

**The 'foreign prostitute' in contemporary Italy:  
gender, sexuality and migration in policy and practice**

A Dissertation Submitted to the Department of Sociology  
in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Doctor in Philosophy

By

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Isabel Crowhurst

## Abstract

This thesis examines discourses, policies and practices underpinning the response to, and governance of, prostitution-related migrations of women in contemporary Italy. It analyzes how Italian socio-political factors, such as national identity construction and political opportunism, and normative values and cultural practices (including historical stigmatization of prostitutes, racialization of the ‘ethnic Other’ and inferiorization of women) contribute to different understandings of, and responses to, the new presence of migrant women operating in the sex industry in Italy.

The study adopts a feminist qualitative research methodology and is primarily based on in-depth interviews and participant observation with a number of diverse third sector organizations that operate in the provision of support services to migrant women in the Italian sex industry, as well as on the investigation of relevant documentary sources.

Taking as one of its focal points the analysis of the legal measure that since 1998 has regulated the provision of assistance to women trafficked for sexual purposes, the thesis explores the strategies enacted by the bodies that are in charge of implementing such regulation and the motivations informing them. Furthermore, the complexity and often controversial meanings attached to the phenomenon of ‘foreign prostitution’ – as it is often described in both public and legal discourse – is explored in relation to discourses invoked in debates initiated in 2002 over the change of the current legislation regulating prostitution in the country. The analysis of these issues shows how dominant historical prejudices against prostitutes and migrants have coalesced in the construction of the image of ‘foreign prostitutes’ who are subjected to a variety of forms of discipline on the basis of gendered, racialized and sexualized identities ascribed to them.

The production and reproduction of socially constructed representations of migrant women who operate in the sex industry in Italy and the political and ideological forces underlying such processes are issues that have received little attention in the literature. In this sense, it is hoped that this research will fill a gap in the existing sociological literature, and allow for a more comprehensive understanding of these issues.

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I presented two earlier versions of chapters of this thesis at the 2003 *Trafficking & Trade: The Impact of Globalization on Women* conference, Denver, Colorado; and 2005 *Gendered Borders* conference, Amsterdam. The papers were later selected for publication, and are referenced in this study when appropriate.

# Introduction

## 1. Presentation, objectives and research questions

In the late 1980s, the emergence of large-scale prostitution-related migrations of women, primarily from economically developing countries to Italy, engendered a profound re-evaluation in the conventional formulation of knowledge about migrant women in the country. Previously, they had been either ignored or identified as non-threatening and submissive. By contrast, migrant prostitutes were now criminalised as dangerous and unsettling ‘Others’, especially after they became prominent in street prostitution. As Bimbi claims, “the visibility and social loudness of *foreign prostitutes* on the streets had the power to catalyse all the fears that had been growing already about the invasion of criminal immigrants” (2001: 13; emphasis added, my translation). The knowledge of these women’s origin, migration patterns and status, and living conditions, remained very imprecise and ambiguous until the first years of the 1990s. Consequently, when the public outcry over the phenomenon of sex trafficking assumed overwhelming proportions in Italy, the new image of migrant women as unknowingly lured into prostitution and forced to live in slavery-like conditions penetrated the mainstream discourse on what had become commonly referred to as ‘foreign prostitution’<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, the other equally popular image of threatening deviancy ascribed to migrant women operating in the Italian sex industry coexisted alongside the opposite victim-like representations.

This thesis examines how Italian socio-political and cultural factors, including collective identity construction and political opportunism, gender(ed) models and behaviours, the historical stigmatization of prostitution, and the racialization and sexualization of migrant women contribute to different understandings, responses and governance of the ‘foreign prostitution’ phenomenon in contemporary Italy.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Foreign prostitution’, in Italian *prostituzione straniera* is almost always adopted to refer to women. On the other hand, ‘foreign prostitutes’, *prostitute straniere*, is feminine, hence it invariably applies to female prostitutes. The gendered assumption that the prostitute person is a woman and the client a man, is reflected in this use of language. As Danna mentions, in fact, the masculine noun *prostituti* should be the universal term for prostitute people, both men and women, but it is rarely applied due to its masculine connotation. This is perceived to be in contrast with the typical representation of prostitutes as women, hence the much preferred and widely adopted feminine term *prostitute* (2004).

The research shows that ‘foreign prostitutes’ are approached either as victims of sex trafficking who need to be assisted and protected, or/and as a threat whose dangerous sexuality and foreignness imperil the unity and integrity of the nation. However, this dichotomy is not always clear-cut, and representations of ‘foreign prostitutes’ as ‘victims and/or predators’ are often juxtaposed (O’Connell Davidson 1998). It is argued that Article 18 of the 1998 Consolidated Act of Immigration – the piece of legislation that contains specific regulations on the provision of protection and support services to victims of trafficking in Italy – plays a crucial role in reinforcing and legitimizing the division between innocent ‘deserving’ victims entitled to protection, and right-less immigrants treated as criminals on the basis of their illegal status and occupation in the stigmatized activity of prostitution. Article 18 and the texts attached to it (including its implementation regulations) characterize ‘deserving victims’ as powerless, helpless and in a state of complete subjection. Thus, the support and protection that is provided under this piece of legislation by its Implementation Agencies (IAs)<sup>2</sup> are made dependent on gendered expectations of how ‘real victims of sex trafficking’ should behave, rather than on the exploitation suffered. As a consequence, if ‘foreign prostitutes’ are not able to demonstrate their ‘victimhood credibility’ by ascribing to a pre-determined gendered ‘victim typology’ they are blamed and punished (mis-treated or expelled) for their ‘non-victim-like-behaviour’.

This study is concerned with unearthing what lies beneath the rhetoric of assistance and protection of victims of trafficking in Italy. It presents a critique of the ways in which the innocent-victim/guilty-criminal divide is produced and reproduced by Article 18, how it informs the provision of support and assistance carried out by its Implementation Agencies, and how it is exploited by the anti-immigration propaganda of leading political parties. Crucially, these aspects are looked at as a manifestation of the broader phenomenon of international migrations whereby gendered, sexed, sexualized and racialized stereotypes and assumptions produced around ‘foreign prostitutes’ in the context of a destination country inform the ways in which these migrant women are approached and treated.

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<sup>2</sup> I formulated the expression ‘Implementation Agencies’ for purposes of simplicity, to refer to those organizations, either governmental or not, that are in charge of the implementation of Article 18 programs of assistance and social integration (see chapter 4). However, there is no such term in the Italian language to describe bodies with this purpose. The choice of the relatively vague word ‘agency’ allows to include under one collective noun organizations that exist in Italy with varying legal statuses; among these are: ecclesiastic bodies recognized by civil law, public charities and assistance institutions, voluntary organizations, social cooperatives, but also public entities such as regional or municipal authorities.

By exploring these aspects, the notion of ‘foreign prostitution’ is identified as symbolic of the complexity of meanings attached to the ways in which female migrants in prostitution are constructed and represented in the Italian context. Its adoption reflects the widespread use of the term ‘foreigner’ in Italian political and public discourses on migration, which indicates a condition of non-belonging and reinforces the Italian/‘Others’ binary upon which most of the modern politics and policies of migration in Italy are based. But the category ‘foreign prostitution’ betokens more than just ‘foreignness’ in that it emphasizes *two* statuses that are both highly demonized in Italy, i.e. being a foreigner/migrant *and* being a prostitute that, coupled together, reinforce each other’s stigma. Moreover, compared to *forced* prostitution or sexual trafficking, *foreign* prostitution does not implicitly evoke any notion of violence or coercion which may raise concerns over protection and assistance. For this reason, and *given* its highly negative connotation, it has been used particularly in anti-immigration discourse. However, *despite* its negative connotation, it is frequently found in scholarly literature (see Bimbi 2001, quoted above), legal texts and policy documents (governmental or not) and more generally, in common language to designate migrant women who operate in the Italian sex industry. In light of these considerations, my main research questions are:

- What accounts for the social construction of the phenomenon of ‘foreign prostitution’ in contemporary Italy?
- To what extent competing representations of ‘foreign prostitutes’ as either powerless victims or as threatening and socially dangerous individuals inform the response to migrant women in prostitution in Italy?
- How is the victim/guilty dichotomy legitimized by Article 18? How does it affect its implementation by IAs, and how do they negotiate this divide on a daily basis? What other factors influence and determine the typology of responses enacted by IAs?

In order to answer these questions a plurality of perspectives were collected in the course of desk-based and ethnographic research informed by a feminist qualitative methodology. More specifically, in-depth interviews and participant observation were conducted with a number of diverse Implementation Agencies, selected on the basis of the purpose they give to their support services vis-à-vis their stance on prostitution and sex trafficking. By interviewing and observing the daily activities of people operating in

IAs, I gained a better understanding of the typologies of interventions offered, their motivations, and the relationships established with the target group. Furthermore, as further elaborated in chapter 2, I operated in the hope that once having established trust with these respondents I would be put in contact with migrant prostitutes and conduct interviews with them as well. At the initial stages of my fieldwork, however, I took the decision not to interview the latter, even after meeting and spending time with them in the shelters of IAs. This choice was motivated by my ethical concern not to impact negatively upon the already vulnerable conditions of these women, given my position as researcher in this context. The realistic appraisal of this limitation led me to focus my research on the hierarchical power relationship between migrant prostitutes and the staff of IAs, who almost always based their daily exchanges with these women on the assumption that they are sexually dangerous and racially inferior. Hence, while the perspectives and experiences of migrant women in prostitution are not included here, it is hoped that by critically investigating the ways in which they are consistently treated as ‘Others’ – even when they are supposedly benefiting from support and assistance – this study will make a significant contribution in bringing to light and challenging the dominant prejudices that contribute to keeping these women in conditions of vulnerability.

## **2. Some further clarifications about definitions adopted in the study**

In order to understand the complexity of the phenomenon under study here, it is important to define and explain the meanings of key terms and concepts adopted throughout the thesis.

First of all, as already evinced from the introduction above, this research focuses almost exclusively on the female dimension of ‘foreign prostitution’. This is partly due to the fact that it is women who are encompassed within the notion of ‘foreign prostitution’ (see footnote 1), and because both men and children’s prostitution-related migrations are different also in the way they are socially represented and treated by the law. Unless specified, by ‘women’ in this study I refer to biologically-at-birth females. In many instances, transsexual migrant biologically-at-birth males would consider themselves



women, or have been through a sex change operation. This distinction is again necessary due to the different dynamics of their migration and social representations.

Secondly, the term migration is used in this study in its original, non-normative meaning: “the movement of a person or people from one country, locality, place of residence, etc., to settle in another” (Oxford English Dictionary 2007). In this semantic realm, migration does not imply voluntariness or coercion, but includes both and other possibilities.

Thirdly, in this study I will present different ways in which prostitution is conceptualized by various individuals and institutions, and the extent to which each distinct construction plays a part in attributing different meanings to the notion of ‘foreign prostitution’. In chapter 1, I discuss dominant and contrasting paradigms generated by scholarly literature: ‘prostitution as exploitation’ and ‘prostitution as sex-work’. Both are important for an understanding of the ways migrant prostitution has been approached in academia and beyond it, for example in legal discourses and social practices. Hence, while this thesis is primarily about the ways in which female prostitution is conceptualized by others in a migration context, it is important to specify that in my approach to the study, I rely on the work of O’Connell Davidson in which prostitution is defined as an institution,

that allows clients to secure temporarily certain powers of sexual command over prostitutes. [...It] is an institution which founders upon the existence of economic and political conditions that compel people to act in ways in which they would not otherwise choose to act.

(1998: 3, 4)

Apart from ‘foreign prostitution’ and ‘foreign prostitutes’ which I adopt, not as my personal terminological choice, but to indicate the social constructed category utilized in the Italian context (hence in quote marks), there are a number of other terms that I use to indicate migrant women operating in the sex industry and the phenomenon of which they are a part. These include: migrant prostitutes, migrant women in prostitution, prostitution-related migrations or, female sex migrations. These terms serve the purpose of defining women whose migration dynamics are affected by their involvement in prostitution, and the phenomenon of migrations of women where the engagement in prostitution, again, plays an important part. However, it is relevant to note that these categories and terminologies would not necessarily be the ones chosen by the

women involved. They do not always want to stress the prostitution component of their migration, and would – at least the ones I talked to in the course of my fieldwork – rather call themselves simply migrants.

Another clarification is needed on the significance of sex trafficking, which – as with prostitution – assumes different meanings depending on the perspective of who adopts it. As it is further explored in chapter 1, some commentators, including Barry (1981; 1995), Jeffreys (1997), Hughes (2000a; 2000b) and the international NGO CATW, the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, argue that all migrant women who operate in the sex industry are trafficked victims of sexual slavery, based on the assumption that prostitution is always sexual exploitation. Others claim that sex trafficking, as defined in international Protocols, is an ill-defined concept that draws the attention away from the root-causes of exploitation, violence and coercion of migrant workers (Sullivan 2003; Kempadoo, Sanghera at al 2005; O’Connell Davidson 2006). From this perspective, sex trafficking is also seen as a conceptual means used by nation-states to tighten border controls and justify tougher immigration laws (Andriasevic 2003; Berman 2005). Another position maintains that the category of ‘victim of sex trafficking’ always implies the existence of its contrary, the ‘non-victim’, thus leading inevitably to a spurious innocent/guilty distinction (Bindman and Doezema 1997, Doezema 1998; Chapkis 2003, et al). Yet another approach is maintained by NGOs such as Anti-Slavery International that equal sex trafficking to slavery and refer to the very specific set of human rights abuses that this entail. A major problem identified by those who support this position is that states set the threshold of victimhood too high, thus failing to meet their obligations under agreed international Conventions and Protocols (O’Connell Davidson 2006).

As mentioned earlier, the critique of the notion of sex trafficking adopted by Article 18, and its reliance on a gendered victim typology is one of the central concerns of this study. My approach is informed by some of the perspectives mentioned above (Andriasevic 2003, Berman 2005; Kempadoo, Sanghera at al 2005; O’Connell Davidson 2006). However, contrary to the suggestions brought forward by some of these authors, I do not believe that abandoning the concept of trafficking altogether would work any better, or to the advantage of those who are exploited. I believe that sex trafficking, defined as the trade and exploitation of sexual labour under conditions of coercion and force (Kempadoo, Sanghera at al 2005), can be a useful working definition. However, I

acknowledge that this can only be possible if an agreement is reached on what constitutes exploitative conditions in sex labour, thus putting an end to the stereotypical portrayals of 'victims' that keep underlying legal and political approaches to sex trafficking.

Lastly, before proceeding to the next section, it is relevant to note here the use, in the Italian language, of two terms, *tratta* (literally: trade) and *traffico* (literally: trafficking), that are often adopted interchangeably despite the fact that they appear to indicate two very distinct phenomena in governmental documentation. *Tratta* (literally: trade) is used in the latter to define what English documents and protocols refer to as trafficking, whereas *traffico* (literally: trafficking) is adopted to refer to smuggling. As Virgilio points out the confusion between *tratta* and *traffico* is still persistent and pervasive in both scholarly literature and in official juridical documents thus limiting the possibilities for a comprehensive understanding of each (2002).

### 3. Thesis overview

This thesis is structured in three main sections. Following this introduction, Part I comprises the theoretical and methodological chapters, 1 and 2. Chapter 3 constitutes the second part of the thesis and sets the scene for the more specific discussion of the empirical data-based chapters that constitute part III (chapters 4, 5, 6). The final section concludes the thesis.

**Chapter 1** critically discusses theories and perspectives that are relevant to this research. I begin with an overview of the literature on gender and migration, and highlight its tendency to look at prostitution-related migrations with a focus on sex trafficking. This is often conceptualized as a form of modern-day slavery, which overlooks the analysis of this phenomenon as a migration issue. The second part addresses feminist debates around prostitution and trafficking and the ways they have influenced current understandings of female sex migrations. Finally, the presentation of more recent approaches that underscore the migration perspective in studies of migrant prostitution lays the ground for a discussion of the analytical perspective adopted in this study.

As discussed in **Chapter 2**, this thesis adopts a feminist qualitative research methodology in order to carry out a thorough investigation into the complexity of the

processes under analysis. In this chapter I explore the methodology informing this study, the research process and its developments, the collection of data, the qualitative methods utilized, the ways in which the data have been analysed, and further self-reflections on critical findings in the course of my fieldwork.

In part II, **Chapter 3** contextualizes and historicizes the issues under study by presenting an overview of a) migration patterns to Italy, b) the responses developed towards the increasing migrant population, c) legislation on, and approaches to, prostitution, and d) the first arrivals of migrant prostitutes.

Part III explores the production of discourses on ‘foreign prostitution’ in key sites, including the legal system and political arena, and investigates how they inform the system of support enacted to provide support to ‘foreign prostitutes’. **Chapter 4** explores the efforts (both successful and unsuccessful) made at the political level to pass legislation that addresses their presence. Here, I also investigate the context and contents of Article 18, and discuss political discourses on ‘foreign prostitution’ and how this phenomenon has been used to promote the politics of ‘social order’ and anti-immigration propaganda. This analysis is carried out in relation to a proposal made in 2002 to change the current law on prostitution, the motivations underlying it, and the debate that followed over the presence of ‘foreign prostitutes’.

**Chapter 5** takes a detailed look at the activities carried out by the Implementation Agencies that enforce Article 18. In addition, I also take into consideration other organizations that provide support to ‘foreign prostitutes’ independently from Article 18 programs of assistance. I explore in particular the discourses underpinning the activities and services they deliver in relation to their understanding of the phenomena of prostitution and sex trafficking. For many organizations that consider prostitution as exploitation (mainly religious-based), the services provided are viewed as part of a ‘rehabilitation itinerary’ during which all migrant women who have engaged in prostitution – often referred to as ‘sex slaves’ – are offered the opportunity to change their lives and shape it according to a more ‘proper’ and ‘moral’ behaviour. For those who consider prostitution as a consenting activity between adults, trafficking is seen as a distinct phenomenon involving violence and exploitation. Their intervention in the distinct areas of prostitution and trafficking is formulated as part of an ‘empowerment strategy’, aimed at reinforcing women’s self-

determination and autonomy, and leaving to the women contacted the choice to abandon or continue their activities in the sex industry.

In **Chapter 6** I address the production and reproduction of sexualized and racialized representations of ‘foreign prostitutes’ that emerged primarily from the analysis of the empirical data collected in the course of my fieldwork and, as an example of visual representation, of an anti-immigration leaflet distributed by the political party Northern League<sup>3</sup>.

I conclude by highlighting the primary arguments of this thesis, drawing conclusions and providing some reflections on how this investigation and its findings can contribute to challenging the exclusionary practices and policies in place towards migrant prostitutes in the Italian context.

