they are seen as acting under the threat of their detained exploiter. According to the same logic, interviewees' emphasis on the fact that women voluntarily chose to sell sex abroad and contacted them in order to do so could be dismissed as a strategy minimizing their involvement in violence and coercion. However, could not the arguments presented by 'traffickers' be meaningful in the context of international sex

work? Would not they fit with the ambivalences and complexity of their relationships to the women working with/for them? Moreover, this logic of interpretation is not inherently less biased than the logic of anti-trafficking, which offers women involved in international sex work only the position of absolute victims in order to avoid repatriation as an undocumented migrant (in Italy) and/or stigmatization and criminalisation (in Albania) as a prostitute.

In the current situation a young undocumented woman selling sex in Italy has no real alternative but to denounce her male working partner when faced with the possibility of repatriation. Admitting to her consent to sell sex, thus facing stigma and repatriation, does not seem to be a real choice, when compared with the possibility of denying her consent and denouncing the people who enabled her to sell sex abroad in exchange of assistance and immigration documentation. These dynamics are enforced by the hegemony of trafficking as the only paradigm for the understanding of men and women's involvement in international sex work. Within the moralized and polarized field instituted by the trafficking paradigm, only some 'victimising' explanations appear plausible, because they confirm the moral (and financial) economy of the trafficking paradigm and of its social intervention apparatus.

Against the Manichean world of victims and exploiters produced by the anti-trafficking paradigm, our research material shows a much more fluid and ambivalent world. For instance, although the majority of detained interviewees lost trace of the girls who had denounced them, a few were still in contact with them and maintained friendly relations because they believed that the girls were forced to denounce them by the police, as the following two excerpts show.

After 15 days, the Greek police stormed the flat and found the girl. As she had no paper, she is repatriated to Albania... They knew she had worked (as a prostitute) in Albania and they immediately asked her who got here to work in Greece. She said she had wanted to do this herself; that I had only helped her, but then the police started telling her that if she did not denounce me she would have had to spend three years in prison for prostitution... On the denunciation they said that everything took place through violence...that I had trafficked to Greece. She did not read because she was frightened and she signed. I was in Albania too, in

the same police station and I could see the signs on her face, that they had beaten her to make her sign. (Albanian, in detention, in Albania).

One night there was a police bust-up and the girls were arrested and taken to Tirana. They took them to the college...a place where they always take girls...and they brainwashed them... They forced her to say that she had been forced by me to sell sex and as a result I ended up here... I do not hold a grudge against her, because I know she was forced, we are still talking through friends and over the phone. (Albanian, in detention in Albania)

These considerations are not meant to deny the existence of trafficking or to underestimate the degree of violence experienced by many trafficked women. On the contrary, they aim at contextualizing international sex work and trafficking within a wider framework of migration, social transformation and socio-cultural change which can provide better explanations for the behaviours of the people involved. In many instances, young women which are repatriated after having denounced their exploiters in Italy and later choose to go back to Italy and sell sex with another man are considered to be 're-trafficked'. However, other explanations could be plausible: that the young woman decided to go back to Italy because she underestimated how much she got used to be free from family control and earn more money in Italy; that by going back to Italy she wants to escape from her family and neighbourhood where she is stigmatised as a prostitute; or that she is disappointed by the support offered by the post-repatriation package, which she thought was going to be in cash rather than in services<sup>6</sup>. These explanations should not be considered as necessarily alternative to, but rather as complementing the trafficking paradigm, which often risks addressing people according to its own, rather than their own, categories and needs.

Acknowledging the possibility of a voluntary participation on the part of women might help explaining the way in which the introduction of anti-trafficking protection measures coincided with a transformation of the management strategies adopted by many interviewees, particularly those who had no previous history of detention. The many histories of denunciation and incarceration of many young men managing international

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<sup>6</sup> These possibilities were mentioned by people working for programmes assisting the psycho-social integration of victims of trafficking in Romania (Mai 2008: 83-85). Available online: <http://www.savethechildren.it/2003/download/pubblicazioni/ODCMailingcorr2.pdf>

sex work through violence and coercion in previous years encouraged new generations to adopt different relationships with their working partners. These are now characterised by a prevalence of seduction over coercion and are embedded within the context of a romantic relationship. The fear of denunciation is not the only factor behind these changes, which were also made possible by the transformation of gendered roles and values. As a consequence, as we mentioned in the preceding section, the lines between manipulation and genuine commitment are becoming increasingly fluid, for both the young men and the women involved. The following excerpt shows how as a consequence of 'having seen the world' contemporary young agents of international sex work are able to experience different relations with their working partners, with whom they can fall in love as well as keep a professional relation.

