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Narratives of Agency: Sex Work in Indonesia's Borderlands

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“Some people do this kind of work because they are forced to, but others do it because they want to live the high life,” said Lia earnestly, responding to a question about the prevalence of trafficking in the sex industry on Karimun, an island on the western edge of the Riau Archipelago in Indonesia.¹ An extremely attractive young woman in her mid-twenties, Lia is the image of middle-class Indonesian respectability in her modern, loose fitting clothes and bright colored *jilbab* (headscarf) modestly fastened over her head and shoulders. Her comment neatly sums up the dichotomous thinking that dominates both public and scholarly discussion about sex work in Indonesia.² According to this logic, sex workers are either forced into prostitution by circumstance (including instances of force or deception), or they freely choose to sell their bodies for financial gain.

Lia has lived in Karimun for more than a decade and is familiar with the circumstances that have given rise to a large sex industry on the island and elsewhere in the archipelago. The Riau Islands form the borderland between Singapore and Indonesia, at the periphery of the Indonesian state. The islands have been part of a growth triangle with Singapore and Malaysia since the early 1990s, resulting in large-scale foreign and joint-venture investment in manufacturing, tourism, transport and service industries. An influx of migrant workers to the region, combined with the ease of travel from economically powerful Singapore, has created the conditions for the proliferation of vice industries such as sex work and gambling on many of the islands. The sex industry caters predominantly to men from nearby Singapore (and to a lesser extent Malaysia), and is fuelled by geographical proximity, comparative cost and the relative anonymity afforded by travel to a foreign country (Ford and Lyons 2008). Local islanders always say that sex workers come to the Riau Islands from other parts of Indonesia – from Sumatra, Kalimantan and Sulawesi, but mainly from Java – and this is supported by our research. While some scholars claim that women are trafficked to the Riau Islands following false promises of good jobs in factories or restaurants (Agustinanto 2003: 179), activists from some local NGOs argue that many of the women who end up in the industry have previous experience as sex workers in Jakarta or elsewhere.

Trafficked women attract some sympathy from the local community even as they endure continued public stigmatization. However, both groups are equally shunned, marginalized by a discourse which positions them as both victims and ‘immoral women’ (*wanita tuna susila*, a common term for sex workers). But this does not mean that sex workers conceive of their lives only in oppressed terms. Attention to the local and historical specificities of sex work reveals that normative constructions of sexuality and gender are often partial (cf. Kempadoo 1999). Lia’s appearance and demeanor, in fact, belies her own experience. Her carefully crafted middle-class persona is part of a deliberate strategy designed to distance herself from the stain of her past life as a sex worker. Even when talking with foreign researchers she is initially careful about keeping to a socially approved script that positions her as a good wife and mother who was deceived and then trafficked into prostitution, a situation from which she eventually escapes. Reality, however, is much more complex. Later, Lia’s narrative changes to one of decisiveness and initiative, as she describes the personal qualities that have allowed her to shape her life during and after commercial sex.

Lia’s story – like the stories of many of her former colleagues – demonstrate the choices and constraints that sex workers face as they actively seek alternative lives. Yet each of these stories is as individual as it is similar. Ani has also experienced life in Karimun’s brothels. Like Lia, she is now also a model of middle-class decorum. She too makes careful, strategic decisions about her new life in order to fit the image of a modern housewife. We meet far away from her home in a middle-class residential area of the city, beyond the gaze of prying neighbors. Ani has consciously adjusted her lifestyle to suit her new neighborhood, copying the way her neighbors dress and talk and avoiding any actions that might draw attention to her past. But unlike Lia, in recalling her previous life as a sex worker, Ani frequently invokes a discourse of victimhood and immorality. Her story is nevertheless also a story of agency.

Lia’s and Ani’s narratives raise questions about how we can theorize the “*constrained* choice to become a sex worker, without moralisingly declaring all sex work to be exploitation or violence against women” (Schotten 2005: 230). The latter view is espoused by those writers who, writing from an abolitionist stance, argue that prostitution is the ultimate expression of male dominance and thus the cornerstone of all sexual exploitation (cf. Barry 1996). According to this argument, there is no place for sex workers to claim that their work is *not* harmful or alienating. Such a totalizing perspective provides little space for alternative accounts of the intersection between structure and agency and overlooks the ways in which women themselves understand and explain their life histories. The stories that Lia and Ani, two women who became labor migrants, then sex workers, and finally the wives of ex-clients, tell about their lives demonstrate these complexities and challenge commonsense understandings about women’s agency.³