#### **4. Concluding remarks**

The production and reproduction of socially constructed representations of migrant women who operate in the sex industry in Italy, the political and ideological forces underlying such processes, the ways they inform legal frameworks, and, in turn, how these are implemented, are issues that have received very little attention in the literature. My research fills this gap in the existing sociological literature, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of these issues by providing useful insights from which policy makers could also benefit. In addition to this, it is hoped that this study will make an original contribution, not only to sociological research more generally, but also to a feminist understanding of the gendered systems and knowledge that reproduce stereotypes and norms about women in the context of prostitution-related migrations by submitting this critical, but constructive investigation of how the phenomenon has been addressed to date in the context of contemporary Italy.

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<sup>3</sup> Initially born as *Lega Lombarda* (1984) the party became *Lega Nord* (Northern League, i.e. ‘representing’ the entire North of Italy) in 1991. It has been in the governing coalition from 2000 to 2006, and also in a previous legislature in 1994-1995, in both cases under Silvio Berlusconi’s leadership (the premier of the centre-right party *Forza Italia*). The Northern League is an openly racist, sexist and homophobic party (see chapter 4 and 6). In this respect, it is relevant to mention that, in the early 1990s, when I first voted in Italy (in the same city where the League was ‘born’ and has its headquarters), the *Lega Lombarda* was viewed as a ‘truly democratic’ alternative to the old and corrupted political system (see chapter 3).

## Part I

### Theories, perspectives and methodology

In the course of the years during which I researched and wrote this thesis I had to answer, as a natural fact of social life, the question: ‘what is your study about?’ over and over again. After the first few occasions when I had spent an excessive amount of words and time giving a proper reply, I decided to formulate a standard answer that, no matter how unrepresentative it might be of the true content of this study, I could give away as quickly as possible. This is the pre-packaged formula that I still use whenever necessary: “my thesis is about social representations of migrant women operating in the sex industry in Italy”. Having uttered these words many times over a prolonged period now, I have come to notice a repeated pattern in the reaction of those posing the question. The interest is always invariably aroused by the ‘sex industry’ bit in my formula. Migration goes unnoticed, and so does ‘social representations’. Ultimately, it is sex that matters. While this consideration is not particularly surprising, sociologically or not, it made me progressively reflect upon the content of my research. How has the interest in prostitution come to obscure other equally relevant activities carried out in conjunction with it (including migration)? Would the migrant women I talked to ever be considered *immigrate* (immigrants) as they call themselves, or will they always and invariably have the ‘whore stigma’ attached to them, no matter how much time has passed since their last engagement in the sex industry? How can they reclaim a migrant identity? Can they? Will it eventually help them achieve another and preferred social position in the country of destination?

The following chapters implicitly reflect upon these questions and discuss theories, concepts and methodologies that form the basis of the investigation of the issues raised in this thesis.

# Chapter 1

## Theories and Perspectives

### 1. Introduction

As explained in the introduction, the exploration of prostitution-related migrations of women in this thesis is approached from a migration perspective. However, this broad phenomenon is often looked at with a specific focus on trafficking in women for sexual purposes, and as pertaining exclusively to issues such as crime and deviance, violence against women, and human rights. In order to understand how such dominant approaches to female sex migrations were formed and have in turn informed institutional policies and social practices, it is necessary to look at developments and debates in a number of relevant bodies of literature.

To achieve this, the chapter proceeds as follows: after briefly outlining major trends in current international migrations, it presents a chronological exploration of the evolutions in the literature on gender and migration. It is within this area that I conceptually locate my thesis. This overview reveals the slow recognition of the importance of women in migration, an aspect that has relevance beyond scholarship, in that it still influences the ways migration policies are designed in many countries, including Italy (see chapter 3). Moreover, whilst feminist scholars have contributed significantly to theoretical developments in research on migration to challenge the persistent gender bias in the field, when it comes to prostitution-related migrations, however, the focus of their analysis has often been centred on sex trafficking. This is often conceptualized uncritically as a form of modern-day slavery, thus constraining its understanding within a migration perspective. In the following section of the chapter I illustrate how dominant and opposed paradigms generated by scholarly discourses on prostitution – i.e. ‘prostitution as exploitation’ and ‘prostitution as sex-work’ – have also obscured the understanding of female sex migrations as a migration phenomenon. As I further explain, my own investigation is developed within a framework of analysis that is

closer to that of more recent approaches in the field. These look at prostitution-related migrations of women within a migration framework that pays particular attention to the role that social constructions of gender and sexuality play in the context of migrant prostitutes' mobility. In this section I also briefly comment on other relevant scholarship upon which this study relies, and then proceed to drawing some conclusions.

The literature presented covers both academic work produced in and around these topics, and concepts and ideas which are relevant to this thesis and which are further explored in part three in conjunction with the analysis of my empirical data. A point that should be noted is that a review of Italian literature on prostitution and migrations is not included here. Some is incorporated in chapter 3, as part of a more specific overview of the Italian context, and more generally it is discussed throughout the thesis, when relevant. Lastly, I take the opportunity to mention events, policies and practice drawn from the Italian scenario, which are relevant to various aspects raised in the discussion of the chapter.

## **2. Some trends of 'global migrations'**

The migration of individuals, families, groups of people, and entire populations throughout the globe has been a constant feature in virtually every era in the history of humanity. However, the complexity, global scope and growing saliency of current international migrations are unprecedented (Castles and Miller 2003). Despite its importance, it was only at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the role of migration as a facet of social, economic, political and cultural life started to be consistently analysed in the social sciences and has now become a popular subject of research (Papastergiadis 2000; *ibid.*). Recently, scholars from the growing field of migration studies have started to adopt various definitions, including 'the turbulence of migration', 'new' or 'global migrations' to describe the interconnection of processes of globalization and migration that have so fundamentally transformed the movements of people(s), with profound economic, social and political consequences (Weiner 1993; Koser and Lutz 1997; Papastergiadis 2000; Castles and Miller 2003; *et alia*).

The unprecedented character of current migrations can be observed in a number of distinctive trends. Among these is the development of new migration trajectories



whereby, for instance, traditional emigration countries have become countries of destination. In this respect, Italy serves as a good example having shifted from historic provider of great migration flows to North West Europe and the Americas in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, to now being a popular destination for a growing number of migrants originating from all over the world, including places historically closed to mass movements, such as the Balkans, Central Europe and countries of the former USSR (Fassmann and Munz 1992; Zayonchkovskaya 2000; Sharpe 2001) (see chapter 3).

Migration also plays an increasingly crucial role in domestic and international politics, often in relation to issues of security, criminality, national identity and citizenship (Castles and Miller 2003). Concern is growing about the challenges that migrants are believed to pose to the supposed religious, cultural or ethnic homogeneity of nation-states. The emergence of and increasing support for extreme-right and xenophobic political parties testify to a rising anti-immigration extremism which is active in many European countries of destination (Wrench and Solomos 1993; Curran 2004). Again, this too is visible in Italy where the openly racist and xenophobic political party Northern League has now been in two governing coalitions (1994-1995 and 2000-2006) and is currently (since May 2006) an important member of the opposition party group (Tambini 2001; Curran 2004) (see chapter 3, 4 and 6).

Migrants themselves are not just passive recipients of the often hostile policies and politics of the host countries. Some have mobilized new and old resources and adopted creative strategies to improve their lives (Koser and Lutz 1997). The formation of social and diasporic networks and the use of new means of communications, such as the Internet and mobile telecommunication, have improved transnational connections, and rendered it easier for fellow-migrants-to-be to find support in countries of destination (Sassen 2001; 2002). Moreover, new 'industries' that stretch beyond the community basis and the legal realm – such as smuggling and trafficking in human beings – have started to flourish, often as a result of the tightening of restrictions to border crossing (Koser and Lutz 1997; Gallagher 2002; Sassen 2002).

Another characteristic of current migrations is the high degree of differentiation, which includes, but is not limited to, categories such as regional, transit, short-term migration, voluntary and forced migrations by an increasingly wide range of migrant types, including highly skilled workers, asylum seekers, illegal migrants smuggled

or/and trafficked, etc. (Koser and Lutz 1997; Castles and Miller 2003; Knowles 2003). Part of this differentiation is also the so-called 'feminization of migration'.

### *The 'feminization of migration'*

The expression 'feminization of migration' has gained popularity within some of the more recent literature on migration – both academic and in policy documents – to describe the increasing role that women play in all types of migrations (Chant 1992; Sassen 1998; Kelson and DeLaet 1999; Kofman et al 2000; Papastergiadis 2000; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Castles and Miller 2003); as explained by Paiva:

Quantitatively, women account for a growing percentage of migrant populations – and in several countries, they already constitute the majority. Qualitatively, women are migrating independently – particularly as labour migrants – in vastly greater numbers than was the case in their mothers' or grandmothers' generations. These two factors [...] taken together, are commonly referred to as the feminization of migration<sup>1</sup>.

(2000)

The suffix '-zation' in the word feminization expresses a sense of evolution, of change in the making. It is precisely with this meaning that the term is adopted: to indicate that current migrations are *becoming* increasingly feminized. However, as suggested by Lenz et alia, the popularity gained by this concept in pursuing the captivating novelty of the phenomenon, may obscure the fact that the feminization of migration has always been an important trend in transnational migratory movements (2003).<sup>2</sup> As Zlotnik claims

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<sup>1</sup> This definition, which was included here because it describes in a simple but clear manner what the concept of 'feminization of migration' refers to, is extracted from a speech given by Robert Paiva (Permanent Observer to the United Nations to the Special Session of the UN General Assembly: Women 2000, Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century) in the course of the 23<sup>rd</sup> special session of the 'UN General Assembly Women 2000'.

<sup>2</sup> In this respect, it is relevant to mention that also the expression 'new migrations' retains problematic aspects for similar reasons. As Koser and Lutz point out, the term 'new' entails a use of the sequential structure of time as the major ordering principle of empirical and cognitive knowledge (1997). While it is undeniable that current migrations have unprecedented characteristics which justify the use of 'new' at the empirical level, conceptually its application to a social phenomenon may overshadow continuities with the past and the reproduction of historical processes and patterns (ibid.). When the term 'new migration' is used in this study, it is in consideration of these definitional caveats, i.e. it serves to highlight the new features of current migrations, while acknowledging their link with historical developments.

Already in 1960, female migrants accounted for nearly 47 out of every 100 migrants living outside of their countries of birth. Since then, the share of female migrants among all international migrants has been rising steadily, to reach 48 per cent in 1990 and nearly 49 percent in 2000.

(2003)

In other words, even though these numbers are consistent with an increasing ‘feminization’ of international migrations, the trend recorded is small compared to the high level of feminized migrations that already existed in or before 1960, but were unaccounted for (ibid.). The collection of data disaggregated by sex that Zlotnik refers to was released in a United Nations report (2002). This shows that the presence of women in international migrations cannot be discounted, and that its invisibility from migration scholarship can no longer be tenable.

Indeed, since the late 1970s a growing body of theoretical and empirical works on the *femina migrans* has challenged well-established gender-blind research, and in 2006 the editors of a special issue on gender and migration in the journal *International Migration Review* (IMR) claimed that “research on women, gender, and migration has fundamentally expanded and changed”, even though there still are some notable variations amongst disciplines (Donato, Gabaccia et al 2006: 22). The following section provides an account of the developments of the past decades that led to the current state of the field.

### 3. Towards a gender approach in migration research

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Ravenstein, one of the earliest theorists in international migration, wrote that women are greater migrants than men (1889):

This may surprise those who associate women with domestic life, but the figures of the census clearly prove it. Nor do women migrate merely from the rural districts into the towns in search of domestic service, for they migrate quite as frequently into certain manufacturing districts, and the workshop is a formidable rival to the kitchen and the scullery.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The research that Ravenstein conducted was based on the census data of the populations of the Kingdom of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland gathered in 1871 and 1881. Despite the limited geographic focus of the information used, Ravenstein claimed that his observations were universally valid, hence the seventh

(1885: 189, quoted in Kelson and DeLaet 1999: 3)

For nearly a century Ravenstein remained the only scholar to mention the importance of women in migration. In 1976, Leeds, a British urban anthropologist, in an article about the first conference on female migrants, still expressed doubts about the usefulness of having women as a unit of analysis, which was, he claimed, ideologically, rather than scientifically generated (1976).<sup>4</sup> The category ‘women’, he stated,

is only useful contextually, i.e. with reference to special social situations or societies, where, in any case, it is better rendered conceptually as “women’s roles” which entails also, of course, men’s roles. [Moreover, the same category] like other personalistic categories is a reductionist and individualistic outlook, a paradigm characteristically part of American rhetoric emphasizing the individual, the psychological, Calvinistic internalizations of norms and self-reliance, etc.; all at the expense of the structural, the organized, the collective, [...] the socially determined strategies (as opposed to the motivations) in individual and group action within social-structural contexts.

(1976: 69)

Leeds’ argument, as that of many other scholars of the time, encoded “the assumption that women do not act in economic or structural contexts and are somehow cloistered and sheltered from capitalist institutions” (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003: 18).

The reluctance to acknowledge women as actors and valid subjects of research has been – and still is – criticized by the growing feminist scholarship in migration studies. Ravenstein’s comment is one of the most popularly quoted in reviews of migrant literatures as proof that women’s presence as autonomous migrants had been acknowledged over a hundred years ago, but was deliberately ignored nonetheless. The slow development of research on female migrations is attributed to the legacy and gender-blindness of two main theoretical paradigms that prevailed in migration studies until the end of the 1970s. The two so-called ‘orthodox’ paradigms have been criticized for either displaying an excess of focus on voluntarism or for being too mechanistic and hyper-structural (Grieco and Boyd 1998; Anthias and Lazaridis 2000; Kofman et al

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of the ‘laws of migration’ that he formulated stated that “females are as usually greater migrants than men” (1889: 253).

<sup>4</sup> Leeds claimed that the conference was useful *per se* “in order that its [the question on women in the migratory process] essential emptiness of scientific content can become manifest” (1976: 69).

2000; et alia).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, in both frameworks women were either ignored or, when female migrants were analysed at all, they were simply added into the picture and it was assumed that they would either stay at home or migrate to follow and be dependant on their male partners (Tacoli 1996; Anthias and Lazaridis 2000; Kofman et al 2000; Pessar and Mahler 2003). The expression used in the literature ‘the migrant and *his* dependants’ exemplifies this belief: women were ultimately considered irrelevant to understanding why and how migration occurred (Kelson and DeLaet 1999).

The emergence of a literature that takes into account female migrants owes much to the rise of second wave feminism in the late 1960s with its critique of traditional epistemologies that had ignored women as social actors, and its innovative investigation of their role in society (Evans 1997). Thus, under the impetus of feminist scholarship, by the late 1970s, female migrants started to be acknowledged within migration studies and became the subject of conferences, specialized journals and research not only in academia, but also in governmental and non-governmental bodies (Phizacklea 1983). This earlier activity and a special issue on women and migration in the winter 1984 *International Migration Review* are still commonly cited as pioneers in bringing attention to, and challenging gender blindness in, migration theories. The IMR was the first journal to dedicate an entire issue to the migrations of women, thus reflecting, as stated in its introduction, “the belated but growing scholarly appreciation of the specificity and importance of women in international migration” (1984: 885).

Of particular relevance in this issue – also in light of the resonance it had in the literature of the following decades – is the article *Birds of Passage are also Women*<sup>6</sup> by

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<sup>5</sup> The first model, commonly referred to as the push-pull framework, is based on a neo-liberal economic approach that views the movement of population as a voluntary decision of individuals pushed by the imbalanced distribution of labour and capital. Hard economic and social conditions in poorer countries – the push factors – and the advantage of the presence of labour and higher wages in more economically advanced areas – the pull factors – determine the size and the direction of flows (Tacoli 1999). Feminist scholarship claims that within this framework women were either ignored or when female migration was analysed at all, it was conflated with explanations cited for men (Anthias and Lazaridis 2000). The second classical model became very popular in the 1970s, and drew on the neo-Marxist political economy tradition which adopts a macro-level structural approach. This views migration as a feature of capitalism and of the transformations in the world economic and political order that have caused a widespread displacement of people from their customary livelihoods (Massey 1998). Even though it is acknowledged that this model has given rise to more female-aware studies on the relationship between shifts in the world economy and the emergence of migrant mobility, gendered relations provide only additional texture in it, thus lacking any deeper analysis on how capitalism incorporated men and women into wage labour on a differential basis (Chant 1992; Koser and Lutz 1998).

<sup>6</sup> This title is a reference to Piore’s (1979) book *Birds of Passage*, considered to be a particularly male-centric account of migrations.

Mirjana Morokvasic, whose earlier work on Yugoslav women had already provoked discussions on the role of gender in migration (Kofman et al 2000). In this contribution, Morokvasic criticized the patronizing western assumptions, often adopted in the literature, about women migrants' cultural backwardness and inferiority (1984). She stressed this aspect in particular in relation to labour issues, and explained that the exclusion of migrant women from employment in western countries was not, as it had been previously and wrongly explained, the result of the latter's own cultural heritage and oppression. Rather, she suggested, it had to be attributed to the unequal gendered structure of western labour markets, structured on the assumption that a woman is dependent on her partner, a male breadwinner. This notion, which shaped social practices and had also been reproduced in migration scholarship, had limited female migrants' access to employment and contributed to their positioning in a situation of socio-economic inferiority compared to their male counterparts (ibid.). In her contribution, Morokvasic encouraged researchers in the field to draw their attention to various aspects of social stratification and their impact on female migrants, and to break away from established beliefs about migrant women's cultural oppression (a notion that is still very diffused in contemporary Italy, as discussed in chapter 6), or that they have to be oppressed *a priori* by virtue of being women (ibid.).

This latter aspect, in particular, was targeting the widespread notion of 'global sisterhood' in white Anglo-American feminist literature about the universality of women's oppression and exploitation that had also influenced the analysis of female migrations (Morokvasic 1984; Andall 2000). More specifically, claims such as Ortner's that "the secondary status of women in society is one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact [based on a] commonality of women's oppression" (1974: 67 quoted in Andall 2000: 5) were at the basis of a theoretical position that encouraged all women to recognize their common situation, and mobilize to change the oppressive male forces and structures oppressing them (Evans 1997). Crucially, while white western feminism developed its critique of patriarchal power, other women started to show their dissent to the global idea of 'sisterhood' by stressing women's diversity of experiences (Carby 1982; Davis 1982; hooks 1982; Mohanty 1988). They contested both the assumption that women's oppression is a universal female experience (Spelman 1988; Ang 1995), and the equally widespread use in western feminism of the singular and monolithic category of 'Third World woman', which had been used and reproduced as the paradigmatic

image of the female victim of patriarchal oppression (Carby 1982; Mohanty 1988) (see chapter 6). They stressed the necessity to recognize that gendered experiences are also always racialized (and classed), and thus proceeded to integrate 'race' into mainstream feminist theory (Lewis and Mills 2003). As Mohanty explains

Through the theorization of experience I suggest that historicizing and locating political agency is a necessary alternative to formulations of the "universality" of gendered oppressions and struggles. The universality of gender oppression is problematic, based as it is on the assumption that the categories of race and class have to be invisible for gender to be visible.