My friend is still married with this girl, even if she denounced him and worked as a prostitute... He knows she was forced to sign the denunciation... And also, there are many people here (in jail) that were or still are married to them (women who sell/sold sex). Many people saw the world and changed their mind about these things... And nowadays girls come by themselves, it is not as before. (Albanian, in detention, in Albania).

At the same time, the fear of denunciation fostered the development of different techniques of management of international sex work, based on team work and a greater degree of autonomy for the female working partners (Leman and Janssen 2008). For instance, nowadays the actual agent never visits his working partner in the street where she works, but delegates control and protection to other members of the groups, in order not to be exposed personally in case of police surveillance. At the same time, this system presupposes a high degree of autonomy on the part of girls, who are also required to change the money they earn each night before going back home to their agents/partners, in order for the notes not to be traceable in case of a police operation. The following account shows some of these logistical techniques at work and also how they can only be viable if the female working partner is satisfied about the economic and affective terms of the relationship.

I mean, I think nowadays it is impossible to do this work with violence... There are controls everywhere and it can only work if the girl is happy

and trusts you. I am at home all day waiting for her to come back from work. She needs to be treated like a queen, because she has to go there alone, get the money, exchange them and bring them back to me. If she is not happy with me, if I beat her up, she can just go to the police and report me. This is why, when she is tired, I suggest she does not go to work the following day, or if she needs clothes, we take some time together to buy them.

A third important implication of the findings of the research refers to the issue of the existence of corruption within judiciary institutions, especially in the countries of origin. Almost all of the interviewees who were detained in Albania mentioned that they were blatantly offered to pay money, by lawyers and judges, in exchange of a substantial reduction of their detention time. On the one hand, as we have already mentioned, these claims are part of a wider strategy of de-responsibilisation on the part of detained interviewees, together with the emphasis given to women's voluntary choice to sell sex. On the other, the existence of widespread practices of corruption amongst the judiciary in Albania is well documented. For instance, according to the 'Albania State of the Nation 2003 Report'<sup>7</sup>, prepared by the established International Crisis Group organisation,

...although the political climate is calmer, and stability has been restored to most of the country, grave social and economic problems could become tomorrow's political problems if left un-addressed. Albania's institutions are weakened and the reform process greatly hindered by endemic corruption and an inefficient public administration. Other negative factors include an increase in organised crime, a weak judiciary, high unemployment, low production, severe environmental problems, and an ongoing energy crisis. The government shows no signs of seriously tackling corruption or backing down in its confrontational stance with the media.

The results of these assessments are reiterated in later editions of the European Commission's annual progress report (the last one for Albania was published in November 2007<sup>8</sup>) and in the US State Department's Human Rights Report 2008 (for 2007), according to which corruption and resource scarcity in the judiciary as well as police corruption, unprofessional behaviour and impunity remained problems:

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<sup>7</sup> Available online: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=1472>

<sup>8</sup> Commission of the European Communities (CEC), *Albania 2007 Progress Report*, Brussels 6/11/2007, available at [http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key\\_documents/2007/nov/albania\\_progress\\_reports\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2007/nov/albania_progress_reports_en.pdf).

The overall performance of law enforcement remained weak. Unprofessional behavior and corruption remained major impediments to the development of an effective civilian police force. Low salaries and widespread corruption throughout society made the police corruption difficult to combat. The government prosecuted corrupt officials and managed complaints regarding corrupt police through the ombudsman.... The constitution provides for an independent judiciary; however, political pressure, intimidation, widespread corruption, and limited resources sometimes prevented the judiciary from functioning independently and efficiently.<sup>9</sup>

These observations were corroborated by the findings of the research. As was mentioned above, most interviewees reported having been offered money in exchange of a reduction in the period of detention.