Married women to labor migrants

Lia and Ani are both ethnic Javanese. They grew up in similar circumstances in very different geographical settings. Ani was born in 1977 in the province of Lampung on the southern tip of Sumatra, while Lia was born two years later in Deli Serdang in the province of North Sumatra. Their parents are poor Javanese peasants who were relocated to Sumatra as part of

Indonesia's transmigration program, under which millions of Indonesians – mostly Javanese and Balinese – were resettled to the less populous "outer islands". Under the objectives of the program, transmigrants were expected to introduce more intensive cultivation techniques and thus boost the nation's food production. However, the land they were allocated often proved unsuitable for these techniques and resulted in environmental degradation and continuing poverty. Unable to secure a livelihood from farm work, large numbers of transmigrants have relied increasingly on nonfarm income. While Lia's parents continue to eke out a living on their small-hold farm, Ani's parents have become petty traders.

Ani married a local man soon after dropping out of junior high school, and immediately became pregnant, giving birth to a son. But Ani's dreams of becoming a wife and mother were short-lived. By the time she was nineteen, she was single again, having left her violent and unfaithful husband. Lia managed to finish junior high school but was unemployed for a time before marrying a man from her village, with whom she had a son in 1999 and a daughter a year later. Her husband died not long after the birth of her daughter, leaving Lia with the difficult task of having to find work to support her two children. When their marriages ended, both women faced an uncertain future. Economically, as single mothers, they faced the prospect of raising their children with no savings and little prospect of deriving a secure income in their villages; and socially, as a *janda* (divorcee or widow), they were the object of community distrust.

The lack of local jobs meant that both women had to look beyond their communities for employment opportunities. After her divorce, Ani left her young son with her mother in Lampung and moved to Jakarta to work in a biscuit factory. It was the first time she had stepped outside her hometown. The work was grueling and life in the factory was highly disciplined. Ani's earnings were much higher than she could have earned in her village, but they were barely enough to meet the cost of living in Jakarta. Nevertheless, she managed to send some money back to her mother to help pay for her son's milk and food. Lia chose a different path. She joined the thousands of Indonesian women who are recruited each year to work overseas as domestic workers. She was employed in Singapore to look after the elderly relative of a Chinese family. In addition to her duties as a care giver, she was expected to clean the house, wash the car and tend the garden. When her six-month bond expired Lia decided to break her contract and return home. Lia's decision to break her contract and return home was not easy. For the entire time she worked in Singapore Lia received no income because all her wages were paid to the employment agent who arranged her travel. But even her more recent experience of sex work has not made her look back more favorably on her time abroad:

I'll never forget what it was like to be a servant in Singapore. It was really hard. If you're just five minutes late they totally lose it. There's absolutely no time to rest. It's exhausting ... I never want to do that kind of work again.

Nothing was worse, Lia believed, than the total lack of control she had as a domestic worker.

Labor migrants to sex workers

Ani's and Lia's experiences as labor migrants in the formal economy provided the conditions for them to undertake another form of labor migration – this time into the informal sector as sex workers in the Riau Islands. Their experiences of entering the sex industry represent two ends of the spectrum. Ani was tricked into the sex industry by an acquaintance. In late 1997, her neighbor, Ibu Eka, approached her while she was waiting at the Raja Basah bus terminal in Lampung City to return to her job in Jakarta. Ibu Eka suggested that Ani join her in Malaysia where she was working in a factory earning a monthly wage almost fifty times what Ani was getting. The promise of so much money was irresistible and Ani accepted the invitation. But Ani never made it to Malaysia. Ibu Eka brought her to Karimun, supposedly a transit site for the next leg of their journey. Not long after she arrived, Ani was taken to work in a brothel complex which housed around six hundred sex workers. Ani worked there for two years. During that time she never managed to send any money to her family. She explained that “women like her” became trapped in the industry:

The trouble is once you're working here, it's hard to move on. Most sex workers have a really low level of education and their only work experience is in the sex industry. They can't go into [petty] trade because they don't have any capital, and they can't work in the supermarket because they don't meet the educational requirements. ...It's impossible to leave [the brothel] if you're not a good talker, if you don't stand up for yourself. Like me – I wanted to get out but I couldn't. Most of my friends were afraid too. In fact, most people who do that sort of work aren't brave people. I'm not sure what we were all scared of really.