(2003: 107)

These contributions had an enormous impact on feminist scholarship and also profoundly shaped sociological research on migration which, in turn, started to look at how the intersections of 'race', ethnicity, gender and class shape and are shaped by migration dynamics (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003).

In an important contribution to the scholarship of gender and migration in Europe, Kofman et alia explain that from the mid 1980s onwards, a division took place in the theorizations of migrations as they became increasingly divorced from that of ethnic relations (2000). The latter, being more preoccupied with analysis of diasporic communities, multiculturalism and hybrid identities, neglected the link with migratory processes, thus limiting, they claim, the understanding of both (ibid.). Seen from another perspective, these new contributions which are related to, but do not necessarily focus on migration *per se*, should be seen as a further advance in the literature, in that they complement and broaden, rather than hamper, our understanding of current migrations (see for example: Bhabha 1990; Hall 1990; Gilroy 1993; Brah 1996; Cohen 1997). Along similar lines, Kofman et alia also criticize what they describe as the recent increasing preoccupation of feminist theory with questions of identity and the body which relegates to second place "the very real material inequalities that women's differing positionings at a global level have" (2000: 33). Interestingly, however, when addressing the case of 'migrant sex workers', Kofman et alia seem to acknowledge – though still somewhat reluctantly – the importance of looking also at "so-called 'cultural' issues, [such as] body, sexuality and representation [which] *might* be significant for a gendered account of migration" (ibid.: 34; emphasis added). As they claim, here "the sexualization of 'foreign' women and the embodiment of racism are crucial" (ibid.: 35), hence the need to

look at how different racialized and gendered identities have been constructed and changed over time, because the cultural representation of the submissive but erotic 'Other' has real material effects (ibid.). Indeed, as this thesis will show, issues of subjectivity, identity and embodiment, and the ways they are constructed, negotiated or influenced, are equally 'real' and crucial in the understanding of gendered processes/aspects of migration as material inequalities. Again, rather than being viewed within a hierarchical ranking, all these factors should be treated as interconnected and constitutive.

By the early 1990s, despite the numerous researches on the topic of women and migration in prominent sociological publications, some authors still lamented that migration scholarship had not moved from the 'add women and stir' approach (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1999; Saltzman Chafetz 1999). In 1999, Hondagneu-Sotelo claimed that feminist migration scholarship still remained mired in a theory that underemphasized issues of power relations and social change, and underlined differences – rather than the similarities – between women and men. She implied that this difference is due to seemingly inevitable, unchanging, cross-cultural sex role constraints. This analytic misfit, she argues, can be resolved with the dismissal of the exclusive focus on women and the adoption of an approach that views gender as relational and in a continuous process of change, rather than ascribed and fixed (1999).

The unfolding of this issue was concurrent with the development of the so-called 'integrative approach' that was trying to make an explicit attempt to overcome the agency/structure dualism present in earlier migration theory by providing a unified conceptual framework in studies of gender and migration (Boyd and Grieco 1998). The key of these theories was to use an intermediate unit of analysis between micro and macro levels of analysis. 'Meso' categories, such as the family, household, or migrant network, were meant to help understanding migration not exclusively as an individual decision, nor as the sole product of economic and political processes, but as an interaction of both these factors (Tacoli 1999). The problem with these approaches, as some theorists pointed out, was that they did not necessarily allow for the more gender sensitive analysis that they advocate, in that viewing the family household or network as a 'unified strategic actor' overlooks all those power relations, diverse interests and activities that are within each of these units (Tacoli 1996; Boyd and Grieco 1998). Moreover, this approach has been accused of retaining the myths that had been applied



often to studies of economically developing countries which romanticized the ‘peasant community’ and created the illusion of the co-operative and “happy to struggle together against poverty family” (Kofman et al 2000: 28).

Another important contribution to this literature comes from Saskia Sassen. Since the 1980s she has looked at female migrations aiming at, she claims, contributing to a ‘feminist analytics’ that allows us to,

re-read and reconceptualize major features of today’s global economy in a manner that captures strategic instantiations of gendering as well as formal and operational openings that make women visible and lead to greater presence and participation.

(Sassen 1998: 82)

Her article in the 1984 special issue of the IMR (Sassen-Koob 1984) is also considered to be crucial in paving the way towards an approach that was to fully develop only a few years later. It looks at how gender, as opposed to women, is incorporated into corporate globalized structures (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003). In her later work, Sassen draws attention to a phenomenon she refers to as the ‘counter-geographies of globalization’. With this term she indicates a variety of cross-border circuits that overlap with and at the same time exploit, the major dynamics that compose economic globalization. These alternative global circuits increasingly involve migrant women and include among others, illegal trafficking for sexual purposes, mail-bride orders and various other types of informal labour markets. Strictly linked to the notion of ‘counter-geography’ is the ‘feminization of survival’, a concept that she adopts to indicate that “households and entire communities are increasingly dependant on women for their survival” (Sassen 2000: 504). In connecting the strategies of survival with alternative circuits of globalization, Sassen wanted to combine the macro structural context with the power of individual agency, and challenged the stereotype of women being solely dependant companions of male migrants.<sup>7</sup>

As mentioned earlier, in another special issue of the IMR issued in 2006 – this time on ‘gender and migration’, as opposed to the 1984 issue on ‘women and migration’

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<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that in addressing prostitution-related migrations, Sassen’s analysis focused primarily on the structural conditions that promote international criminal sex trafficking organizations, a case that gives more substance to claims of the failure of immigration policies and the neoliberal model of globalization, but at the same time overlooks the ‘victims’ struggle to negotiate and challenge such structures.

– it is claimed that such stereotypes have been fully challenged, even though some strands of migration research are still gender-blind.<sup>8</sup> In the introductory article, the editors explain that a reflection on the developments and changes produced on migration and feminist theory made them realize that “the time was right for again taking stock” (Donato, Gabaccia et al 2006: 4). They claim that,

based on our reading of reviews in many social science disciplines, we are pleased to report that the state of gender and migration studies is fundamentally healthy, [gender analysis is undertaken across most disciplines in] a wide variety of spatial scales, from the local and familiar to the national and global.

(ibid.: 6)

Overall, the authors conclude that the multidisciplinary interest in gender and migration was the strength of this approach, and they encouraged increased interdisciplinary cross-fertilization in future research.

The overview presented here of a complex and broad field of study outlined the developments and current debates within the research on gender and migration, to which this study intends to make an original contribution. Moreover, this review also lays the context for the following crucial question: how (if at all) has this body of literature included/addressed/analysed migrant women who operate in the sex industry?

A look at the scholarship produced so far shows that when migration scholars explained prostitution-related migrations of women, they have done so almost exclusively with a focus on trafficking for sexual purposes (see, for example, Sassen 2000 and 2002, as discussed earlier). Whilst looking specifically at sex trafficking is not problematic *per se*, it becomes questionable when discussions of this phenomenon draw exclusively and unreflectively, as they often do, on gendered representations of female victimhood that depict them as subjugated and oppressed by male dominance, and dismiss their agency and subjectivity (Kempadoo, Sanghera et al 2005); or, when they conflate *all* prostitution-related migrations with trafficking for sexual purposes, a position that excludes the possibility that migration dynamics may be connected with the sex industry, but do not necessarily fall under the category of sex trafficking. Furthermore, the focus on the exploitation and abuse that is involved in sex trafficking,

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<sup>8</sup> Curran claims that, for instance, the vast majority of quantitative migration scholarship still employs a gender framework very reluctantly, if at all (2006: 215).

has resulted in the ‘appropriation’ of this phenomenon by other disciplines and approaches, including criminology, human rights, violence against women, etc. As Agustin points out, this is problematic when those women who leave their country and are later found selling sex in another, ‘disappear’ from migration studies, where they would be migrants, and they “reappear in criminological or feminist theorizing (where they are called victims)” (2006: 29). In other words, this disciplinary shift becomes critical when centring on violence and coercion ends up obscuring the migration component in the analysis of prostitution-related migrations.

The following section is concerned both with the theoretical developments that led to such diffused focus on sex trafficking as an issue of violence and coercion, and also on the contributions made to challenge this perspective. While I agree with Salt, who claims that the circumscribed concern for sex trafficking and the confusion surrounding it is partly a consequence of its running ahead of theoretical understanding and factual evidence (2000), the analysis presented here also underscores the crucial influence of debates on prostitution as a site of struggle for feminists (and others), that has determined and also limited the way we look at sex trafficking, and more generally at prostitution-related migrations today. Finally, this discussion is crucial because such debates are not just confined to theoretical realms, but have substantial repercussions on social policies and practices, as is discussed in detail in the following chapters.

#### **4. Prostitution and trafficking: a critical review of contested matters**

Approaches to prostitution-related migrations of women are deeply divided along ideological lines over contrasting views on prostitution (Doezema 1998). Such is the centrality of prostitution in the research on migrant prostitutes, and so emotive and polarized are the debates around them (Anderson and O'Connell Davidson 2003), that the migration component is either intentionally overlooked, or more simply, neglected. In this section I present a review of more crucial debates that have contributed to the current and contested understandings of prostitution-related migrations.

I begin with a historical overview of the discourses surrounding the so-called white slave trade, and how they informed the early twentieth century anti-trafficking/anti-prostitution campaigns in ‘the West’. As the section proceeds to explain,

interest in these aspects gained new impetus in the 1970s, and radical feminist theorists played a crucial role in conceptualizing prostitution as a form of patriarchal oppression, and trafficking as sexual slavery. The emergence of a pro-sex work perspective challenged this view and advocated for the recognition of prostitution as a form of work, and for the right to choose to do it. More recently, a new and developing body of literature has shifted away from a circumscribed focus on prostitution, to look at the various and complex components that determine the migration dynamics of women involved in the sex industry.

### *The white slave trade and growing concern for female prostitution*

The ways in which transnational prostitution and sex trafficking are understood and studied, as well as addressed by national and international treaties and policies today have been influenced by debates and discourses surrounding the so-called white slave trade in the nineteenth century (Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Doezema 2000; Berman 2003; Kempadoo, Sanghera et al 2005). The term was adopted to refer to the abduction of European and north-American white women “for prostitution in South America, Africa, or ‘the Orient’ by non-western men or other subalterns” (Doezema 2000: 24). International reports explain how white women, for the most part under-age, were attracted with offers of lucrative employment and then “transported to foreign countries and finally flung penniless into houses of debauchery” (League of Nations 1921: 3 quoted in Lazaridis 2001: 67,68). Despite the fact that contemporary historians argue that the number of women involved in the trade was very small (Grittner 1990; Gibson 1999), at the time it became a prominent issue, aroused by the sensationalist accounts of brutalized and violated white women and contributed to a widespread ‘white slave panic’ (Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Kempadoo, Sanghera et al 2005). In the United States and in Britain the fervent feminist campaigns against white slavery became increasingly involved in the drive to abolish prostitution, seen as its primary cause, and were also fomented by religious and social purity reformers who advocated a cleansing of all vices from society and a strict regulation of the sexual behaviour of young people, and of women in particular (Grittner 1990; Doezema 2000; Levine 2003).

The social construction of, and response to, the white slave trade raises a number of important considerations that, as I explain later, have relevance also in relation to the

contemporary phenomenon of sex trafficking. The first concerns the gendered and raced assumptions underpinning the ways the phenomenon was understood and dealt with. Despite the fact that there is evidence that Black and ‘Third World’ women were among the small number of those who were actually trafficked, the phenomenon was an issue of concern only in respect to white women, hence the definition still in use of *white* trade. The policing of some (white) women’s sexuality, to protect them from the perils of the white slave trade, became an effective tool for the preservation of a reproductive-heteronormative and eugenic system to which white women had to contribute, whereas the individuals whose sexual behaviours, occupations and ‘race’ fell lower on the scale were subjected to a presumption of disreputability and criminality, that entailed very little consideration for their suffering (Luibhéid 2002). Dyer in 1880, even argued that the trade of English girls was “infinitely more cruel and revolting than negro servitude [, being it] not for labour but for lust; and more cowardly than negro slavery, [in that it fell upon] the young and the helpless of one sex only” (1880: 6 quoted in Irwin 1996). As Irwin posits, not only does this assessment undervalue the humanity of Black people, but it also ignores the sexual exploitation of Black women, whether in the trade, in the colonies or under slavery (ibid.). This lacuna has persisted in the literature for decades and in the early 1980s Angela Davis was still lamenting the lack of studies of female slavery and other forms of abuse that have been consistently performed against Black women but have “been all but glossed over in the traditional literature on slavery” (1982: 25).

The extent to which the white slave trade had become a great issue of concern is reflected in the national acts signed in western countries at the beginning of the twentieth century<sup>9</sup>, all aimed at restricting women’s migration as a means to protect them from the ‘evil of prostitution’, both when part of the ‘white slave trade’ or trafficking and as a form of sexual exploitation *per se* (Doezema 2000; Berman 2003; Sullivan 2003). These earlier agreements were consolidated in 1949 by the United Nations with the adoption of the ‘Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others’. The Convention states that both trafficking and prostitution are “incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person [and] endanger the

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<sup>9</sup> For example: the ‘International Agreement for the Suppression of the White Slave Traffic’ (1904); the ‘International Convention for the Suppression of the White Slave Traffic’ (1910); the ‘International Convention to Combat the Traffic in Women and Children’ (1921); the ‘International Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women of Full Age’ (1933).

welfare of the individual, the family and the community” (quoted in Sullivan, 2003: 68, 69). It required signatory states to prevent prostitution and trafficking, terminate registration or supervision of prostitutes, dismantle brothels, rehabilitate ‘victims of prostitution’ and repatriate victims of trafficking (Sullivan 2003). This document did not attract significant international support, and few countries signed up to it (ibid.). However, its significance ended up being more symbolic than being effective, in that it stood as an international recognition of the predominant abolitionist approach to prostitution that had “defined the terms of the international discourse on prostitution for almost 100 years” (Kempadoo and Doezema 1998: 37). Any reference to migration was elided because it was considered out of scope in dealing with an issue which had to do primarily with the violation of human rights, and where mobility was just a less relevant feature of an overarching and more important structure of abuse.

Prostitution and trafficking were addressed again in the 1979 ‘Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women’ (CEDAW) which included an article specifically condemning those who profit from the sexual exploitation of women<sup>10</sup> (Reanda 1991). While during the white slave campaign, the main target of strategies to eliminate trafficking were women themselves who were induced or forced not to migrate for the fear of being abducted, with the CEDAW – and to a lesser extent also the 1949 Convention – the approach started to focus more on the criminalization of perpetrators (Doezema 1998). The CEDAW was also the result of the revival of attention on issues of trafficking that “grew out of a radical feminist ideology that emphasized the political and global dimensions of men’s sexual violence against women” (Sullivan 2003: 69). This return of interest was spurred by a renewed concern within feminist movements to re-examine the issue of prostitution, which in turn was raised by the fact that, precisely at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, the number of migrant women operating in the sex industry started to grow to an unprecedented extent.

#### *Prostitution as sexual exploitation: the radical feminist approach*

Since the 1980s, discourses on (transnational) prostitution were marked by the radical feminist perspective that, as commented by O’Connell Davidson, views it as a

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<sup>10</sup> Article 6 of the Convention states that “State parties shall take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to suppress all forms of traffic in women and exploitation of prostitution of women”.

necessarily degrading practice that further contributes to subordinate women to male violence (1998). This perspective has been held by a number of authors (Barry 1981; Dworkin 1981; MacKinnon 1987; 1989; Barry 1995; Jeffreys 1997; Hughes and Roche 1999; Hughes 2000b) and, as Weitzer suggests, it still remains quite popular (2005). In presenting this approach, I focus in particular on one of its most militant representatives, Kathleen Barry, whose work on prostitution has been highly influential in raising attention to prostitution and trafficking within this perspective (1981; 1995).

Barry's main argument is that women have been transformed into a highly exploited and abused class. What keeps women in this condition of oppression is the worldwide instrumentalization of sexuality by men. Its most obvious manifestation is sexual exploitation, "the foundation of women's subordination and the base from which discrimination against women is constructed and enacted" (1995: 11). Barry claims that the lowest class condition into which women are relegated is revealed fully in prostitution:

I knew that one cannot mobilize against a class condition of oppression unless one knows its fullest dimension. [...] From 1970 I had been involved in initiating radical feminist action against rape, but until I learned of the traffic in women and explored the pimping strategies in prostitution, I did not fully grasp how utterly without value female life is under male domination. Women as expendables. Women as throwaways. Prostitution – the cornerstone of all sexual exploitation.

(ibid.: 9)

In this perspective, trafficking is conceived as the transnational dimension of prostitution which affects in particular "indigenous and aboriginal women who are from remote tribal communities where traditional family and religious practices either devalue girl children or reduce girls to sex service, which enables and encourages parents to sell their daughters" (ibid.: 178). In order to change this condition of oppression, Barry encourages to fight for an active political involvement in the international arena of human rights in which "sex power must be addressed as a global issue, inclusive of all its occurrences in the subordination of women. To do that prostitution must be centred in this struggle" (ibid.: 9).

Another important aspect of women's exploitation, according to Barry, is the normalization of oppression, i.e. the fact that male domination is so pervasive that it has been accepted and consented to by women themselves who are happy to collude –

though unwittingly – with the ‘oppressors’. Hence, what might appear to be a voluntary decision to engage in prostitution is nothing but an induced belief ingrained in women’s minds by the oppressive power of male domination. This aspect is clearly expressed by Hughes, who in a lecture on sexual exploitation, stated:

Prostitution and trafficking are extreme forms of gender discrimination and exist as a result of powerlessness of women as class. Sexual exploitation is more than an act; it is a systematic way to abuse and control women that socializes and coerces women and girls until they comply, take ownership of their own subordinate status and say, ‘I choose this’.

(2000a)

This argument inevitably leaves very little space to any pro-prostitution vision. As Doezema posits, “in this neat, sealed construction, [...] the notion of a prostitute who is unharmed by her experience is an ontological impossibility: that which cannot be” (2001: 27). In fact, Barry considers ‘sexual liberals’ – those who lobby for prostitution to be accepted as work – and those who embrace prostitution as their own chosen identity as responsible for seeking to normalize the sexual exploitation of women and actively engaging in promoting women’s oppression (1995). Moreover, even those who do not operate in the sex industry but are supportive of those who do, are only promoting their egoistic scope to ensure that prostitutes are maintained in a separate – and lower – category from theirs (ibid.).