They asked me 7 million Lek to lower it to 5 years, but I did not have any money... (Albanian, in detention, in Albania)

Moreover, the only person who actually admitted to trafficking three girls managed to pay substantial amounts of money and got away with considerably shorter sentences, as the following quote shows:

I have been in jail three times, for three different girls... Each time I was offered to pay and I paid. To have a reduction (...). Usually they can get you out for lack of evidence, but it is very expensive. I had to pay 60,000€ to reduce a 15 years sentence to 18 months...but it was worth it, you only live once! (Albanian, not in detention, in Albania)

The interview and ethnographic material gathered in the context of the research shows that as a result of corruption, of the introduction of anti-trafficking legislation, and of the transformation of management techniques away from violence and coercion, currently detained interviewees were those who did not have the financial capital to bribe the juridical apparatus, nor the socio-cultural capital to operate outside the logics of physical violence and coercion. Many detained interviewees seemed to be aware of these differentiations and protested that people who had been involved in criminal activities to a higher extent than they had been and with the necessary financial resources and political liaisons, were never going to be accounted for by the law. As a result of the

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<sup>9</sup> US State Department *Human Rights Report: Albania – 2007* (March 11, 2008), op. cit., see annex III.

combination of these dynamics, very few detainees had faith in juridical or state institutions in Albania, while a few openly declared that they would try and imitate their more 'seductive' and 'team-working' younger colleagues, once they were released.

Well, what can I say...? Maybe when I get out of here I will stop and get away from all of this. I had enough. But maybe I will try and do it better, in a smarter way, like the big shots making lots of money. They have maybe ten girls and never get caught. They have the money to pay good lawyers and get out of trouble. Maybe I will try it with a girl that wants to do it for sure. I don't know really, but it is true that only unlucky people end up here, the big ones are out there enjoying their money.  
(Romanian, in detention, in Italy)

A final juridical implication of the findings of this research points to the difficulty in maintaining secrecy and anonymity regarding the location of shelters for victims as well as the whereabouts of victims when they live in the wider society. In a few cases detained interviewees were able to follow the girls' post-denunciation trajectories quite closely while they were moved between shelters which were supposed to be safe and secret. These considerations offer a critique of the actual viability of reinsertion in conditions of anonymity in Albania and in Romania.

In the next section we will focus on the way the observations outlined in the previous two sections impact on interviewees' expectations and plans for the future.

## **EXIT FROM THE MANAGEMENT OF SEX WORK**

Interviewees' future plans were integral part of their broader self-presentation narratives. Consequently, people who claimed to have been accidentally or tangentially implicated in the facts for which they were detained, tended to frame their hopes and plans for the future in terms of the desire to 'leave it all behind' and conduct more mainstream lifestyles. These trends were not restricted to people who denied having had a proactive role in the arrangement and management of international sex work. Most detained interviewees indicated that they would renounce the lifestyle and economic advantages attached to managing sex work in order to reunite with their spouses and families.

In order to analyse interviewees' ideas about their future in their full relevance, we need to take into consideration a wider set of social and cultural dynamics, which we can refer to as the proliferation of individualized and non family-centred lifestyles in the post-communist period. This was characterized by an accelerated process of individualization, which led many young men and women to seek and find alternative gender roles and models of personhood to those historically hegemonic in Albania and Romania. Thus, across the post-communist transition, a plurality of 'modernised' lifestyles emerged alongside and often in sharp contrast to the family-centred ones offered by tradition (Mai 2005). The possibility of accommodating the contradictions emerging between these different sets of aspirations and priorities was not the same for all the social strata of Albanian and Romanian societies, because the acceptance of the moral implications of individualized lifestyles implies a critical attitude towards the patriarchal values and male honour underpinning traditional gender roles. This critical stance requires a social, economic and cultural capital which was not equally available to all young men and women in Albania and Romania. In this respect, the recourse to international sex work can be seen as a social and cultural practice through which many young men and women challenged and reproduced hegemonic gender roles in the name of the aspiration to a better lifestyle in terms of individual self-expression and economic autonomy.