Unlike Ani, Lia was a “good talker”, who could “stand up for herself”. After leaving Singapore Lia returned briefly to her village, but soon decided to go and work in the Riau Islands. She was employed in a small brothel run by a local Malay woman. Lia resented having to share her takings with the Madam, who deducted large amounts of money for food and lodging on top of her 50 percent cut. Eventually Lia decided to leave:

After four months I decided to run away. I was sick of working in a high-risk job without making any money. I figured I'd be better off on my own, finding my own clients and keeping all the money for myself. That's what I was thinking ... She [the Madam] threatened me, you know. She said she'd report me to the police and all that. I said, “I don't care if you report me to the police here. Even if you report me to the police in Jakarta I'm not scared. Prostitution isn't permitted in this world.” That's what I said to her. I might not be very educated, but I know that prostitution is illegal, so I didn't care where she reported me.⁴

Lia had amassed a file containing the contact details of those clients she had liked when working in the brothel, and used this list to establish herself as a freelance sex worker. While she met most of her clients in one of Karimun's numerous hotels, some of her regulars would ask her to meet them in Singapore. These arrangements were mutually beneficial. All Lia's costs were covered and she went home with four times the going rate for an overnight booking in Karimun; meanwhile her clients received 24 hours of service without the annoyance of a ferry trip and at considerably less cost than if they had hired a Singaporean-based sex worker.

Ani and Lia's experiences of sex work initially appear to be quite different. While Ani was sold and trafficked into prostitution, Lia made a conscious decision to travel to the Riau Islands to become a sex worker. They also experienced different degrees of autonomy in negotiating sex work – Ani was bonded to a brothel where the Madam dictated her working conditions, while Lia decided to strike out on her own as a freelancer. Lia's freedom to pick and choose the clients that she 'liked' provided her with more freedom to negotiate the conditions of her work. However, both women were subject to the whims and fancies of their clients and to the inevitable risks of violence and sexually transmitted diseases. While Lia's freelance status provided her with greater financial rewards, she was much more vulnerable to harassment by local authorities and had to work hard to maintain her client base. By contrast, while Ani earned much less than Lia, she had some protection under her contractual arrangement with her Madam.

From sex workers to Batam wives

Ani married her second husband, a fifty-seven-year-old Singaporean Chinese client, just three months after they first met in the brothel where she was working. Before they could marry, Ah Huat paid SGD 2,000⁵ to Ani's Madam to release her debt with the brothel. After their marriage, Ah Huat bought a two-bedroom house for them in Tanjung Balai Karimun, the main city on the island. Ani later brought her parents and child to Karimun to meet her husband and to see her new home:

When my mother first came to visit she cried until she passed out. I was still young you see, and my husband was old. I just said to her – as I told you she doesn't know about my background – I said to her, "Mum, he's the one I'm meant to be with. What's the point of marrying a young man if he treats me badly, he's not responsible, and he doesn't care for my family, especially as I have a child? Yes, he's old, but he takes responsibility for everything, he is caring. And the main thing is that he's responsible. He cares for my child, for you and father, for everyone." She found it so hard to accept because I am still young. That was the problem for her. But eventually she got used to it. She even became fond of my husband.

Ani's son now lives with her in Karimun and her parents have become reconciled to her marriage. She feels safe with her husband because he is so different from her violent first husband. Ah Huat continues to live and work in Singapore but visits Ani regularly and provides her with Rp.4,000,000 housekeeping money per month. He plans to retire to the Islands in a few years and live there permanently with his new wife and her child.⁶

Since her marriage Ani has had the chance to lead a middle-class lifestyle unavailable to all but the well-to-do in Jakarta. She has her own home and motorcycle, sufficient income to buy expensive clothes and food, and has travelled abroad to Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand:

My life's really different. Really different – just so different. I used not to have anything. I couldn't afford to buy anything! Now I can go to Malaysia, to Thailand. I can go anywhere, buy anything. Best of all because my husband loves

me, he gives me anything I ask for...Before I couldn't even buy a dress worth Rp.20,000. I hardly had enough money to buy food.

Ani is no longer the naïve country girl who was tricked into sex work, but a financially savvy woman who makes important decisions about her family's future. This transition has involved careful, strategic decisions about her new life in order to fit the image of a middle-class housewife.

Lia also married a former client, Farid, a Malaysian whose first wife is infertile. Farid has rented a house for Lia in Tanjung Balai Karimun and sends her 1500 Malaysian Ringgit⁷ per month to cover her living costs. Like Ah Huat, he visits regularly but continues to live and work in Malaysia. If he is too busy to come to the Islands, Lia sometimes goes to Malaysia, where they meet in a hotel. Farid's first wife knows he has married again, but the two wives have never met.⁸ Unlike Ani, Lia's decision to marry is not about reconstructing an idealized nuclear family with the children from her previous marriage, who have remained with their grandparents in Deli Serdang. Instead she dreams of establishing a new family with her second husband.

