



Bodies in Exile

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ABSTRACT

In this text, I focus on the exiles of Ukrainian women who are forced to work as sex workers in Sweden.

KEYWORDS

Ukrainian sex workers, Sweden, refugee, exile, trafficking of women, racism



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BODIES IN EXILE

"P4 Malmöhus recently reported on an alarming increase in the number of Ukrainian refugees being exploited in prostitution. Ukrainian women now make up the single largest group of women who are exploited in prostitution among those the Equality Authority has become aware of."

After reading the passage above and several other texts in various newspapers about how Ukrainian women prostitute themselves in massage parlors and on yacht trips, articles with sensational details, I began to think about the experience of exile. The tragic issue of people fleeing Ukraine has revealed a variety of stories, told both as personal accounts and as collective experiences.

While the word *exile* is used as a more stylish term befitting the upper classes and intellectuals who are allotted their own personal space for reflections on *critical* issues in life, the word *refugee* tends to suggest pity for a group leaving their homeland. Exile implies political and intellectual contexts and a sense of individuality, while refugee brings the mind to a humanitarian context and a sense of collectiveness. However, the refugee and the exile still share one important characteristic: being forced to leave the homeland in fear of greater danger. Thus, their experience of the past remains the same.

Here I use the word exile to refer to the universal condition of involuntarily leaving one's own country, thus, to refer to the positioning of bodies in exile.

In most cases of exile, the body is the only thing that people can take with them in the exile process. Therefore, when everything else that the person once was and had suddenly becomes abstracted and left behind, *the body* becomes central. The refugee body in transit is often described as *damaged and wounded*, something that is instrumentalized, measured, and evaluated by the institutions that receive it.

A human being in a state of exile constantly vacillates between frailty and vulnerability but also proves to be powerful and lifesaving. Those who need to get somewhere safe become surprisingly strong in the will to survive. They hike endless terrains and cross borders and territories. They swim mile after mile in the seas without enough food and nourishment. They fight the border police in lands on which they are forbidden to set foot.

In Sweden, the law on prostitution makes it illegal to buy sex but not to sell the use of one's own body for such services. This law enables people in exile to work as sex workers when they cannot support themselves on 71 SEK per day, which is the maximum daily allowance for refugees. On the other hand, we should also discuss who buys sex. As in any trade, it is a question of two different parties.



Feminist writer Audre Lorde argues that because the vast majority of sex worker clients are white cisgender men, it makes black feminists' political history of prostitution complicated. Prostitution is a class, as well as an ethnicity and gender issue, for black people. So, it is in an American context, but it is universal that prostitution is a class, ethnicity, and gender issue. To elaborate a bit, nobody talks about prostitution as a social problem when it happens in the nice rooms.

In any case, the last thing Ukrainian women need when trying to establish themselves in Swedish society is to be marginalized. In addition, as was done in the articles, the prostitution activity is portrayed with explicit details, and the group risks becoming even more of an "object of desire" in the new society. And whether they are forced, or they choose to engage in sex work, why should they be stigmatized? We are talking about individuals who have all possible educations, skills, professions, and life experiences. Portraying a group as victims and only victims devalues their individuality – this is all the more the case when the issue is to do directly with our bodies, and when it is prostitution-as-sex-work.

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