It only within its embeddedness within these wider socio-cultural and economic processes that the appeal of international sex work can be understood in its full complexity. In fact international sex work can be seen as a 'fractal space' (Gal and Kligman 2000; Roman 2007: 128-29) through which relatively marginalized young people negotiated alternative sexual, gendered and economic positionalities, through bodily rather than discursive practices (Mai 2007). For many young men, engaging in the arrangement and management of international sex work becomes integral part of a lifestyle allowing them to maintain a hyper masculine and domineering subject position in a context shaped by the rapid transformation of established gendered roles and figures of authority. Thus, 'making money' through the management of female sex workers becomes a lifestyle in itself, allowing young men to present themselves as powerful 'gangster' figures, to obtain and maintain 'social respect' in a context in which their masculine status and role are increasingly under pressure from socio-economic and cultural changes. The following quote shows some of these dynamics at work.

How do I call my job... 'money'... This is how I call my job 'to make money'... Then...I mean...I always liked the idea of the gangster... Of somebody who is respected and known by everyone... Who has a good life...and takes no shit from nobody.  
(Albanian, not in detention, in Tirana).

These dynamics are very important when analysing interviewees' future plans and possibilities as their identities are embedded in lifestyles and subcultures that are underpinned by the maintenance of a powerful and 'respectful' masculine role through the engagement in the international management of sex work. As a consequence, in a few cases, young men, as the quote on page 36 shows, openly admitted to planning to return to the international management of sex work, after having learnt a lesson on how to manage their work partners and their work in order not to be denounced.

The material gathered in the context of this research showed that the arrangement and management of international sex work became a lifestyle and a survival practice for many young men in many relatively marginalised areas of Albania. The following two

quotes show the way this practice can become normalized and widespread within specific peer groups.

Yes, I mean, it is the main thing young men and women do here... It is a very poor neighbourhood, there is no work at all. So it is quite easy to think you can do it too, when everyone else is doing it. It becomes sort of normal. But I hated it, it is not for me, I am very lucky to have found this job now. (Albanian, not in detention, in Albania)

Of course I was not the only one... I mean, you need to know one thing... Here, all the people who were able to build something which is not...how can I put it...which is not basic, like a good restaurant of...a good car...and a nice house...that is how they did it!  
- But I cannot believe that everyone is doing it, come on...  
Not everyone, but many more than you will ever know, I think at least 35% of the young people I knew in my neighbourhood started working with women... (Albanian, not in detention, in Albania)

These observations, as we have already mentioned in section 4, highlight the relevance of the social dimension in the development of the phenomenon under examination. In this respect, alternatives to the involvement in illegal activities can only be viable if they are disseminated and sustainable economically, socially and culturally.

## **FOCUS ON PSYCHOLOGICAL DYNAMICS: A FEW FIRST WORKING HYPOTHESES**

Keeping in mind the important limits posed by the fact that the interviewees' psychological dimension could only be addressed in the context of non repeated semi-structured interviews, it is possible to outline here a few key dynamics, which should be explored more in detail in future inter-disciplinary research. In this respect, the most important finding of the research is the normalization of the 'profile' of young men managing international sex work, which highlights once more the centrality of the social dimension in its development. This does not mean that there is no aspect of potential vulnerability in the profiles of young men managing international sex work, but that the main dimension of this vulnerability is social, rather than psychological. In fact, the normalization of the relations and profiles involved in international sex work can be seen as a consequence of the commodification of youth culture and of the heightened socio-economic fragility of young men and women from Albania and Romania, many of which see international sex work as the only way to achieve social 'respect', mobility and autonomy.

Recent times, as we mentioned in section 4, have seen the prevalence of consensual practices and arrangements, which corresponded to the re-framing of the management/work relation within the context of a romantic relationship and to a re-negotiation of the power balance in favour of women selling sex. The contextualization of the working relationship within a romantic setting can be seen as allowing both parties to sublimate the moral and existential implications of engaging in international sex work in terms of normality. As far as the development of the working relationship is concerned, this is more often than not the outcome of the encounter between two migratory projects, rather than of the manipulation of female vulnerability by male strength. As women play an increasingly central role in migration flows, under the pressure of the feminization of migration (Sassen 2002), men managing international sex work can be seen as acting as 'moral brokers' of women's aspiration to social mobility in social patriarchal settings. In other words, women need their managing

partners in order to obtain both the moral legitimization of their social viability as 'good girls' - by presenting themselves as married, engaged or 'with a boyfriend' - and to be able to work as 'bad girls'. In this respect, the function of the agent is not only to offer protection and logistical support, but to sanction the moral and affective viability of his working partner by framing their relationship according to socially acceptable notions and practices of 'love'.