Lia pragmatically acknowledges that women married to nonresident non-Indonesians face a range of problems, not least of which is the threat of being abandoned by their husbands. She believes that women have the power to make or break their relationships with foreigners:

It really depends on us. If we're good to them, they'll be even better to us. But if we're bad, well, that's what happens. Lots of my friends are stuck in the brothels because they have taken money from their Singaporean or Malaysian clients and given it to their boyfriends here. ... Eventually their Singaporean "husbands" dump them, even though those Singaporeans are actually quite nice men. [These women] really overstep the mark. They get a good one, and they go and do that. There are plenty of those. They don't realize that their boyfriends are just using them. They get dumped [by their Singaporean client], the money stops, and then the boyfriend disappears. Then they are all on their own again.

Although Farid has professed a desire for a child, Lia worries that he might abandon her and the baby. If that were to happen, she matter-of-factly asserts that she would go back to freelance sex work to support her children. Her willingness to return to sex work reflects Lia's sense of herself as an independent woman who can make choices about her future, as well as her knowledge that paid sex can be a lucrative form of work.

Unlike Ani, Lia does not profess to be "in love" with her new husband. But, this does not mean that she views her relationship as any less authentic than any other marriage. The concept of a "love marriage" is relatively new in Indonesia, and it is commonly asserted that in an arranged marriage love will grow between the couple (Smith-Hefner 2005; Munir 2002). Although marriage to a foreigner has provided Lia with a more secure economic future, her decision to marry Farid was not solely based on money. She rejected a Singaporean suitor (who could have offered her greater wealth and the chance to live in a

developed country) because of their different religious beliefs and because of the greater autonomy that life as a second wife living alone in Karimun offered her. Like Ani, Lia has modified her behavior and dress to approximate the life of a middle-class housewife and is generally successful in “passing” within the community. Both women acknowledge that their economic and social mobility is a matter of both luck and hard work.

Conclusion

Ani and Lia’s stories throw into sharp relief the false dichotomy between “force” and “choice” in the debate over women’s involvement in sex work. Both women have experienced choice and constraint throughout their lives – as young married women, as single mothers, as labor migrants, as sex workers, and as women married to foreign men. They have exercised agency within the structural bounds of their particular circumstances, and with varying degrees of success, at each life stage. Their marriage to foreigners has catapulted them from their status as poor transmigrants firmly into the lower middle classes, where they are able to consume a lifestyle unattainable for most Indonesian women of their class background. The anonymity afforded by their lives on the outer fringes of the Indonesian nation-state has allowed them to conceal the nature of their involvement in sex work from their families. However, the moral and social sanctions placed on women’s sexuality leave an enduring mark on their lives. While the border zone has provided them with prospects that they wouldn’t have had elsewhere, it also imposes risks and other costs. For women seeking new futures on the border, hard won respectability can all too easily disappear. The physical distance between marriage partners gives the women a high level of autonomy, but leaves them vulnerable should their husbands tire of their commute. And, while their husbands are aware of their “history”, their families and neighbors are not, leaving them constantly fearful that the truth about their social mobility may be discovered.

We are not suggesting that all working-class women (or sex workers) have these same opportunities by virtue of being present in the islands, as class mobility is contingent upon many factors and must be actively and consciously achieved. Ani and Lia have shaped a future for themselves far different from that available to them in the transmigration villages where they grew up; a future in which they have the moral protection of a married status and ample economic resources, while maintaining a level of day-to-day autonomy unimaginable to most Indonesian women. Yet although they have benefited from the fluid nature of class formation and community structures in the borderlands, as former sex workers, Lia and Ani continue to carry the stain of the past with them as they navigate the often treacherous path between structure and agency.

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Notes

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² Wardlow (2004: 1037) reminds us that use of the term *sex work* is "potentially problematic because it assumes particular kinds of subject positions, motivations, and gendered identifications that may not be accurate for all women who exchange sex for money." However, we use it here (in contrast to the alternative "prostitution") in order to draw attention to the criminal and legal dimensions of women's labor. As a discursive strategy it also "opens up a space for the formation of new identities not based on passivity, or sexual exploitation and sexual victimhood" (Sullivan 2003: 78).

³ The stories of Ani and Lia are based on in-depth interviews conducted in August 2006. Pseudonyms are used at the request of the informants.

⁴ Indonesia's national criminal code does not prohibit sex work. It is illegal, however, to participate in the trade of women or underage males; or to earn a profit from the prostitution of women (Sulistyaningsih 2002).

⁵ In 1999, SGD 2,000 was worth approximately USD 1,135.

⁶ The pattern of cross-border marriage described here is not unusual in the Riau Islands and is a reflection of both economic and social imperatives. For further discussion of why couples live on separate sides of the border see Lyons and Ford (2008).

⁷ September 2006, MYR 1,000 = USD 274.

⁸ In Malaysia, Muslim men may marry up to four wives.