Barry put into practice her appeal for an active involvement in the promotion of what she believes to be feminist human rights, with two major initiatives. She wrote the ‘Convention Against Sexual Exploitation’ in which she proposed the elimination of all laws and policies that legalize or decriminalize prostitution, and of those that distinguish between forced and free prostitution (Barry 1995). The Convention reiterates that the movement of prostitutes across national boundaries has to be defined as trafficking because no distinction may be drawn between the voluntary migration of sex workers and the forced transportation of women for the purposes of prostitution (Sullivan 2003). The aim of this document was to achieve international recognition and inspire the formulation of binding documents to be ratified in the largest number of countries possible.

The other initiative that Barry contributed to was the launch of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) in the late 1980s. Since its inception, CATW



has been one of the most active international non-governmental organizations (NGO) with regional headquarters and networks in Asia, the Americas, Europe, Africa and Australia whose main scope is “to work internationally to combat sexual exploitation in all its forms, especially prostitution and trafficking” (CATW 2007). The worldwide activities of CATW, as specified by its co-executive director in a speech to the UN Working Group on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, is especially addressed to “poor, minority, or so-called Third World women and children, frequently with histories of physical and sexual abuse and socialized into an ethos of self-sacrifice, [and who are unable to] resist economic and familial pressures to enter prostitution” (CATW 1998). This statement clearly shows that CATW has appropriated Barry’s culturalist arguments and perpetuates them in its ‘rescuing practices’. As explained in later sections of this thesis, this attitude is not exclusive to CATW, and can be easily observed in a large number Italian NGOs operating in this field that claim to intervene to redeem and save ‘poor, ignorant and abused’ victims of sexual trafficking.

In this respect, it is relevant to mention Doezema’s critical questioning of the epistemological approaches utilized by radical feminists to build their ideology (2001). She claims that western radical feminists have constructed a ‘damaged other’ – the Third World prostitute victim of sex trafficking – as a powerful metaphor to advance their own feminist interests. It is not an accident of history, she argues, but a legacy of colonialism that prostitutes’ suffering bodies are at the forefront of the campaign against trafficking today. In particular, Barry’s work and the rhetoric of the CATW campaign look in an orientalist fashion through the ‘colonial gaze’ of western feminists at non-western women as backward, innocent, and in need of rescue. In this way, they create a hierarchy which situates trafficked women in the lowest rank because they originate from pre-industrial and primarily agricultural societies, while at the other end of the scale are post-industrial developed societies where women achieve the potential for economic independence. Within this fallacious structure the Third World prostitute is “rendered innocent by the ritual invocation of her poverty and desperation” with an emphasis on violence to underscore her complete victimization: “the more violence, the more helpless and truly victim she is” (ibid.: 28). However, not only do western mainstream feminists make use of the sufferings of the Third World prostitute to assert their moral rightness and superiority, but also non-western discourse exploits the same metaphor of fears and anxieties to symbolize “the excesses of the global march of capital and its negative

effects on women” (ibid.:17). Ultimately, the investment in the history of pain of the Third World prostitute has become such a constituent part of the identity politics of those who claim to struggle against it, that they cannot let go of that injury without ceasing to exist (2001).

Indeed, against the image of the necessarily oppressed prostitute, women such as Barry herself become elevated as the “self-professed avant-garde of liberated womanhood” (Ang 1995: 195), and only those who have not ‘sold their souls’ to the prostitution agenda can authorize themselves to intervene and fight for the rescue of the (potential) victims. Through this distancing, the ‘Others’ are seen only in terms of how they might/should be, thus making it impossible to engage in a closer perspective that reveals/acknowledges the structural and individual conditions that determine their lives, choices and actions, including the possibility of having decided to engage in prostitution. In this way, as O’Connell Davidson writes, one ends up “telling a story about prostitution which is unrecognizable to most of the people who actually participate in it, and thus cannot hope to explain *why* they do so” (1998: 122; emphasis in the original).

In sum, the radical feminist approach, that had in Barry an important representative, is based on the premise that prostitution is a form of sexual degradation in which the (female) practitioner can only be represented as a victim of male domination. The focus of this approach does not include the possibility of considering the prostitution-related move of a woman to other countries within the perspective of migration since it is, in any instance, a form of coerced exploitation – trafficking – promoted by the globalized sex industry’s appetite, which again needs to be looked at primarily as a manifestation of the sexual exploitation of women at the hands of men.

### *Challenging the prostitution as exploitation and victim-centric approach*

In the 1990s, sex-workers’ rights movements<sup>11</sup> and their supporters, including pro-sex feminists, started to put the radical feminist view on prostitution and trafficking under significant attack (O’Neill 2001; Sullivan 2003). Building on the work already produced

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<sup>11</sup> Some of the most popular among old and new sex-work groups are: the American COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics) “the leading prostitutes rights organization in the United States” (Jenness 1990: 403), PENet (Prostitution Education Network) and NSWP (Network of Sex Work Projects); the South African SWEAT (Sex Workers Advocacy and Education Taskforce); the Japanese SWEETLY (Sex Workers: Encourage, Empower, Trust and Love Yourself), the English Collective of Prostitutes in England, and also the Italian Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitutes (on the latter, see chapter 3 and 4).

by western pro-prostitution lobbies during the previous decade, they advocated a distinction between forced and voluntary prostitution, claiming the legitimacy of the latter as an expression of the human right of self-determination (Delacoste and Alexander 1988; Nagle 1996; Chapkis 1997). They maintained that prostitution, when freely chosen, should be regarded as an income-generating activity or a form of employment for women and men, hence the adoption of the term 'sex work'/'sex workers' to acknowledge/stress that those who engage in the sex industry have the same rights as other workers (Bindman and Doezema 1997; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998). Trafficking and forced prostitution, on the other hand, are considered in the perspective of the violence that they involve. This is only one of the effects of the widespread poor social and legal position of women that relegate them in the informal, unregulated and unprotected labour market (Wijers and Doorninck 2002; Allwood 2004). As O'Connell Davidson explains, within this perspective, what renders both sex workers and trafficked women so vulnerable to exploitation are the laws that criminalize prostitution (1998), and demands are advanced to remove prohibitive legislation in criminal codes, to guarantee the right to prostitute, and to introduce regulations to normalize the sex trade (Outshoorn 2004).

The Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women (GAATW) formed in Thailand in 1994 is a popular NGO operating in the field of trafficking that supports this view. It promotes grass-roots campaigns to help victims of trafficking, and to defend the "self determination of adult persons who are voluntarily engaging in prostitution" (Doezema 1998: 37). At the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing the GAATW, with the support of pro-sex feminists and sex worker rights groups, obtained the first international recognition of its approach, successfully opposing the approval of the CATW Convention drafted by Barry (ibid.; Sullivan 2003). As a result, the final statement of the conference called for the elimination of traffic in women and *forced* prostitution, without the condemnation – advocated by CATW – of prostitution as such <sup>12</sup> (Bindman and Doezema 1997). A year later, the GAATW wrote a report commissioned by the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, in which the definition of trafficking emphasizes coercion as a critical factor, and focused on the exploitative and abusive power relations "associated with the international journey to sell sex and the act

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<sup>12</sup> The same stance was reiterated in the outcome document of the 5-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action in 2000.

of selling it, rather than the journey or the work themselves” (Pickup 1998: 46). The adoption of a marked distinction between forced and voluntary prostitution in a UN document, and previously in the Beijing Platform for Action declaration, signalled a shift in the international agenda in which freely chosen prostitution became recognized as a licit activity in its own right (ibid.). Radical feminists reacted to the occurrence of this change with an act of moral estrangement, refused to accept such an ‘abhorrent’ criminal act against the liberation of womanhood, and engaged in a militant opposition that to this date has transformed the debate – symbolized by the CATW and GAATW– into a clash of ideologies, by some defined as the ‘sex wars’ (O’Neill 2001).

Nevertheless, even those who acknowledged that the GAATW campaign – which they had initially supported with enthusiasm – undermined the dominant abolitionist model of prostitution in the international discourse, soon started to criticize the problematic consequences of its approach (Bindman and Doezema 1997; Doezema 1998; Pickup 1998; Jordan 2002; Chapkis 2003; Kempadoo, Sanghera et al 2005). They claim that the dichotomization of prostitution into *coerced* and *free* has had the effect of turning the concern of public opinion and institutional bodies exclusively towards forced prostitution and the condemnation of its related practices, whereas “no international agreement condemns the abuse of human rights of sex workers who were not forced” (Doezema 1998: 13). Furthermore, the media, supranational, national, governmental and non-governmental agencies, and a large body of anti-trafficking literature have transposed the voluntary vs. forced distinction into a representation of the consenting prostitute as the western sex worker “seen as capable of making independent decisions about whether or not to sell sexual services”, and the coerced prostitute as a woman from an economically developing country, deemed unable to make a choice, being “passive, naive and ready prey of traffickers” (ibid: 42). Implicit in this distinction, due to the stigma attached to prostitution, is the creation of a guilty vs. innocent divide which “reinforces the notions that (western) women who freely transgress sexual norms deserve to be punished, while (non-western) young, innocent women forced into prostitution by poverty, traffickers or age, need to be rescued” (Kempadoo and Doezema 1998: 30).

As part of their contribution to challenge the victim-centric accounts of the mainstream discourse on trafficking, Kempadoo and Doezema edited *Global Sex Workers*, a collection aimed at presenting an alternative perspective of the lives and experiences of *sex workers* outside the ‘industrialized North’. Premised upon the

assertion that prostitution is not an identity but a source of profit and/or a form of labour, the authors seek to stress the recognition of personal agency of sex workers who are persons capable of making their own choices and decisions, even when they may be harmed by their engagement in the sex industry and/or are involved in debt-bondage and indentureship (1998).

Another important contribution that also attempts to shift the focus away from the 'obsession with sex trafficking' comes from the work of Agustin (2001; 2002a; 2002b; 2003a; 2003b; 2004; 2005a; 2006). In this case, rather than focusing on the experience of prostitution/sex work, Agustin is interested in the experiences of migrant women who operate in the sex industry within a migration framework. She claims that the gendered bias that is still present in migration studies reinforces the victim-centred accounts of trafficking by sending the message that women have a greater disposition to be deceived and a lesser one to migrate. Implicit in this stance is the old and enduring assumption that it is better for women to stay at home rather than embark upon migrations and get into trouble. "Trouble is seen as something that will irreparably damage women, while men are routinely expected to encounter and overcome it" (2002b: 111). In order to form a new perspective that does not refer to women sex migrants solely as victims, Agustin asserts that an effort is needed to recognize that the strategies that seem less gratifying to some people may be successfully utilized by others. The evolutions connected with the spatial and personal trajectory of migration, the bad beginnings, frightening or even tragic moments experienced by women in their migrations should not be seen as necessarily permanently marking nor defining their whole life experiences (*ibid.*). Furthermore, she indicates, another mis-representation comes also from feminists espousing prostitutes' rights who often end up imposing their own pre-fixed identity, that of sex worker, on those women who dislike to be identified as such because they are doing sex work temporarily as a means to an end, and would rather consider themselves as migrants (2005a). As she underlines, the issue of prostitution is so inextricably connected to personal aspects of sexuality and intimacy that how one person assumes she or he would feel in a particular situation does not mean they know how all other people feel about it (2003a).

In the attempt to confront the excessive sensationalist aura that surrounds the public perception of migrant prostitutes' lives – essentialized as either oppressed victims or 'happy sex workers' – Agustin seeks to normalize the journey of migrant prostitutes

on the basis of their own desire to be considered people with a normal life. She thus presents a new narrative in which poorer 'Third World women' are seen as just taking advantage of the jobs available in the West, usually restricted to domestic and sexual services. Because wages – better than those they would get in their country of origin – allow them to help their parents and relatives, send children to school, build a house or start a business, engaging in a migration to a foreign country and in the jobs available there makes sense (2003a). Economic factors are important but not exclusive in taking this decision, others include the desire to see new and famous places, be a dancer, be admired, meet new people, and marry (2002a). In sum, the message that Agustin tries to bring forward by stressing these aspects is that, whether it is enjoyed, despised or merely preferred to other options, the way they are making money is not always the central issue for female sex migrants in their daily experiences as migrants (2004).

While the contributions presented above, which challenge the radical feminist view, are aimed at de-focusing from the centrality of trafficking in the analysis of migrant prostitution, more recent studies, such as the ones of Andrijasevic (2003; 2004; 2007) and Berman (2003) have gone back to trafficking and the discourses created around it, in an attempt to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon from a migration perspective. As Andrijasevic points out, with a shift of emphasis from choice and coercion in relation to prostitution to the many factors that channel women into prostitution in the first place, it is possible to extend the analysis of trafficking away from victimization to issues of citizenship, belonging, representations of migrant prostitution and the impact they have on migration regimes (2004). This theoretical shift, should not be viewed as a dismissal of the pain and suffering of trafficked women, rather as a way to "broaden and deepen the framework of reference by which these elements of hardship can be understood and analyzed" (Andrijasevic 2004: 213). This exploration brings to the fore the crucial role of gendered borders and immigration regimes in creating the conditions for the exploitation of women in trafficking and prostitution (2004). Moreover, by drawing attention to the agency of trafficked victims, Andrijasevic's analysis illustrates the ways in which women are constructed as gendered migrants and how in turn they negotiate and challenge such representations both in the process of migration and prostitution (2007).

Similarly, but with a specific focus on migration regimes, Berman explores the extent to which the portrayal of migrant prostitutes as sex-trafficked victims functions to

enforce anti-immigration discourses and policies (2003). As Wijers and van Doorninck argue, at the national and supranational level trafficking is considered as a problem pertaining to criminal and immigration laws that officially aim at introducing stringent regulations to combat both organized crime and the exploitation of human beings (2002). According to Berman, there are other motivations underpinning this approach. The portrayal of sex trafficking as a vast, violent and horrific practice serves as an act of statecraft that authorizes the state to fight traffickers and organized crime, and less visibly to reinstate its boundaries at a historically critical moment when the meaning of the nation is undergoing significant revision.

The anxieties encapsulated in this crisis over boundaries encounter one another at the site of migrant sex workers, and via criminalization, subject women to a violent regime of policing in the name of staving off or covering these crises.

(2003: 59)

Thus, the rapid deportation of illegal migrants and victims is used as a strategy to empower the state to contest the fear of 'invasion' from the 'Others', in order to protect the political community. This perspective precludes the

understanding of the complex structural, social and economic aspects of women's migration including the possibility that 'trafficked women' may be migrant (sex) workers and/or are responding to labour demands in the West.

(ibid.: 58)

Furthermore, these discourses function as a site at which the state can intrude upon the most intimate realms of life – how and where a woman uses her sexuality – with the scope of regulating public order and morality (Berman 2003; Wijers & van Doorninck 2002).

The latter aspect is analysed in depth also by Luibhéid who claims that immigration control serves as a site for the regulation of sexual norms, identities and behaviours, and to construct the nation, the symbols of nationhood, and its people in particular ways (2003). Official designated identities, which are not just sexual, but also gendered, racial, ethnic and class-based are "treated as evidence that undesirable sexual acts would likely occur" and have to be disciplined (ibid.: xiv). Luibhéid brings the example of the historic practice of impeding the entry into the US to working-class Chinese women, "because their intersecting gender, class, ethnic, and racial identities led

to suspicion that they were likely to engage in prostitution” (ibid.: xv). The example of how racialized gender identities are treated as presupposing particular sexual acts is not just a practice of the past, but is still widely in place, as I discuss in chapter 6 in relation to the treatment of Black migrant women in Italy.

*Some comments on the scholarship produced on prostitution-related migrations*

Before explaining how I position my own study vis-à-vis the theoretical perspectives analysed here on prostitution-related migrations, there are a number of aspects that are relevant to point out in relation to the literature presented. The first point concerns the acrimony that characterizes much of the scholarship produced around issues of prostitution, and particularly the ideological conflict between radical and pro-sex feminist perspectives. As Hubbard (1999) and Bell (1994) note, writing about prostitution can never be an unproblematic exercise. The prostitute body has been a site of struggle for feminists in particular because it is a terrain on which they contest sexuality, desire and the writing of the female body and whereupon different expectations, desires and ideologies are projected (Bell 1994). Nevertheless, despite very contrasting views on the issue, a dialogue that goes beyond divergent ideas is sorely needed. Far from being rhetorical, this comment is in fact a sincere quest for a constructive exchange among scholars who conduct research in this field. In the course of the past five years, I witnessed for myself, while participating in and presenting at international conferences, how panels and workshops on sexual trafficking<sup>13</sup> often turn out to be a site for ferocious debates that rarely move beyond the either/or-ism of distinct perspectives.

Related to this latter point about the very divided and divisive fields of studies on (transnational) prostitution, is the fact that often the voices of the prostitute women included in this scholarship are reproduced through quotes from interviews which are recycled from one source to another. This becomes problematic when the quotes selected appear to be ‘cherry picked’ depending on the approach taken by those who adopt them, and are applied to support their own views and preoccupation about prostitution

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<sup>13</sup> In this respect, it is interesting to note the neglect of a migration perspective in this area which is also reflected in the organization of international conferences, where sex trafficking panels are rarely included in areas of migration analysis.



(O'Connell Davidson 1998). Such common practices raise methodological concerns about the use, and abuse, of personal narratives that is particularly widespread in prostitution/trafficking scholarship. Indeed, as Acker et alia points out,

the act of looking at interviews, summarizing another's life, and placing it within a context is an act of objectification. [...] The question becomes how to produce an analysis which goes beyond the experience of the researched while still granting them subjectivity. How do we explain the lives of others without violating their reality?

(1983: 429)

Social researchers retain a great amount of power in relation to how they use and represent the lives and ideas of the researched (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002), especially those whose voice have been kept silenced all along. Making knowledge claims that derive from the interpretation of the researcher's selection of data is highly problematic, and rather than actually providing a space from where these voices can be heard, it silences them even more by altering their original meaning. I am not suggesting here that we should avoid the use of quotes or accounts of women sex migrants, or any other subject of research. Rather, I want to stress the need for a more critical reflection of the exercise of power in the production of knowledge, especially in relation to contested issues such as the one under analysis here.<sup>14</sup>

This same consideration applies to organizations that operate in the field of trafficking to provide support to the women involved in it. For example, in order to make their arguments even more poignant, many anti-trafficking organizations' publications and websites, including CATW, display a selection of the most abhorrent details of the sexual exploitation described by some victims of trafficking. Although it is undeniable that sexual trafficking is a practice that violates the human rights of the person and it may be characterized by brutal violence, accounts of trafficked women that focus *exclusively* on the extreme make little contribution to the knowledge on the issue. On the contrary, they have a part in bringing about an even more disfigured image of a phenomenon which needs to be understood and addressed in its complex, multiple and factual manifestations (see also chapter 5 and 6).