Because of the gap between young people's values, expectations and aspirations and those which are established in their places of origin, the (love) relationship between the agent and the sex worker can become the emotional and economic script allowing them to detach from home. In the process, the gender dynamics underpinning their society of origin are both challenged and reproduced, as agents are positioned in masculine powerful terms, while women occupy a more subaltern and depending relation. However, as was particularly evident in the case of men selling sex who are also agents, men also depend on women for their social legitimation and for their economic survival. In this concern, as we mentioned already in section 4, the narrative of omnipotent domination and manipulation deployed by male interviewees can be seen as wanting to recast in omnipotent terms affective and economic relations which are marked by a very high degree of ambivalence. For instance, the following excerpt from the only interview we were able to undertake with a woman who is both selling sex and managing other girls, shows the way the relationship between worker and agent can be an alliance between two subjectivities informed by very similar socio-cultural and economic constraints and priorities, as well as by different gender roles and culturally sanctioned entitlements to mobility.

Well, we both come from bad families...I mean, nothing special, but we had to do lots of things we did not want to do... a shitty life really...I left because the place I come from is disgusting, there is nothing and the mentality is old. If you want to have fun you have to become somebody's whore, otherwise they force you to marry and set up a family, so you become old instantly. There is nothing, parents always go on about how it used to be worse, but why should I focus on the worst when I want the best? It is for the best that I came to Italy, everyone was saying that here it was better, that one way or another it was possible to 'make money', and so when I met him and saw that he was 'making money'...I decided to come... (Romanian woman, in Italy)

This last excerpt shows how, overall, ambivalence is the most relevant and recurring psycho-social dimension emerging from the research evidence. This is reflected in the way in which international sex work agents describe their relationship with their working partners in terms both of genuine attachment and shrewd manipulation, as we have seen in section 4, and in the way they describe, more rarely, their relations to their fathers. These are often presented as distant figures of authority and attachment, but very seldom of support and advice. In most cases, parents, including fathers, are receivers, rather than providers, of economic and moral support. The picture one gathers is one in which young men are caught between the non-sustainability of the previous moral, cultural and economic order, the necessity to prove their worth to their parents, and the desire to both challenge and reproduce a established values and roles, with specific reference to established models of masculinity in terms of 'power' and 'success'. In this respect, the impression one forms when listening to the histories of migration and involvement in sex work we gathered is that it is the social rather than the psychological circumstances that influence the development of each individual trajectory. The following two quotes are amongst the few which openly express feelings of ambivalence regarding parents.

My father...he was a policeman... A man following rules, even back then. (...) I still speak with my mother over the phone, when he is not home, but he does not want to have anything to do with me... He does not talk to me nor does he accept my money. (...) My brother is very different from me, he is like my father, whereas I have always hated uniforms.  
(Albanian, not in detention, in Albania).

My father was cold and detached, when he punished me he transformed himself from my friend to my worst enemy'.  
(Romanian, not in detention, in Italy)

More in general, fathers are represented as the legitimizing authority interviewees have to prove something to, or, more often, forgiven by, rather than sources of guidance and support. On the other hand mothers are usually represented as more present and forgiving, but also as less relevant regarding the moral legitimation of the successful transition to adulthood. Although this division of parental and psychological roles within the family is very common in most patriarchal socio-cultural settings, the specific picture

one gathers is one of loneliness, disorientation and conditionality, in which young men feel that they can gain (self)worth and respect only by negotiating a hyper-successful 'gangster' status. In other words, the necessity to negotiate a powerful position of privilege can be seen as corresponding in inversely proportional terms to a self-perception in terms of worthlessness, inadequacy and powerlessness. In this respect, most interviewees seemed to be caught between the ambivalent aspiration to and the rejection of a traditional masculine 'successful' role and the imperative of success in order to achieve social worth and recognition. The following excerpt shows the way the necessity to prove oneself to others in terms of economic success and privilege 'at home' is seen as a key factor behind the migration of many young men and women.