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<sup>14</sup> As I discuss in the following chapter, the employment of a feminist methodology, especially in relation to research on/with 'vulnerable' women, enables to question and self-reflexively explore relations between knowledge and power.

Another point that needs to be made is again related to *ad hoc* representations of (migrant) prostitutes that are used to validate one or other perspective. It is worth noting how both pro sex feminists' assessment of radical feminist understandings and radical feminists themselves have focused almost exclusively on the portrayal of Third World women as victims. However there are other constructions of racialized and sexualities identities that need to be considered, because they are also widespread in discourses produced around sex trafficking and migrant prostitution; for example, the image of the exotic Asian/oriental woman, "sensuous, seductive, full of Eastern promise", whose sexuality "is projected as suitably controlled but vulnerable" (Brah 1996: 78), or the historical sexualization of Black women as sexually uncontrolled, irresponsible and uncivilized (see chapter 6). The question here is why these constructions have not been accounted for, despite the fact that they play a crucial role in determining the socio-political response to the presence of migrant prostitutes. As Ahmed states, the female body – either sexed or sexy – has become "somewhat of an abstraction, that is, a way of signalling a certain kind of feminist rhetoric" (2000: 41). In this sense, to address the body of Third World women, or its construction, as abused and victimized serves the purpose of advancing both the radical and sex work feminists' agenda. In the case of the former by finding a justification to intervene and rescue, for the latter to propose an alternative reading that seeks to dismantle the iconicity of the oppressed victim and to project onto it another oppositional allegory - that of the 'content sex worker'. In both cases victimized Third World women's bodies become objects upon which different ideologies are endorsed to serve someone else's purposes.

## **5. Theoretical underpinnings and analytical perspective of this study**

One of the main considerations that arises from the discussion presented so far is that a large body of existing literature conflates the contemporary phenomenon of prostitution-related migrations with either trafficking for sexual purposes or exclusively with the experience of sex work *per se*. The fact of being categorized and analysed as either victims of transnational criminal networks and/or male sexual exploitation, or as sex workers, has left a vacuum in the analysis of the aspects connected with the migration dynamics of migrant women operating in the sex industry.

As I explained, more recent work in this area has problematized these approaches and reclaimed trafficking as an issue of migration, thus aiming at looking at it from many more perspectives than just voluntariness or coercion vis-à-vis prostitution. In this way, these contributions have called attention to a new approach in the gender and migration literature that had started to address female sex migrations with an exclusive focus on trafficking, and had appropriated uncritically the widespread victim-centric approach to the phenomenon.

This thesis intends to further contribute to this new stream of research in the connections between migration and prostitution, with a specific interest in exploring the types of knowledge produced around migrant prostitution and the factors that determine the response to this phenomenon, specifically in the Italian context. The introductory chapter already explained that the analysis of this study is not circumscribed to sex trafficking or trafficked women. Rather, I develop my investigation around the collective notion of ‘foreign prostitutes’ that is often adopted in Italy to describe and address migrant women operating in the sex industry. I look at ‘foreign prostitution’ as a socially constructed category and seek to explore: how it has become a dominant notion, the meanings attached to it, and how it has come to inform legal discourses, migration regimes, and everyday institutional and social practices. Looking at these processes within a migration perspective allows the exploration of gendered, racialized, sexed and sexualized constructions and representations of ‘foreign prostitutes’ that in turn influence policies and practices that impact on their own mobility, settlement, assimilation or exclusion as migrants.

One of the crucial factors that emerge from the exploration of the meanings attached to ‘foreign prostitution’ is the constitutive role that sexuality and sexual practices play in the formation and definitions of citizenship and nation, that in turn are crucial in determining both migration regimes and migrants’ mobility. This aspect raises important considerations on how migration literature has confronted and explored issues of sexuality. Manalasan, in his contribution to the 2006 IMR mentioned earlier, claims that the focus on gender in migration studies has subsumed sexuality conceptually and theoretically, as a reflection of the tensions between gender and sex/sexuality in feminist scholarship<sup>15</sup> (2006). Nevertheless, as Luibhéid points out, migratory movements are

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<sup>15</sup> Suffice it to say here that there are different perspectives over the sex/gender distinction. Some claim that a separation between the two should be maintained conceptually (Rubin 1993; Jackson and Scott 2000), whilst others argue towards its redundancy (Gatens 1983; Butler 1990).

controlled and mediated by state authorities not only on the basis of racial, ethnic and gender preferences and prohibitions, but also through sexualized notions and stereotypes in migration law and practices (2002). This study certainly confirms this view, given the centrality of sexuality in the construction of the notion of ‘foreign prostitution’ that has relevance not only at the state level and its regulations, but also in governmental politics, local settings, and social and individual interactions.

Indeed, sexuality itself is a contested issue, and further explanations are needed here to specify in which sense I suggest to employing it within this study. First of all, I refer to sexuality as socially and not as biologically determined. As Weeks states “what we so confidently know as ‘sexuality’ is [...] a product of many influences and social interventions. It does not exist outside history but is a historical product. This is what we mean by ‘the social construction’ of sexuality” (2002: 11). For this reason

we cannot define anything sexual in an absolute sense, for what is ‘sexual’ in one society may not necessarily be sexual in another. An act is not sexual by virtue of its inherent properties- [but] becomes sexual by the application of socially learned meanings. Sexual behaviour is in this sense ‘socially scripted’ in that it is a ‘part’ that is learned and acted on within a social context, and different social contexts have different social scripts. In using the term ‘sexuality’, then, I am referring not just to genital sexual activity, but to all the attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviours which might be seen to have some sexual significance in our society. From this starting point it is possible to establish a theoretical framework in which female sexuality – and its implications – may be better understood.

(Jackson 1996: 62)

This quote from Jackson’s discussion of the social construction of female sexuality is reported here because it is within this conceptual meaning that sexuality is adopted in this study to address the meanings and constructions that are attached to prostitution as a gendered, sexed and sexualized practice within a migration framework and in the Italian context.

As a concluding remark to this section, it is important to note that my concern with and approach to the issues raised in this study have been highly influenced by the numerous contributions that feminist scholarship has made in a number of different areas of social research. Feminists’ contributions on gendered and racialized systems and structures of social reality were a crucial point of reference in the analysis and problematization of perspectives on migration regimes, policies and social practices in

Italy. The work of third world and postcolonial feminism, in particular, has been essential in developing my own critical outlook on constructions of 'Otherness' and related to this, to the power of representations of 'Others'.

Certainly, the fact of being informed by feminist theory, does not necessarily make research 'feminist research', neither does the specific focus on gender and gendered social lives. Rather, as Ramazanoglu and Holland specify,

The point of doing feminist research [is...] to give insights into gendered social existence that would otherwise not exist. [...] What appears to make some projects feminist [...] is dependence on a normative framework that interrelates 'injustice', a politics for 'women' (however these categories are understood), ethical practices that eschew the 'unjust' exercise of power, and theory that conceptualizes gendered power within this normative framework.

(2002: 147)

In this sense, my own research is aimed at uncovering and exploring these issues and their interrelation, with the final aim of making a contribution to the understanding of gendered injustice towards migrant women operating in the sex industry, with, at the same time, a commitment to produce a useful knowledge that can initiate social change and improvements in the responses to their presence.

## **6. Concluding remarks**

In this chapter the concern was primarily with how academic scholarship has looked at prostitution-related migrations of women, and the extent to which the work produced so far provides a conceptual space for a sufficiently comprehensive analysis, in order to understand its complexity. Moreover, after the discussion of these aspects, I presented the analytical perspective informing this study, which in turn builds on more recent contributions in the field of gender and migration.

As I explained in the first section, the androcentric focus that characterized the field of migration studies since its inception, and that still persists today, has resulted in the neglect of research on migrant women that has overshadowed their large presence. To challenge this trend, substantial efforts have been spent in the past decades in the formulation of new epistemological approaches that would include their presence. In particular, the vital injection of the knowledge and insights of feminist scholars has had a

profound impact on the course of migration theory and opened a new and much needed space of enquiry in gender and migration research. Further contributions also challenged essentializing notions in the field, including the claim that there is a typical migration experience or a monolithic 'migrant-woman' category, and pointed to a comprehensive and intersectional analysis in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of migration-related processes and dynamics.

Nevertheless, the first contributions on prostitution-related migrations coming from the gender and migration scholarship tended to look at female sex migrants exclusively as 'sex-slaves' and 'victims', thus overlooking other aspects constituting the dynamics of their migrations. As explained in the second section, this approach has been influenced by feminist debates around the issue of prostitution, that have created deeply divided camps between those who view it as a form of sexual exploitation and others who conceptualize it as sex work and reclaim its legitimacy as a form of labour. I argued that both the radical feminist and the sex work perspectives are inadequate to speak about the complexity of female sex migrations. Both the focus on exploitation and on prostitution as work have in fact contributed to the theoretical and conceptual collapse of the migration component in prostitution-related migrations.

In the third part of the chapter the focus shifted to the exploration of a new framework of analysis where prostitution-related migrations are looked at through a migration perspective, which, as shown in this study, explores how the intersection of gender, 'race' and sexuality, among other crucial factors, contributes to representations of migrant prostitutes that have bearings on their migration patterns.

As a final remark, it is relevant to mention that the perspectives outlined in this chapter raise issues and present approaches that are not exclusively confined to academic debates and controversies, but they also play an important role in shaping institutional discourses and social practices. For example, as already pointed out, the gendered bias in migration research still informs migration policies to the extent that independent migrant women are often either treated suspiciously (potential criminals/prostitutes) or are seen as particularly vulnerable, and because they lack the support of a male figure, they are likely to attract danger. Similarly, essentialized representations of migrant prostitutes – as either unaware victims of criminal traffickers or as individuals who took rational economic action to embark on sex migrations – inform, for example, legislations, political debates, public perceptions, policies and the modalities in which they are

enforced. In this way they ignore and constrain the much broader complexity of prostitution-related migrations of women.

These aspects are further explored and analysed in part III of this thesis. In the following chapter I present the methodology and methods employed in carrying out my study, and subsequently, in part II, I give an overview of the Italian socio-political context which is at the centre of the analysis of this study.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Methodology, methods and sources**

#### **1. Introduction**

This thesis explores the production and reproduction of the socially constructed notion of ‘foreign prostitution’, the political and ideological underpinnings of its meaning(s), the ways they translate into social practices, and the implication they have on the lives of those migrant women who are labelled as ‘foreign prostitutes’ in the Italian context. In order to investigate these aspects, a plurality of voices and perspectives were collected and analysed in the course of desk-based and ethnographic research. In this chapter I explain how the research process itself has taken place. More specifically, I outline the theory informing my research approach (methodology), and delineate the research design and its development, as well as the techniques for gathering material (methods), and the data analysis applied. I also discuss methodological concerns in confronting critical findings, situations and events in the field.

#### **2. Methodology**

In the previous chapter I explained how my analysis of the issues mentioned above is informed by a feminist perspective, which is grounded in the commitment to uncover, explore and understand exclusionary policies and practices towards ‘foreign prostitutes’, but also to contribute to challenging the social systems and processes that play a part in maintaining and reproducing them. This approach also informed the methodology I employed.

Methodology in social research is concerned with the research procedures that make knowledge valid and authoritative (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002), and involves



describing and analyzing the methods used, evaluating their value, detailing the dilemmas their usage causes and exploring the relationship between the methods that we use and how we use them, and the production and presentation of our data – our ‘findings’. Thinking methodologically is theorizing about how we find things out; it is about the relationship between the process and the product of research.

(Letherby 2003: 5)

This thesis adopts a feminist qualitative research methodology in order to carry out a thorough investigation into the complexity of the processes under analysis and to address the aims of this study. What constitutes ‘feminist research’ – from a methodological perspective – and ‘qualitative analysis’ or, the combination of both, ‘feminist qualitative analysis’ is still subject to various, often contested, interpretations in the scholarly literature – both feminist and not (Harding 1991; Maynard and Purvis 1994; Alasuutari 1995; et alia). Qualitative analysis assumes different meanings for different traditions of research as it often transcends scholarly disciplines, subject matter and fields of enquiry (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Lincoln and Denzin 2000). I refer in particular to the conceptual definition offered by Miles and Huberman:

Qualitative research is conducted through an intense and/or prolonged contact with a ‘field’ or life situation [...]. The researcher’s role is to gain a ‘holistic’ (systemic, encompassing, integrated) overview of the context under study: its logic, arrangements, its explicit and implicit rules. [...] The researcher attempts to capture data on the perceptions of local actors ‘from the inside’ through a process of deep attentiveness, of empathetic understanding.

(1994: 6)

While the qualitative nature of my research process fits with the above definition, its distinctive feminist component is found in the modalities and analysis of how research proceeded, the way I located myself within the research process, the questions that I asked, their interpretation, and the purpose of the work itself, i.e. research *on* women seen also as research *for* women (Kelly 1988; Maynard and Purvis 1994). Crucially, my theoretical perspective and approach to empirical analysis are based on the awareness that material conditions and social interactions cannot transcend intersections of gender, ‘race’, ethnicity, sexuality and class divisions (Hill Collins 1994). Lastly, the attention for the affective component of the study as well as the power implicated in the search for data were crucial in the choices I made in relation to how and whether to approach particularly vulnerable groups of women. This is a fundamental aspect of feminist

research and methodology which maintains as one of its main concerns the undertaking of research in ways that are non-exploitative, by paying particular attention to the power dimension between the researcher and the researched (Maynard and Purvis 1994; Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002; Letherby 2003).

### **3. The first stages of the research process: getting started**

In this section I outline the phases that characterized the first stages of my research. More specifically, I begin with some comments on my getting familiar with the topic and field of this study, and then proceed to explain the process of collecting documentary sources, and the type of data analysis adopted.

#### *Getting familiar with the field*

As Crabtree and Miller point out, prior to initiating qualitative data-collection techniques, the researcher needs to develop familiarity with “the setting, participants, and activities along with a set of questions concerning these” (1992: 14). Before engaging in my doctoral research, valuable knowledge of aspects of prostitution-related migrations to Europe was gained while working as project officer for a small non-governmental organization that provided advice and support to local and migrant female prostitutes in southern Hungary. In the course of this experience I became familiar with some of the complexities and problems connected with both street and indoor prostitution. I observed patterns of hostile behaviour in the societal and institutional response to the expanding sex industry in the country – especially when this involved minority women, and particularly Roma, who are highly stigmatized in Hungary. I also learned about the unequal power relationship between myself (my colleagues, and my organization in general) and the women we were employed to assist. Although located in a very different socio-political and cultural context, in Hungary I started gathering information and reflected upon issues related to my job that not only eventually led me to choose the subject of this thesis, but also proved to be important in my analysis of the Italian case. Retrospectively, I consider the time spent in Hungary (2000-2001) as a preparatory phase to my doctoral research during which I worked with an organization similar to the ones I

was going to observe as a researcher. Moreover, the contacts and trust that I later established with the staff of Italian organizations during fieldwork was facilitated when I mentioned that I had previously been a 'colleague'. Lastly, I also learned how easily, as a recent graduate from a western European country, with very little working experience and no training, I could be employed in a country whose language I did not understand, and be put in a position of responsibility within such a complex field of work, because my presence would give credibility to the organization and enhance the chances of attracting funds. These political aspects became clear to me only later, but were important to stimulate my reflections over the ethics of 'help' that I critically analyse in this study.

### *The collection of documentary sources*

The systematic research for this thesis began with the collection of a variety of secondary sources. These include Italian legislations and related legal documents on migration, prostitution and trafficking; governmental reports, statistics and statements; documentation of political debates; informative material made available by local authorities, Italian and international NGOs (including mission statements, annual reports, newsletters, guidelines for practitioners, etc.); newspaper and magazine articles; records of national seminars and conferences, as well as Italian scholarly literature on the issues covered by this study.

While many of these resources are published on the Internet, I was able to collect those which are not available electronically by gaining access to a number of Italian libraries and resource centres, with specific Italian language collections on migration and prostitution. More specifically, I drew upon the resources of the Centre for Migration Studies (*Centro Studi Emigrazione*) in Rome, where I traced a number of academic Italian journal articles on prostitution-related migrations, and on female migrations, more generally, in the Italian context. Equally resourceful were the International Centre for Family Studies (*Centro Internazionale Studi Famiglia*) in Milan, where I collected many articles and papers in Catholic journals and magazines, and the archive collection on prostitution and feminism at the feminist foundation *Fondazione Badaracco* in Milan. Moreover, during my fieldwork peregrinations in the Italian peninsula I managed to acquire the numerous leaflets, pamphlets and annual reports produced by Implementation

Agencies across the country, and also monographs or edited collections published by practitioners about their experiences in the field.

As mentioned, through the Internet I was able to easily access many documents that would have been more complicated to find otherwise (including political debates and also various pieces of legislation), and many more I would not necessarily have known about in the first place. Electronic sources that I found particularly relevant included material available from the websites of political parties, from where I could retrieve statements and commentaries about the 2002-2003 debates on a new law on prostitution analysed in chapter 5. Crucially, the Northern League's official national website<sup>1</sup> includes policy proposals made in relation to these debates, and also other numerous relevant documents that are at the basis of its political manifesto and agenda. Similarly, regional or local websites of the Northern League contains other relevant material, including a selection of the placards and leaflets displayed and distributed in the course of various political campaigns, one of which is included in the discussion of chapter 6. Moreover, what I thought initially to be a most unfortunate coincidence, my parents living in the same building as a major Northern League headquarters, proved to be quite useful, giving me access to more placards, leaflets and a variety of propaganda material. Lastly, in relation to my research on the Northern League's positions on ('foreign') prostitution (see chapters 5 and 7), I contacted the person who authored the vast majority of its documents hoping to be able to have a meeting. Although he diplomatically declined the invitation, he did send me more relevant documentation that is not publicly available.

For an evaluation of the selections of representations used in media coverage of 'foreign prostitution', I collected articles in six national newspapers which represent a large swathe of the Italian political spectrum: *Il Corriere della Sera* (centre/centre right), *La Repubblica* (centre-left), *Il Manifesto* (left), *Il Giornale* (right) and *L'Avvenire* (Catholic, centre-right). I focused in particular, but not exclusively, on the standpoints of each newspaper on the 2002-2003 events spurred by the Government proposal to change the current law on prostitution and the polemics/debates that it raised (see chapter 5). The relatively limited numbers of articles on the phenomenon of trafficking and 'foreign prostitution' appearing in the above-mentioned newspapers between 1990 and 2000 were

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.leganord.org>

also collected with the aim of gaining a better understanding of the development of media discourses surrounding 'foreign prostitution' in the course of this decade.

As this overview shows, in conducting preliminary and in-depth research for this study I have had at my disposal a vast array of documentary sources. Following Scott's definition, I use the term 'document' here in its most general sense, as a written text (1990). Thus, ministerial documents, laws, political debates and speeches, reports, the content of the mass media, of websites, informative or propaganda leaflets can all be incorporated under this broad category. All of them were crucial to developing my own understanding of the context of the phenomenon of 'foreign prostitution' in Italy, and of the ways it is addressed in different settings and for different purposes. Moreover, their content has relevance for this study not only because they constitute particular readings of a social event, but also in that "documents, read as the sedimentation of social practices, have the potential to inform and structure the decisions which people make on a daily and longer-term basis" (May 2001: 174).

In light of this consideration, and knowing that the documentary sources mentioned above vary in scope and style, I used and read them differently, with a focus on their original purpose, the process and social context of their production, and the target audience of their messages, paying attention to what they contain and what they exclude. I investigated each of them asking how they reflect, address and contribute to reinforce an already socially constructed reality – be it 'foreign prostitution', migration, trafficking, etc. Rather than adopting a quantitative textual analysis – that would have focussed on a systematic counting of the number of times a specific term has occurred or of the number of column inches devoted to a particular topic – I employed a qualitative emphasis in the exploration of these texts, i.e. an investigation of the *meanings* of words and phrases in each of them and in relation to one another (Scott 1990). As Agger suggests, this way of proceeding "tells us a great deal about the societies in which writers write and readers read" (1991: 7, quoted in May 2001: 183), and enables the researcher to consider both the ways in which meanings are constructed, and the ways in which *new* meanings are adopted and developed in the texts analysed (May 2001). This comment applies also to legislative measures which, as explained in chapter 4, are based on but also contribute to develop specific sexed, sexualized and gendered constructions of legal subjects in the context of measures formulated in relation to sex trafficking.

Through the analysis of these documents, I identified three key themes to pursue with further in-depth and fieldwork research: a) the discourses elaborated and related strategies enacted by IAs/NGOs in the provision of services for ‘foreign prostitutes’ in Italy, b) the political manipulation of the issue of ‘foreign prostitution’ in the context of the Government’s anti-immigration and anti-prostitution politics and policies, and c) the racialized and sexualized representation of ‘foreign prostitutes’.

Before proceeding to the discussion of the data collection through ethnographic research, another resource needs to be added in this discussion, and which I deliberately kept separate from the above due to its distinct – virtual and interactive – nature, i.e. the email list/on-line network of the Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitutes, to which I am subscribed. This virtual space of interactive communication and information was set up in 2001 and has since then been fluctuatingly active, with a peak of messages and participation during 2002 and 2003, after the Government submitted a proposal for a new law on prostitution. In a very short time, thanks to the space offered by this electronic list, a virtual epistemic community was created discussing the proposed legislations, the issue of prostitution in general, and also personal matters (health-related, problems with the police, prices of the services, etc.) connected to the sex industry. As I explain in chapter 4, given its public access, the list has also been verbally attacked by individuals who sent extremely offensive messages<sup>2</sup>. Aside from these cases (which are interesting *per se*), the list has been a valuable tool to gain updated information on the debates on prostitution from the point of view of prostitutes and clients, who communicated with each other in a space where they felt comfortable, protected as they were by the anonymity and ‘invisibility’ offered by computer-mediated communication (Garton, Haythornthwaite et al. 1999), to express their opinions and concerns (see chapter 5).

The analysis of the data gathered from this source does not differ significantly from the one adopted for the above mentioned material, being based on a qualitative reading of the contributions of the email list members that took into consideration the context in which they were produced, the audience they targeted and the identity of the person who sent each message. Indeed, the authenticity of the identity of whoever participates in the cyber-communication of a virtual networks is not provable, and there is a possibility that some of the contributions were ‘made up’ rather than expressing

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<sup>2</sup> It needs to be noted that the access to the e-list was restricted in late 2002 by a subscription policy, which is still free and allows anonymity, but has limited the interferences of disrupting ‘intruders’.

‘real’ concerns. The data are thus treated with this caveat, and also with the awareness, pointed out by methodological studies on on-line research, that computer-mediated communication is often characterized by high-levels of spontaneous self-disclosure which is favoured by the visual, but also identity anonymousness of the exchange (Jones 1999; Joinson 2001)

#### **4. The fieldwork**

After conducting a first analysis of the material collected, and in light of the preliminary selection of the three themes previously mentioned, I identified a number of parameters that would serve to organize the process of empirical research. These were, in line with Miles and Huberman’s suggestion,

the setting (where the research will take place); the actors (who will be observed or interviewed); the events (what the actors will be observed doing or interviewed about); and the process (the evolving nature of events undertaken by the actors within the setting).

(1994: 149)

Based on these, and informed by my methodological approach I proceeded to select the methods – interviews and participant observation – and the sample of my ethnographic research. In this section I explain the rationale for these choices, the strategies adopted in gaining access to my respondents, the methods employed, and finally, I discuss how I analysed my findings.

##### *Profile of the sample*

In order to address the research questions formulated for this study, I initially selected a sample of organizations (IAs/NGOs)<sup>3</sup> that provide support to migrant female prostitutes. These bodies, and the people working in them play a crucial role in the provision of assistance to these women and often are the only ones to act as intermediaries between them and other Italian social institutions. As I discuss in the third part of the thesis, the

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<sup>3</sup> I use this formulation to indicate that the organizations contacted included both Article 18 Implementation Agencies and other non-governmental associations that work independently from Article 18 programs.

quality, nature and aim of the services provided have a crucial impact on the lives of the women they are targeting.

The organizations were selected primarily on the basis of the purpose they give to their support strategies (empowerment, redemption, rescue, etc.) vis-à-vis their ideological stance on prostitution (prostitution seen as a form of labour, as a sin, as exploitation and abuse, etc). In addition, other aspects of the interventions provided were taken into consideration: type of assistance offered (including accommodation, legal help, health and social services, educational and training activities, job insertion), period of existence, whether operating independently or funded by the Government under Article 18, and lastly, degrees of national and local advocacy. I subsequently categorized the organizations into three typologies: 1) faith-based organizations, 2) non-faith based voluntary organizations and social cooperatives (including advocacy and migrant groups) 3) public bodies (mainly local municipalities). Following the criteria mentioned above, I then proceeded to select a sample of organizations from each category so that it would reflect each group's numerical prevalence. Between 2002 and 2005, in the course of four periods of fieldwork<sup>4</sup>, I conducted a total of 35 interviews, 11 with the staff of 6 different faith-based organizations, 18 with 8 voluntary organizations and social cooperatives, and 6 with 3 public institutions. The geographical distribution of the organizations contacted also reflects their numerical presence in the national territory. 10 are based in the North, 5 in Central Italy and 2 in the South (for more details see tables 1, 2, and 3, and figure 1).

Apart from two Nigerian cultural mediators, the IA/NGO respondents that I approached and interviewed were white Italian women and men. They cover numerous roles, many of which are not always easy to define with precision. Some are individuals belonging to a religious order who operate in a particular organization without covering a position easily identifiable with any specific professional function. Others claimed 'to be in charge' of the day-to-day running of an organization, and the rest can be more straightforwardly identified as lawyers, project managers/officers/directors, volunteers and cultural mediators. The latter have become popular amongst the staff of organizations dealing with migrant prostitutes only relatively recently. TAMPEP, the European network for HIV/STI prevention and health promotion among migrant sex

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<sup>4</sup> Summer 2002, 2003, 2004 and spring 2005.



workers<sup>5</sup>, and the Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitutes (the Committee hereafter), its affiliate in Italy, were amongst the first to point out the key importance of this professional figure in work with migrant sex workers, and as a reference point for sex workers and governmental and non-governmental institutions addressing their needs (TAMPEP 2001). TAMPEP defines cultural mediators as people – usually women, when dealing with female prostitution – belonging to the same ethnic/cultural group or nationality as the migrant sex workers they work with, and “therefore capable of recognizing and appreciating the cultural and social mechanisms influencing their behaviour and choices” (ibid. : 19). Their main function is to mediate and facilitate communication and understanding of the different cultures of the migrant and of that of the ‘receiving country’ (TAMPEP 2007). Apart from the IA of the Committee who has a permanent cultural mediator as a member of its staff, other organizations employ them on a consultancy basis, often only occasionally or, due to lack of funds, simply cannot afford them. Other organizations I visited claimed that they did not need this figure and, in fact, ‘are better off without them’. Less clear are the roles of so-called *operatori/operatrici* (operators) and *educatori/educatrici professionali* (professional educators), that could be both translated as social workers. However, as Andrijasevic points out, the term ‘social worker’ in English is not the accurate translation of the Italian ‘*operatrice/operatore*’ which has a less institutional role “usually a flexible and precarious worker who does not have a ‘classical’ formation of a social worker but instead a shorter theoretical formation and practical training for a particular type of work” (2004: 16). On the other hand, in order to be an *educatore/educatrice*, one requires a professional qualification (achieved through a specific diploma) to learn skills and perform activities that are closer to the job description of UK social workers.

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<sup>5</sup> TAMPEP was launched in 1993 by the Mr A. de Graaf Stichting, also known as the Dutch Institute for Prostitution Issues, with headquarters in Amsterdam. STI stands for Sexually Transmitted Infections.

Figure 1: Map of Italy with regions of fieldwork underlined



**Table 1: Sample of public bodies operating with female migrant prostitutes**

Name	Region	Years of activity in this field as of 2007	Total no. of interviews	Year of contact
1 Alloro	Veneto	12	2	2002
2 Casa	Apulia	9	3	2005
3 Lilla	Emilia Romagna	12	1	2004
TOTAL SAMPLE			6	

**Table 2: Sample of faith-based organizations**

Name <sup>6</sup>	Religious affiliation	Region	Years of activity in this field as of 2007	Total no. of interviews	Year of contact
1 Speranza	Catholic	Emilia Romagna, Piedmont <sup>7</sup>	17	5	2002, 2004, 2005
2 Parola	Catholic	Lombardy	12	1	2002
3 Vita	Evangelic	Lazio	7	1	2002
5 Voce	Catholic	Piedmont	7	1	2004
6 Familia	Catholic	Lombardy	17+	2	2004
7 Migrante	Catholic	Piedmont	12	1	2005
TOTAL SAMPLE			11		

**Table 3: Sample of voluntary organizations and social cooperatives**

Name	Region	Years of activity in this field as of 2007	Total no. of interviews	Year of contact
1 Strada	Abruzzo	17	5	2002
2 Valore	Friuli Venezia Giulia	12	6	2003, 2005
3 Fiore	Piedmont	12	2	2002
4 Spazio	Lazio	12	1	2003
5 Rosa	Veneto	9	1	2002
7 Viola	Piedmont	9	1	2005
8 Petunia	Apulia	7	2	2005
TOTAL SAMPLE			18	

### *Getting in*

The phases of ‘infiltration’ in the field and ‘ingratiation’ (Cassell and Symon 2004) of people working with the organizations mentioned here were, in the majority of cases, unexpectedly easy. In order to contact the relevant actors and obtain approval to carry

<sup>6</sup> For confidentiality reasons all the names of the organizations are changed, and the places specified in the tables refer more generally to the region where the organizations are based (see also later sections of this chapter).

<sup>7</sup> This is one of the largest organizations in Italy with headquarters in one specific region, but with numerous affiliated groups all over Italy. I made contact with and visited people operating in three different locations.

out the fieldwork, I sent an electronic mail in which I introduced myself and the scope of my research. When I received a positive response, I generally followed up this first contact with a telephone call in which I provided further details about my research and arranged a date for a visit. In the infrequent cases in which I did not get any response, and when an organization did not have an email address, I pursued the contact directly by phone. In some cases I contacted the same organization more than once, either by phone or visiting again in person in order to have a better understanding of the “evolving nature of events undertaken by the actors within the setting” (Creswell 1994: 149) over a longer period of time.

The majority of the people I entered into contact with showed interest in my research, gave me various types of informative material, often suggested the names of other organizations to contact, and in some cases encouraged me to stay longer to ‘help out’ with their day-to-day activities, especially in the summer when some of the staff were away on holiday.

I also tried to make contact with three migrant groups: one registered ‘multicultural association’ run by and for migrant women, and two informal support groups of Nigerian women in Italy. The aim was to establish whether these different types of associations provide any kind of help or support to migrant prostitutes, and if so, whether they cooperate with other associations. While I managed to reach the first and interview some of the staff, it turned out to be impossible to reach the other two NGOs, despite repeated attempts. As I found out only later, the latter had been closed due to lack of financial resources.

In one other instance I was unable to carry out interviews with the staff of a particularly important Implementation Agency, the *Fondazione Regina Pacis* (Regina Pacis Foundation). I had been keen on getting in touch with the priest running it, don Cesare Lodeserto, after reading and hearing many controversial statements on the supposedly very low standards of accommodation and treatment – often described as prison-like – offered in his shelter house. For three years, my phone calls and emails went un-answered, until finally, in March 2005, I managed to get in touch with don Cesare and agreed to meet him a month later. I soon realized while talking to people from other organizations, that having been able to arrange an interview with the (in)famous priest was quite rare, in that the bad publicity that the organization had received through the media led its members to avoid contact with visitors/journalists, etc.

In April 2005, the night before our appointment had been scheduled, after I had already travelled a long way towards the city for our meeting, national news on television were reporting that don Lodeserto had been arrested on that same day on charges of kidnapping and personal violence related to the murder of a migrant man who had been under his custody. The whole event caused a big scandal within Article 18 organizations, and the fact that I was supposed to meet the incriminated priest the day after he was arrested became an anecdote amongst the organizations that I visited later on. In some instances people jokingly started to refer to me as 'don Lodeserto's friend'. Nevertheless, my missed interview had its positive effects, as it was mentioned more than once by my informants when, through snowballing, I was introduced to people working in other organizations whose interest in my work was also stimulated by this particular detail.

### *Interviews*

By interviewing people occupying various positions both within Implementation Agencies and other non-governmental associations that do not operate as part of Article 18 programs, I expected to gain a better knowledge of the motivations informing their activities, how these are put into practice on a daily basis, the type of relationship established with the target group, to what extent and whether it was based on any hierarchical power relations, and if so, with what consequences. I also aimed at understanding the ways they operate, and wanted to investigate in greater depth how and to what extent different perspectives and beliefs on prostitution and migration are reflected in the typologies of support enacted by each organization. Lastly, I hoped that once I managed to establish trust with my respondents, I could be put into contact with migrant women prostitutes themselves and, as my initial intention was, carry out interviews with them as well<sup>8</sup>. As I explain in a later section, I eventually decided not to pursue this sample group as I had initially intended.

The 35 interviews carried out with staff members of various IAs/NGOs and public bodies were open-ended and conducted in a semi-structured format with a set of basic questions which I prepared in a guiding questionnaire (see Table 4). These were adapted to the roles of the people interviewed and to the ideological stance of the

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<sup>8</sup> I also thought that establishing contacts through the facilitation of IA/NGO staff would reduce the risk (for both the women and myself) involved in trying to engage with them on my own when they operate on the streets, for example, by attracting the police, violence caused by pimps or other women, etc.

organization. I initially asked basic questions about legal and procedural aspects of the implementation of Article 18, and/or of the nature of the support services provided, and then focused progressively on details such as the interviewee's view on the organization's approach to prostitution, the diversity of perspectives on the latter among other organizations, the societal response to the presence of 'foreign prostitutes', etc. Each interview lasted between 40 and 90 minutes, the majority of them took place with one person, and only in three cases with a small group, and were all carried in the offices of the various organizations. When interviews were tape recorded I translated them *verbatim*. Only in a few cases have people asked not to be recorded. In two instances I felt it inappropriate in order not to spoil what I felt was a fragile equilibrium.

In many instances informal discussions occurred during the (often numerous) coffee breaks and also over lunch. Although in the course of the interviews my respondents were generally very spontaneous and outspoken, these informal conversations were seen as an opportunity to express even more candid perspectives. This type of exchange became particularly frequent in the course of participant observation. It was obviously not recorded, however I took extensive notes at the end of each day or when possible soon afterwards.

Crucially, interviews provided material to explore the extent to which normative values and cultural practices (historical stigmatization and condemnation of prostitution/prostitutes, racialization and sexualization of 'foreign prostitutes', anti-immigration sentiments, etc.) are transferred in the behaviours of individuals working for these organizations when coming into contact with 'foreign prostitutes' (see chapter 6). The interviews also allowed me to gain a perspective – from the implementer's point of view – on the policies and discourses on prostitution and migration elaborated at the Government level.

**Table 4: Selected questions from the guiding questionnaire with IA staff**

**About the interviewee's experience**

- How long have you been working for this NGO? Do you have previous experience of working in this field?
- Did you receive any training, and if so, do you think it was useful?
- Do you work/volunteer for this organization in particular because you agree with the scope of its mission?

**About beliefs/ perspectives of the IA/NGO**

- What is the main scope of the organization's intervention, and do you believe this can be achieved in the long term? How do the services provided by this organization differ from that of others?
- What do you think of the perspective of X organization? (I refer here to an IA/NGO which has a very different approach to the one of the interviewee's).
- What do you think of the perspective according to which this phenomenon should be seen as one relating primarily to immigration rather than prostitution?
- How does your organization carry out/organize Article 18 programs of assistance and social integration? What does 'social integration' mean for your organization?

**About the socio-political context**

- Do you think the Government is providing enough support to organization like yours and what could be done to improve the responsiveness to the presence of so-called 'foreign prostitutes'<sup>9</sup>?
- How is the anti-immigration and anti-prostitution policy of the current Government going to affect public opinion specifically in relation to so-called 'foreign prostitutes'?
- How is the activity of your organization viewed by the local population?

**About 'foreign prostitutes'**

- What major obstacles do you find in dealing specifically with this group?
- Given what governmental documents state, how responsible do you feel for the 'life-improvement' of these women? How much responsibility is put on your IA towards this end?
- Do you think that pervasive stereotypes of so-called 'foreign prostitutes' affect the way you interact with them?

**General concluding questions**

- How has your organization evolved over the years?
- What were the major lessons learned?

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<sup>9</sup> As I learned after the first two interviews and conversations I had with the staff of IAs/NGOs, trying to refer to migrant prostitutes without adopting the term *prostituta straniera*, 'foreign prostitutes', created confusion and required an explanation on my part, at the very beginning of the interviews, which caused tension deriving from my criticism of a term that the respondent(s) generally and unquestionably adopt. I

### *Participant observation*

Participant observation was chosen as a method to witness events as they naturally occur. I selected two IAs in order to observe whether the contrasting approaches they maintain on prostitution might result in the implementation of divergent support strategies. In both cases I organized the observation into two main phases. At first I became familiar with the setting, individuals and their general practices and routines. This level of approach has been defined by some as descriptive observation (Spradley 1980; Crabtree and Miller 1992) and serves primarily to have an understanding of what is going on in that particular context “and to provide clues and pointers to other layers of reality” (Bryman 1988: 62). Subsequently, I observed the interaction between the members of staff and ‘foreign prostitutes’ in a variety of circumstances, for instance during their encounters on the streets, when responding to a woman’s request for employment or exiting prostitution, in facilitating the exchange between women who had exited prostitution and their new employers, ex pimps, partners, police forces, in the accommodation where they resided, etc. The question I addressed at this stage was: why and how is this happening? This type of focused observation is much more selective than a descriptive observation, as it “represents choices the researcher has made based on both areas of interest and what had been learned in the setting, [...] and enables to compare the attributes of various categories or activities” (Crabtree and Miller 1992: 55).