To live in Romania nowadays you need money...you do not really need money to live, but to prove to others that you are better than them...sometimes you live like shit but outside people think you are ok... I mean you have to do anything you can to prove at all costs that you are privileged. For example, look at me, I am full of gold and so is my girlfriend. Look at Romanian women or girls, they are always full of gold because they need to prove to somebody that they are doing well. Romanians do not migrate for a real need because there is no real poverty there. We are not rich but we are also not starving. The problem is this always having to prove something, to people and also at home, to your family, they expect fucking everything from you and when you go out you need to be able to show that you can afford fashionable things, otherwise you are not worth a fucking thing. (Romanian, not in detention, in Italy)

The necessity of appearing to be privileged at all costs can be seen as the result of a socio-cultural and economic situation of heightened transformation, in which people feel worthless, inferior and inadequate because of the loss of the previous order and status. In this shared general context, young men and women who decide to engage in international sex work can be seen as particularly vulnerable to the internalization of these self-perceptions, which are engendered socially and rooted in each interviewees' individual history. On the other hand, they can also be seen as particularly resilient, as they tried to challenge these self-perceptions by migrating and looking for chances of self-improvement abroad, rather than enduring them at home. These ambivalent dynamics and tensions are the main psycho-social platform shared by all young men

involved in international sex work and should be the main focus of concern for social intervention.

## CONCLUSIONS

Given the pilot and explorative nature of this research, the main aim of this final conclusive section is to summarise the arguments and observations outlined in the report and to indicate future directions for a fully developed research.

The Albanian and Romanian post-communist transformations were accompanied on the one hand by the rejection, together with the communist ideology, of values and practices related to a collective ethical dimension, and on the other hand by the absence of a coherent and alternative system of knowledge and an uninformed idealisation of the West, associated with a universe of material plenty and luxury. As a consequence, post-communist societies experienced a very high degree of socially engendered ambivalence regarding old and new socio-cultural, moral and economic values and priorities. Young people, who found themselves asserting their identities at a time of such heightened social transformation, were particularly affected by the ambivalent tension between the desire to conform to expensive and individualised late modern lifestyles, the duties enforced by the imperatives of family survival and reproduction, and the enduring hegemony of patriarchal and conservative values at home. One of the outcomes of these contradictory social dynamics was a 're-traditionalisation', a reinvention of some strategic aspects of the traditional cultural heritage in order to serve new ends, corresponding to the emerging social needs of new social identities (Schwandner-Sievers 2000, p. 256). These emerged in reaction against the world of hardship and violence provided by the communist state and in relation to the access to the world of material superiority which became potentially available through migration and other means after the collapse of the isolationism and repression that had characterised life under communism.

The phenomenon of international sex work is a social dynamic that can be seen as emerging at the encounter between young men and women who found themselves in a condition of relative socio-economic and cultural vulnerability during the process of post-communist transformation. Young men who are involved in the management of



international sex work can be seen as characterised by a specific experience of the fusion of traditional models, the socio-economic and cultural uncertainties and opportunities created by transition and the weakness of the state in enforcing the law. The reactive rejection of traditional values of honesty and morality (because of their association with the communist heritage and the experience of inequality and corruption at home), the lack of economic opportunities and the corruption of state officials motivate many young men, who have very low expectations for their economic futures and very little faith in the state's ability to solve their problems, to see criminal behaviour as a positive way to help themselves and their families. In most cases, the decline of parental authority, the fragmentation and polarization of the economic scenario and the cultural construction of democracy as a place without prescriptive rules and where luxury could be attained easily constituted a fertile ground for the emergence of criminal behaviour.