The first period of observation was carried out with *Valore*, an association that approaches prostitution as a consenting activity between adults, and clearly distinguishes it from trafficking for sexual purposes, which is seen as a form of violence and exploitation. The activities carried out by this IA are formulated as part of an ‘empowerment strategy’, aimed at reinforcing women’s self-determination and autonomy. The organization has a small office in a Northern Italian city centre and is run by a project manager, a project coordinator, a social worker (*educatrice*), a psychologist, one full-time and two part-time cultural mediators (all are women). They also have a shelter house<sup>10</sup> where women who choose the program of exit from prostitution live for a

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therefore decided to use the locution ‘so-called foreign prostitutes’ (*cosiddette prostitute straniere*) whenever adopting this term.

<sup>10</sup> In this case, the definition ‘shelter house’ is not technically correct because the apartment is not seen as an emergency recovery nor as a refuge from the outside world (as happens with other similar structures run



period of 3 to 8 months. I went to *Valore*'s office for a short period in the summer of 2002, and then for one week in both the summer 2003 and spring 2005 and observed the routine of their daily activities trying, in my role as observer, to cause minimal interference. I also participated in the activity of night outreach work during which some members of staff (usually a social worker and a cultural mediator) drive a camper around the city and stop in the vicinity of the places where women are prostituting, distribute condoms and information leaflets, and provide help and advice when requested (see chapter 5).

In 2003 and 2005, I was accommodated at the shelter of the organization. The first time I shared the flat with Queen, a Nigerian woman who was ending her project of social protection<sup>11</sup>. In the spring 2005, I shared the flat with two Albanian women and one from Romania. In both cases, apart from their initial suspicion, I integrated quite well in the flat dynamics and established a good interaction with the women staying there. We had meals and watched television together in the evenings, I went out with them and their friends, and we had long conversations about all sorts of issues, including their experiences as migrants in Italy.

The second period of observation was carried out in a city in the centre/north of Italy with *Speranza*, a Catholic association that views both trafficking and prostitution as sexual exploitation, and considers them forms of modern-day slavery. The services it provides are aimed at reaching the same target group as *Valore*: migrant women operating in the sex industry. However, while the latter made a distinction between victims of trafficking and prostitutes and offered different services accordingly, *Speranza* invariably considers these women as victims of abuse and violence, and its intervention is aimed at rescuing/saving and re-educating (rather than empowering) them with the purpose of helping them regain their lost dignity and identity. Thus, the methods employed by *Speranza* are very different from the previous case. For instance, in its street outreach visits this IA's staff approaches street prostitutes with the aim of convincing them to abandon prostitution, and often encourages them to pray for their 'redemption' (see chapter 5).

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by other organizations), but rather as a temporary accommodation where those residing can start organizing their life with the aid of the staff (see chapter 5).

<sup>11</sup> The apartment usually accommodates up to six women, but at the time of my visit many of them had summer jobs in Italian sea resorts.

Initially I spent a short period of observation with this organization when, in the summer 2002, I accompanied one of the coordinators of a local project while he drove around his area carrying out various activities (at the hospital, trying to make contact with the women on the streets, etc). In fact, apart from its main headquarters, this IA does not have designated offices and the various activities are run by one or two individuals who are responsible for a specific geographical area. I spent a longer time with this organization in the spring 2005, when I stayed at one of its shelters in Central Italy, sharing the flat with five women and three volunteers. As in the previous case, I had the opportunity to talk with the 'guests' about their experiences, but I also learned a lot about this IA's approach from the volunteers who permanently resided there.

More fortuitous short periods of participant observation with other organizations occurred in 2002, when I was asked to get directly involved in various activities while I was visiting to conduct interviews. I thus stayed overnight in a protected shelter house, supposedly to make sure that no pimp would try to break in, accompanied women to hospitals for health checks, acted as interpreter for an Italian lawyer who was examining the case of a Nigerian woman, etc. While the trust conferred upon me as a complete stranger was flattering, and enabled me to have important contacts and insights, it also revealed a lack of professionalism and insecurity endemic in many of these structures.

In relation to these more casual experiences, it is worth mentioning that there have been some circumstances in which I did not feel entirely comfortable with the role that some of the organizations' staff thought I could assume while conducting my research. In one specific instance I became involved, simply by being present, in situations in which I knew the rules set by the organization had been broken and, in fact, later required the intervention of the police. The staff of the IA I was being hosted by, considered my presence in the shelter as a possibility to have an infiltrated insider who could provide them with information that the women were refusing to give. My final choice on whether to disclose what I knew was a difficult one, and I based it on my evaluation of what would be eventually be in the best interest of the women themselves.

Finally, another important aspect for the data gathering was my participation in three Italian congresses and other meetings on trafficking for sexual purposes in Italy. By observing how these were conducted, who spoke, what was said, and what was absent from the discussion, I was able to gain deeper insights into the discursive construction of the issue amongst academics and also IA's service providers.

### *The analysis of the data*

The data collection through my ethnographic work and its analysis was carried out throughout the period of fieldwork – divided into four distinct phases with six to ten month gap periods between each of them. This meant that my research process was in constant evolution with the responses and observations gathered continuously developing my knowledge and readings of the issues addressed.

However, once I had finished my fieldwork, I engaged in an in-depth data analysis of both transcribed interviews and the notes I took of my participant observations. First of all, I ordered the material according to the themes I had selected beforehand and that had also proven critical in my empirical findings. As mentioned earlier these were: firstly, the approaches of each IA/NGO towards prostitution and migration and the strategies enacted in light of different perspectives. Secondly, the views of the respondents on the political interventions of the Government on the issue of ‘foreign prostitution’; and lastly the way my informants approached and constructed their knowledge about ‘foreign prostitutes’. I subsequently proceeded to select within each of these three themes a number of categories and further subdivided them in major and minor themes which were then compared with, and analysed through, relevant theories and literature when possible. By making associations and comparisons between perspectives, behaviours and experiences, I observed differences and similarities among the findings in relation to each selected criteria. In this way, and through the qualitative analysis of the data – i.e. one based on the meanings expressed, in this case, in the both verbal and non-verbal communication – I was able to focus on the ways my IA respondents made sense of their experiences, of their daily encounters with ‘foreign prostitutes’, of their perception of other IAs, and of the political climate in which they operate. I could also explore the influence that the broader and complex Italian socio-political and ideological context plays in the ways in which they operate. Being able to draw from, and triangulate different data – collected through interviews, informal communications, participant observations field notes and secondary sources – allowed me to gain an understanding of the multi-faceted aspects that constitute the object of this study.

Before proceeding to the following section, it is important to discuss here, as part of the data analysis process, issues inherent to the two different languages I have dealt

with in this study. All my interviews were conducted and transcribed in Italian, whereas my field notes are written in a mixture of Italian and English. I translated and reported my findings in English, as well as the sections of interviews and notes that I quote in the text.

Indeed, the issue of translation is crucial in qualitative research like mine that is conducted in one language, but is reported and analysed in another, and it is important to reflect on whether the act of translation introduces bias in the original meaning of a text. In this respects, Temple and Young suggest that there is not always a single correct translation of a text, hence:

The solutions to many of the translator's dilemmas are not to be found in dictionaries, but rather in an understanding of the ways language is tied to local realities, to literary forms and to changing identities. Translators must constantly make decisions about the cultural meanings which language carries, and evaluate the degree to which the two different worlds they inhabit are 'the same'. [...] In fact the process of meaning transfer has less to do with *finding* the cultural inscription of a term than in reconstructing its value.

(Simon 1996: 137, 138; emphasis in the original; quoted in Temple and Young 2004: 165)

In light of these considerations I have been particularly attentive in trying to provide a translation as true to the original meaning as possible, but also one that would deliver the same semantic nuances. Moreover, when difficulties in the interpretation and translation of concepts from one language to the other arise, I explain the significance of the latter in the original language and then provide an adapted version in English in such a way that the latter reconstructs the value of the cultural inscription of the original text.

## **5. Further comments on the research process**

### *What about migrant prostitutes? Confronting complications in the field*

Following the leads established in the course of the first phase of my fieldwork (summer 2002) – in which I had observed racialized and sexualized attitudes towards Black 'foreign prostitutes' on the part of my IA respondents – and encouraged by the staff of various organizations who told me they could put me in touch with the 'girls' any time I

wanted, I thought of interviewing Nigerian and Ghanaian women who operate or have operated in the Italian sex industry, and who are or have been recipients of different degrees of support from the above-mentioned organizations<sup>12</sup> (from legal advice, to health assistance, distribution of condoms and STI prevention information, shelter and protection, participation in a program of integration, advice on employment, etc.). My idea at that time was to conduct as many interviews as possible. However, with the continuation of my fieldwork that same summer, I started to consider whether conducting interviews with these women in those circumstances would be in conflict with my methodological approach, due to the intrusive nature of my research, as I perceived it, and the fact that I would not have enough time to build a relationship of trust with them.

The way I was introduced to a woman residing in a shelter and with whom I was supposed to conduct my first interview, confirmed my decision to reconsider how to reach my sample; as I noted in my fieldwork diary these were the words of the educator: “Maia, this is Isabel, she is from London and she is writing her thesis on prostitution. She is going to give you an interview about your experience as a prostitute, ok?” Both Maia and myself became very nervous at those words and I eventually did not carry out the interview, as I had planned it, but just had an informal conversation.

The power that the researcher has in accessing the lives of the researched is a very important aspect of social research, and one, as mentioned previously, which has been discussed abundantly by feminist scholarship. In the course of my observation of the dynamics of interaction between Italian staff of IAs/NGOs and migrant women (ex) prostitutes I noticed how often the former would patronize the latter, and openly treat them with contempt, as the ‘deviant ones’, or as ‘lost cases’ who would invariably ‘waste their lives’. I thus became aware that an interview conducted with women who are in vulnerable positions, are temporarily residing in often hostile environments, and with the type of introduction I had been given (i.e. what had sounded like an imposition) would have further contributed to their being treated as ‘Others’. When the educator mentioned “your experience as a prostitute” as the reason why I wanted to interview Maia, not only did she misrepresent the scope of my research, but she also completely disregarded Maia’s privacy by revealing a very delicate detail of her life that she clearly felt

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<sup>12</sup> My plan of approaching also Columbian women in a North-eastern city where they had formed a large community, fell through after they moved to other locations due to the harassment caused by continuous police raids.

uncomfortable in sharing with a complete stranger. As Brannen highlights, naming the topic under investigation is a very sensitive part of the interview process that needs caution:

Sensitive researchers tread wearily at the beginning of interviews and don't reveal all their hand at the outset. It is important not to prejudge the research problem by labelling it or defining its boundaries too closely; respondents may thereby define the problem in their own terms.

(1988: 553; quoted in Maynard and Purvis 1994: 138)

In the case of my introduction to Maia, having mentioned her involvement in prostitution as my research interest, not only did it preclude the possibility of having a dialogue about it in other terms, but it also left Maia without any possibility of choosing not to mention it at all.

In light of these considerations, whilst initially I had thought of gathering enough material to dedicate a chapter of the thesis to migrant prostitutes' perspectives on their experience as women, as migrants and as (ex)prostitutes in Italy, I eventually decided to focus the entire study on the responses enacted by Italian society and institutions to their presence, an approach that is often neglected in the literature. Nevertheless, in the course of four phases of fieldwork, I did have the opportunity to develop closer relationships with migrant women who operate or have operated in the Italian sex industry. However, apart from a single case when a woman volunteered to be interviewed, I did not conduct any formal interview and preferred to maintain the interaction at the level of more spontaneous and open ended conversations which I had in a variety of different circumstances (sitting in a car, while waiting for the doctor at the hospital, on the pavement while distributing leaflets and condoms, at the shelters, etc.). These findings are not explicitly reported in this study, however, they were very important in developing my understanding of the socio-political environment researched, in that I could listen to the perspectives of some of the recipients of the policies and practices that are the focus of this thesis.

### *Sexism and racism in the field and some self-reflective notes*

Contrary to my initial fear of not being able to 'make people speak', the interviewees were all extremely loquacious. In many instances I felt that the opportunity of talking to

an external person, like myself, represented for many of them a unique opportunity to disclose their emotional and professional frustrations. As Skeggs notes in reflections over her own doctoral research, while “the technology of the confessional is an effective form of control (for the researcher), confessions can also provide a space for support (for the researched)” (1994: 81). Many of my Italian research participants were extremely blunt about their feelings towards the system, but more importantly, towards the women they were working for. Highly racist and sexist comments abound in my field notes and interview transcriptions, despite the fact that I had made clear the purpose of the interview and the intended use of the information, which I would critically assess. In many instances, I had to make a significant effort to remain calm and keep listening to my interviewees without showing too openly how angry their statements had made me. When I felt I had to challenge some of their comments, even more intolerance was displayed in the following utterances. In these cases, when I shook hands with my respondents and thanked them for their hospitality and time, I was left with a sense of concern and uneasiness. My concern was for the environment in which some of the women had to live, even just temporarily, as part of their Article 18 project of social protection. My uneasiness was due to the fact that the interviewees had assumed – before, but even after I had challenged them – that I would share, or at least understand, their racism, sexism and hostility towards female (ex) prostitutes. In this respect, the considerations of Vera and Feagin on the study of racist events, are particularly useful. As they point out,

*All social researchers imbed their values, emotions and understanding in their research. (...) Making one’s values and emotions open and public does not mean one should not conduct careful, honest, and objective research. It just means much more candour about this process. It can also yield much greater insights into the phenomena being studied.*

(2003: 76; emphasis in the original)

These encounters and my own reactions made me reflect further on how my interviewees had viewed me as an insider/outsider, sharing their ‘race’, but not necessarily their ‘culture’ and gender, as I discuss in what follows.

As I experienced in the course of my life in Italy – where I was born and brought up – having a non-Italian-sounding last name is enough to be considered a ‘foreigner’. However, being a white woman with a British surname, means also that I was inserted in

the category *straniera*<sup>13</sup>, foreigner, which, while it implies that the person does not really belong, at the same time might evoke some sort of fascination and attractiveness, when the person comes from a ‘desirable’ country, and one that is viewed with admiration and that is not too ‘culturally different’, as a respondent told me about my being British<sup>14</sup>. Had my last name sounded Albanian, or my skin been darker, I am convinced that I would not have been as favourably treated and welcomed in the way I was, during my fieldwork. Being considered a ‘*straniera inglese*’ (English foreigner) – as my Italian interviewees insisted on considering me, despite my efforts at explaining that I am also an Italian national – eventually worked to the advantage of my research. I believe that the openness and candidness with which many of my interviewees talked about many issues, is due in part to the fact that I was perceived as a sympathetic outsider, a ‘foreigner’ who is not entirely part of the system, but that at the same time shares the ‘same race’, language and can understand the respondent’s culture and perspective. As one interviewee stated: “Are you going back to your country afterwards? Then I can tell you this...”.

The same considerations are not applicable to my contact with migrant women (ex) prostitutes. Being a white woman who speaks Italian has meant being looked upon by them with suspicion. In this instance, my physical and linguistic attributes were enough to classify me as ‘Italian’, thus one not to be given too much confidence. My very basic Albanian however, was enough in some cases to establish some sort of communication, which was then continued in Italian. My knowledge of Spanish has been very important in starting conversations with Colombian women. Similarly, English as a common language, enabled me to communicate with ease with some women from Nigeria. Interestingly, as a Nigerian cultural mediator told me,

you, even if you are white, with your English, will probably be accepted (by Nigerian women) more than me. Especially once they find out that I come

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<sup>13</sup> *Straniera*, feminine of *straniero*, means ‘foreigner’. Whether or not the term assumes negative connotation in the Italian context (although as stated in the text, it indicates always a condition of non-belonging) depends on the origin of the ‘foreigner’ and the social representation of his or her country in the Italian collective imaginarium. The term *immigrato* (immigrant), on the contrary, has assumed, almost invariably, a negative connotation. A person who migrates to Italy from one of the 15 EU pre-enlargement countries or North America (excluding Mexico), would not commonly be referred to as an ‘immigrant’, as would people of all other countries, but would be more likely called *straniero/a* or *forestiero/a* (ex-pat).

<sup>14</sup> An assumption that is correct, in that I have both Italian and British citizenship, and that was made, as he later told me, on the basis of my surname and my ‘coming from London’.



from a different ethnic group than they do. That's the end for me, they will not even talk to me anymore.

(Fieldwork notes, March 2005)

This comment raises important issues about the insider and outsider position of the researcher vis-à-vis the research subjects, an aspect that, as Young points out, has been studied for many decades now (2004). At the core of this interest, he explains, is the understanding of the extent to which sharing (or not) membership in the same categories (most commonly 'race', gender and class) as their respondents affects the capacity of the researcher to collect rich and accurate data (ibid.). As my ethnographic research has taught me, the way in which I was located in an 'outsider' position has favoured the collection of a rich array of data. Indeed, as I mentioned, the 'outsider' position is itself constructed, and it varied in degree and 'distance', depending on the perception of the respondents, which in turn was based on their positioning in terms of 'race', gender, cultural background and, to a much lesser extent, class, which in Italy is not such a prominent aspect of social stratifications as it is in the UK.

In this respect, I want to conclude these reflections with some comments on the sexist slanders against 'foreign prostitutes' that some male IA respondents candidly shared with me. Reflecting on racist utterances against Black 'foreign prostitutes' gathered in my fieldwork, I thought that the reason why my respondents, men and women, had shared them with me was the fact that while I was perceived as an outsider, I was also sharing their same 'race', hence I could relate, or at least I could understand, what they were talking about. This highly troublesome assumption was however not valid along gender lines, when it came to the sexist comments of *male* informants about 'foreign prostitutes' being and behaving like 'sluts'. Why were these men sharing with me such debasing comments about other women? While I discuss the complexity of these aspects in chapter 6, the point here is specifically about the researcher-respondent position towards the researched, in this case 'foreign prostitutes'. My answer to the above question – which I formulated only at a later stage after in-depth analysis of the data and relevant literature – is that in the eyes of my respondents these 'other' women are so dehumanized and objectified that it was *normal* for them to make those comments. While my gender was not an issue, I believe that, again, my 'race' as a shared factor, supposed cultural affinity and my perceived outsider position played a crucial role in creating the space for the display of such strong and hostile sentiments.