Today, in Albania and Romania, there are families, shaken by economic transformations and bewildered by the evaporation of a moral and ethical order, who can, with varying degrees of awareness, end up by trading their daughters for money and closing their eyes regarding their son's involvement in criminal activities. There are young girls who want to break free from the submission and violence they experience at home and/or they want a better future from themselves, stimulated by the world of emancipation, freedom and wealth they see on foreign television channels and by the histories of success of their migrant peers. There are groups of young men, under pressure from the necessity to maintain 'social respect' in the form of a powerful masculine self-image, who are directly involved in the smuggling of drugs, weapons and people into neighbouring countries. On the one hand, young men and women involved in international sex work, as we highlighted in the last section, can be seen as particularly vulnerable to internalising, rather than resisting, the socio-cultural and economic contradictions and ambivalences of the context they grew up in. On the other hand, they can also be seen as particularly resilient, as they are able to own these contradictions and ambivalences and use them to their own

advantage, in order to lead the lifestyles they aspire to starting from the socio-cultural and economic resources they have access to.

The material gathered in the context of this pilot study indicates a transformation of the mix of vulnerability and resilience characterising the psycho-social trajectories of young men involved in the arrangement and management of international sex work. On the one hand, the increased globalisation of individualised and 'hedonistic' youth lifestyles, the transformation of gender identities and the establishment of international sex work as a normalised socio-cultural and economic formation make voluntary practices relatively more acceptable for men and women. As we have seen, this coincided with a shift away from a prevalence of violence, deceit and coercion in the management of the international sex work in early post-communist times, towards a re-embedding of the working relation in the context of a relatively more equal romantic and economic relationship. On the other hand, the normalisation of international sex work these shifts entail can be seen as expression of a more diffused psycho-social vulnerability, characterised by an increased relevance of exteriority as a measure of self-worth, by the increased polarisation between social classes, and by the ambivalent endurance of patriarchal and conservative gender roles and models of authority.

These observations are full of implications for the world of social intervention, with particular reference to anti-trafficking initiatives. These seem to be tailored only to fight and respond to the early post-communist situation, which was marked by extreme forms of abuse and violence, rather than to the individualised, diffused and ambivalent situations characterising contemporary experiences of international sex work. The unilateral portrayal of international sex work as a world of male perpetrators and female victims is the expression of 'politics of compassion', which risk becoming even more obsolete and inefficient, as they legitimise social support in terms of suffering, victimhood and vulnerability (Fassin 2005; Tiktin 2006) which do not correspond to the experiences of the people involved.

Contrary to the Manichean and victimising representation embedded into the trafficking paradigm, the material gathered in this research shows that women use the possibilities available to them to pursue their migratory and life projects. These include the services offered by men working as agents in the international sex industry and the anti-trafficking measures available to them when they face deportation by the police or when relations with their agent deteriorate or are perceived as exploitative. The main problem of the trafficking paradigm is that it dramatically underestimates the possibility of voluntary engagement in sex work under the protection of or in co-operation with an agent. As a consequence, the ambivalence and complexity, but also the simplicity, of the relations between the women and men involved in international sex work are often interpreted in unilaterally pathologising ways and lost. For instance, the concept of 're-trafficked' is often used to describe the desire of repatriated women to return to sell sex abroad. In a similar way, the concept of the 'Stockholm syndrome', referring to a situation in which a hostage shows signs of loyalty to the hostage-taker, has often been used to explain the relationship between a 'victim' and her 'trafficker', particularly when she decides to co-operate in the recruitment of other girls selling sex. However, this can simply be seen as a career move for the subjects involved. Notions such as 're-trafficking' and the 'Stockholm syndrome' are consistent with a social intervention paradigm that would be delegitimated by the possibility of voluntary engagement in sex work under the management of another person and that evokes scenarios of false consciousness to defend its *raison d'être*.

The aim of these considerations is not to minimize the ways in which social and psychological vulnerability can be implicated in and exacerbated by international sex work. The research evidence we gathered encourages a re-definition of the priorities of social intervention in order to respond to the complexity and ambivalence of the dynamics, challenges and transformations outlined above. Paradoxically, in order to respond more efficiently to the vulnerable component of the vulnerability/resilience mix of young men (and women) managing international sex work, their resilient aspects need to be recognized and catered for. Initiatives of social intervention should stop imposing pre-digested notions of freedom and consent , in order to be able to

respond to intrinsically ambivalent situations. On the contrary, their work should take on and work with these ambivalent relationships and dynamics in order to increase the aspects of resilience over those of vulnerability within the psycho-social trajectories of the men and women involved in international sex work, whether they want to change their lives or keep working in the sex industry.

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