### *Some considerations on research ethics*

For issues of ethics and confidentiality in this thesis, I referred to the detailed code set forth in the 'Statement of Ethical Practice of the British Sociological Association' (British Sociological Association 2002). Three issues in particular are worth mentioning: informed consent, right to privacy and protection from harm. All my contacts with research participants were conditioned on their freely given consent to participate in my research and to let me participate in their daily activities. I explained the scope of my research, why it was being undertaken and how it would be disseminated (Article 17 of the Statement). Whenever I established relationships with migrant prostitutes to whom I was asked by IA staff not to disclose the specific nature of my research nor the purpose of my visit, I said I was doing research into female migrations. In these cases, I always strove to protect the sensitivities and privacy of the participants and never pursued my research questions directly, although I gathered data through simple observation.

I treated my data with strict confidentiality, even when anonymity was not requested by the participants. I used pseudonyms for individuals and organizations (except for public figures) and modified identifying details, such as the name of the place where the organizations are located. I ensured that the physical, social and psychological well being of participants were not being affected by the research. For this reason, I tried not to interfere with migrant women while they were prostituting on the streets. Even when I interacted with them in this context, while accompanying the members of staff of IAs/NGOs, I did not push my less familiar presence onto them but established conversations only when prompted by them.

## **6. Concluding remarks**

This chapter has outlined the research methodology, the methods and sources adopted, and how the data were analysed. This has shown the importance of qualitative analysis in providing crucial findings for the development of this study. It also discussed methodological concerns related to the potential intrusive nature of my research, and self-reflective notes about being confronted with racist and sexist findings in the field.

The thesis now moves on to part II and chapter 3 which provides a detailed contextualization of the issues under study, laying the groundwork for a critical overview of the attitudes developed towards 'foreign prostitutes' since their first arrival in Italy in the late 1980s.

## Part II

### Setting the scene

When I was a teenager living in Italy, every now and then on a Saturday the ‘boys’ of my group of friends would meet late at night, after they had taken the ‘girls’ safely back home, and go to Milan on a *puttan tour*<sup>1</sup>. This meant that they would drive to where street prostitutes were working, to look, shout, and sometimes even throw things at them, and then, at least as far as they later told the rest of the group, go back home. I recall that in the peppered narration of these events, the highlight of their ‘after-night out’ was having seen Black women, while (supposedly) Brazilian transsexuals were a source of great hilarity. This way of finding ‘entertainment’ was quite popular amongst young men, and the term *puttan tour* is still commonly adopted to refer to these types of activities.<sup>2</sup> This particular memory came back to my mind only just recently, when on a London tube train I saw an Italian man sitting in front of me wearing a T-shirt with a ‘*mappa del puttan tour delle straniere*’, a detailed map of the streets of Milan where it is possible to find ‘foreigners’ (*straniere*, foreigners, is feminine).

There a number of reasons why this anecdote and practice are mentioned here. First of all it reveals, from my own experience, that in the early 1990s migrant prostitutes were visible on the streets – at least those of big cities like Milan – and already attracted attention. Secondly, thinking retrospectively about the way in which the *puttan tour* night was structured, made me realize its profoundly gendered and de-humanizing nature, and how it reflects the perception and treatment of ‘foreign prostitutes’, and of prostitutes more generally in Italy. The distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ women – the former to be kept safe at home, and the latter made object of abuse for the purpose of crass

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<sup>1</sup> Literally, a whore tour. Leonini describes the *puttan tour* as a group experience, shared rigorously only by men who “drive around in areas where street prostitutes are most present [...]. In the course of this tour they stop and talk to prostitutes, but the main entertainment is about the jokes shared by the group of friends” (1999: 44; my translation).

<sup>2</sup> My Google search of ‘puttan tour’ produced as a result hundreds of blogs of people telling their stories about their *puttan tour* experiences. There are also a number of videos available on You Tube showing groups of men shouting at and insulting street prostitutes.

entertainment – is an example of the social hierarchy that positions prostitutes as outcasts, who are both rejected/despised and made object of sexual desire. Moreover, the acceptance that ‘guys’ could and would do something like going on a *puttan tour* is a reflection of the normalized male objectification of prostitute women, both as sexual bodies and, in this particular case, as a source of mockery upon which masculine identities are performed and reinforced.

Indeed, this practice raises many issues, including the social significance of prostitution in relation to masculinities, and also the roles of women, the ‘good girls’ and their acceptance of these ‘male escapades’. Some of these aspects are included in the investigation of the following chapters. However, my main aim here is to introduce the complexity of responses to ‘foreign prostitution’ that are explored in this part of the thesis, by presenting a ‘familiar’ and routinely performed gendered social practice that gives an insight in the social positioning of prostitution that migrant women came to occupy in Italy.

## Chapter 3

### **Migration and prostitution in Italy: setting the context for the response to ‘foreign prostitution’**

#### **1. Introduction**

This chapter presents an overview of the evolution of social and political responses to migration and prostitution in Italy in the past two decades. Its aim is to provide context for the complexity of factors that contribute to the construction of the category ‘foreign prostitution’.

I begin by illustrating the development of large-scale migrations to Italy in its recent history as a country of destination, the hostile social reactions they generated, and the progressively restrictive migration policies formulated in the past twenty years. The second section outlines the legislation that has been passed in Italy to address prostitution, including that currently in place. Here I also introduce the perspectives of two crucial actors on the social profile of prostitutes, the Catholic Church and the Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitutes. In the third section, the investigation turns to the first arrivals, in the late 1980s, of migrant women who started operating in the Italian sex industry. In particular, I look at the social responses developed towards them, and the political actions that led to the formulation of Article 18 in 1998.

#### **2. Italy and migration: an overview**

##### *The shift from an emigration to an immigration country*

Italy became a country of immigration only relatively recently. For many decades since its unification in 1861, the history of the country has been characterized by mass movements of Italian people who migrated both domestically – from South to North – and internationally, primarily towards other western European countries, the United

States and Argentina (Klein 1983). Such was the scale of these movements of people that it is suggested that the emigration of over 26 million Italians between 1876 and 1965 has been among the most important and numerically substantial of the modern world (Wrench and Solomos 1993; Gabaccia 2000).

It was in the 1970s, with the turnaround from net emigration to net immigration in Southern Europe, that Italy's long history as one of the most prolific exporters of people and labour came to an end. This change marked its passage from a traditional sending country to a new<sup>3</sup> country of destination (King and Black 1997; Gabaccia 2000). Immigration to Italy grew steadily throughout the 1970s and 1980s boosted by economic growth and lack of proper immigration regulations (Cole 1997). In fact, it was only in the mid 1980s that more rigorous, but still tolerant<sup>4</sup>, migration legislation was first passed, although neither uniformly nor coherently enforced (Pastore 2004; Pojmann 2006). In just three decades, the number of migrants to Italy rose from 300,000 to an estimated 1.6 million at the end of 2001, and reached just over 3 million, i.e. 5.2% of the population in 2005 (Caritas 2006).<sup>5</sup>

The first migrants to arrive to Italy in the late 1960s were Tunisian and Yugoslav men, and women from the Philippines, Eritrea and Cape Verde. Starting from the 1980s migrants of many more nationalities joined them, primarily from Africa (with a prevalence of Senegalese and Moroccan men) and Asia (Sri Lankan and Indian men and women). The 1990s were characterized by large influx of individuals from the Balkans and Eastern Europe, Albania and Romania in particular (Cole 1997; Macioti and Pugliese 2003). As of 2006, according to estimates based on the number of those who are in possession of, or have made a request for a visa, the largest migrant communities in Italy are originally from Romania, Albania, Morocco, Ukraine and China (Caritas

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<sup>3</sup> The adjective 'new' is adopted here exclusively in the context of the modern history of Italy, i.e. since 1861, when it became a united kingdom. In fact for millennia, the Italian peninsula had been a destination and transition country for many migrant people(s).

<sup>4</sup> Particularly if compared to strict contemporary immigration policies of other EU states such as the United Kingdom and Western Germany.

<sup>5</sup> Compared to other European countries such as Germany, France and the United Kingdom, the number of migrants in Italy is still on a smaller scale. However, the quantitative dimension of the phenomenon assumes particular relevance when one considers how fast the turnaround took place. In this sense, Italy's situation is closer to other Southern European countries, such as Greece, Spain and Portugal, which went through similar transitions in their migration patterns (King and Black 1997).

2006).<sup>6</sup> Women constitute nearly half of the total migrant population, with the largest nationalities represented by Polish, Peruvian, Filipino, Romanian and Sri Lankan migrants (ibid.).

### *The response to immigration*

The socio-political impact of, and response to immigration has been the object of analysis of a large body of literature. This has observed that after a relatively tolerant start, Italy, as a 'receiving'<sup>7</sup> country, has progressively developed exclusionary policies and practices towards the newcomers. The literature suggests that since the late 1960s – at the onset of migration flows – and until the early 1980s, the steady arrival of migrants was internalized by the indigenous population as a social fact, with little debate or questioning about its causes and possible consequences (Campani 1993; Dal Lago 1998; Statham 1998; Andall 2000; et alia). The legacy of the emigration experience and the 'good nature' of Italians were also sometimes adduced as an explanation for the empathy and tolerance with which migrants were supposedly welcomed during this first stage (Ferrarotti 1989; Balbo 1991).

In his 1988 book, Giorgio Bocca, a popular Italian journalist, asked the question (the title of the book itself) *Are Italians Racist?* As Cole suggests, the question preoccupied many people who were reminiscent of the overtly racist past of the country during the Fascist era (1922-1943) and wondered whether a new wave of intolerance and racism would develop towards the increasing number of migrants (1997). But the prevailing answer to Bocca's question remained negative for quite some time (and as I explain in chapter 6, for some, it still is). What motivated this position was the belief that Italy was at the time still in a phase of 'pre-racism'. This expression was used to indicate how, until the migration turnaround, Italian society had remained substantially mono-cultural and mono-racial. For this reason, it could not be considered a racist country,

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<sup>6</sup> Being based on the number of migrants who are in possession of or have made a request for a visa these data are only tentative because they are not inclusive of undocumented migrants.

<sup>7</sup> Dal Lago argues that given the rejection, rather than reception, experienced by migrants in Italy, it would be hypocritical to use the term 'receiving' country. As a better alternative, he suggests the use of 'destination country'. "This special attention does not come from any sort of political correctness, it is simply a linguistic caution necessary to keep the distance from the *langue de bois* which dominates the subject of migrations" (1998: 17; emphasis added, my translation). Even though I agree with Dal Lago on this point, throughout the thesis I occasionally refer to Italy as 'receiving country', and use inverted commas to indicate its contentious meaning.



because *de facto* there were no ‘other races’ to discriminate against (Balbo 1991). A document written in 1990 by the organization *Italia-Razzismo* (Italy-Racism) – a prominent association established in the 1980s to provide information on migration – states:

We certainly cannot take for granted that we will not become a racist society (in our institutions, in our practice, in our everyday relationships, in our values), but nor is it true that we are racist today, in the same terms as other European countries. Attention and cognitive investment and debate are crucial in this phase which for the moment is one of pre-evaluation, pre-formulation, perhaps, pre-racism.

(Italia-Razzismo 1990: 3, quoted in Andall 2000: 55)

Such notion of a ‘pre-racist’ society and that of the intrinsically good and welcoming nature of Italian people was later questioned given that, rather than being welcomed, migrants had been simply ignored: they were not conceived of as a public issue, because they had not yet been identified as part of the public (Cole 1997; Sciortino and Colombo 2004). Furthermore, structural factors such as their “relatively low numbers, [...] uneven regional dispersal across the country, and their insecure type of labour” contributed to obscure their presence (Statham 1998: 25).

Indeed, the concept of a ‘pre-racist’ Italian society needs to be addressed critically, not only to be confronted as an unsubstantiated and naïve belief, but also, and more importantly, as a refusal to acknowledge both systemic and everyday practices of racism in contemporary Italy.<sup>8</sup> To be mentioned, for example, is the fact that internal movements of southerners to the richer and more economically developed North had resulted in the spreading and exacerbation of already deep-rooted anti-southern hostilities (Pojmann 2006). People from the south of Italy – often called ‘*terroni*’, the peasants, a common derogatory term used by northerners to refer to the southerners – were routinely subjected to various forms of discrimination and social exclusion (Lumley and Foot 2004), and in the 1990s became the target of the racist propaganda of the Northern League. But also important to address is the unobtrusive exploitation and discrimination of many migrant women operating in the live-in domestic sector who, at

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<sup>8</sup> Essed suggests that racism is more than structure and ideology, as it is “routinely created and reinforced through everyday practices” (1991: 3). In this sense, she adopts the concept of everyday racism “to connect structural forces of racism with routine situations in everyday life” (ibid.). Essed’s notion of everyday racism in relation to the Italian context is further discussed in chapter 6.

that time, were already numerous in Italy, but due to their lack of visibility remained ignored (Tacoli 1996; Andall 2000; Anthias and Lazaridis 2000).

The point here is not to advance the idea that Italy is a racist country. As Essed posits in fact, “racism in a society is not the same as a society made of racists” (1991: 21). Rather, these considerations highlight the refusal to come to terms with and problematize its various racist practices that were, and still are, well ingrained in the social tissue of the country. In this respect, Salih suggests looking at this tendency as a continuum with the Italian colonial past. As she states, even though “there is not a defined political culture towards immigrants which can be directly ascribed to the colonial legacy” (Salih 2003: 17), the historiography of the Italian colonial past – which represents the colonial experience as a humanitarian enterprise and denies its racism<sup>9</sup> – is consistent with and reinforces contemporary denials of racist policies and practices towards the migrant population (ibid.) (see chapter 6).

Notably, by the end of the 1980s, the notion of a ‘pre-racist’ Italy and that of a good natured Italian population ‘always ready to welcome newcomers’ had to be seriously reconsidered. Hostile sentiments towards migrants became increasingly overt, fuelled by fears of the cultural and economic threat that the Italian population had associated them with (Andall 2000). Consistent with the progressive criminalization of migrants in public discourse are the various pieces of legislation on migration that since 1986 have increasingly tightened border controls to deny entrance to the so-called *extracomunitari*, extra-communitarians, a term that is commonly used to describe people who are not citizens of the European Community.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For example, as Barrera points out, Mussolini organized the short-lived ‘Italian empire’ in Africa – named Africa Orientale Italiana (Italian Eastern Africa) – following a hierarchy of racial relations that was based on the strict subordination of colonized people (2003).

<sup>10</sup> Even though it is commonly adopted in legal and governmental documents, the term ‘*extracomunitario*’ has a highly negative connotation. For example, Pojman, a white American scholar who did research on immigrant women and feminism in Italy claims that, although she called herself ‘*extracomunitaria*’ (feminine) when she was in Italy, “literally the term (...) usually denotes poor, of colour and from the third world. A white American could not claim it accurately” (2006: 2). While I agree on the second part of the statement, it is important to mention that ‘*extracomunitario*’ is not necessarily about ‘being poor, of colour and from the third world’. For example, white migrants from the Balkans and Eastern Europe, were and still are (despite some of them coming from ‘new’ EU countries) called ‘*extracomunitari*’. In this respect, this term entails primarily a notion of non-belonging to an ideal western system of values. The person who is labelled as ‘*extracomunitario*’ is supposed to come from and personify a culture that is incompatible with that of Italy/the ‘West’.

### *Italian immigration policies*

The political response to immigration came through the introduction of the first specific migration policy in Italy, Law 943 in 1986 (Andall 2000). This legislative measure was primarily aimed at prohibiting clandestine migration, and for this reason it included an amnesty for undocumented 'aliens' residing on Italian territory. However, the law presented a number of flaws that severely limited its applicability. Crucially, it did not include a realistic appreciation of the social conditions of migrants, thus, ultimately, it failed to provide a rational and coherent immigration regime (Pastore 2004). Furthermore, the inefficiency of the bureaucracy in cooperating with local administrations, the police and regional offices resulted in an extremely limited number of migrants being able to comply with the requirement to register in employment lists. As a consequence, it became even more difficult for them to find a job through legal channels, with the opposite effect of pushing people into illegal jobs (and, as a consequence, to an illegal migration status) (Statham 1998; Andall 2000). Lastly, this piece of legislation was constructed upon the gendered notion that the 'main' migrant would be a man and the dependant, the spouse, a woman. In this way, the possibility for women to enter the country independently and legally was limited as their status had to be linked to that of the male migrant they had supposedly migrated with (Salih 2003).

Four years later, new migration legislation was passed. The so-called *Martelli Law* (Law 39, 1990) granted a second amnesty for regularization, and included specific norms on working conditions which were less penalizing for migrants. It also established the right to asylum and provided for substantial budgets to be set aside for processing refugee application and to fund immigrant and refugee support centres. As in the case of the previous legislation, these provisions were in line with the Government's policy to regularize migrants already residing in Italy, whilst at the same time prohibiting further entry of non-European nationals.

This shift towards increasingly exclusionary migration policies is believed to have been propelled also by the so called 'Albanian crisis' of 1990 and 1991. In those years a large number of Albanian people fled to Italy and other southern European countries claiming asylum from the deepening political chaos of their country (Wrench and Solomos 1993). The incapacity of the Italian state to respond promptly to this

situation led to a humanitarian crisis<sup>11</sup> which the media presented as a national emergency due to the country 'being under siege' (ibid.; Dal Lago 1998). After this episode, the notion of migration as the movement of people in search of better opportunities was completely replaced by that of an unlawful activity that needed to be stopped. Concurrently, discourses on immigration – whether generated in the political arena or reproduced through media channels – became dominated with visual and verbal images of the invasion and criminal behaviours of migrants (Sciortino and Colombo 2004).

But the development of such a strong anti-immigration sentiment has to be inscribed and understood also within the context of the drastic end of the first Italian republic.<sup>12</sup> In 1991 the explosion of a corruption scandal threw the entire political system into a state of total chaos to the extent that the elected Government shifted, literally from one day to the next, from being the legitimate authority of the nation state to being a national scourge. As a crisis of legitimacy crystallized within the dominant culture, the 'invading' migrants became a perfect scapegoat to blame, not only for the supposedly threatened national identity, but also for the instability of its political regime. It is in this context that the Northern League gained substantial political terrain and supporters.<sup>13</sup> It claimed to be a new, truly democratic alternative to the 'old' corrupted political regime, and pursued an explicitly racist anti-immigration campaign in order to defend Italian culture, value system and identity from the threats embodied by the 'foreigners' (see chapter 4 and 6). As Andall reports, the unequivocal anti-immigration position of the Northern League was outlined in a 1992 electoral manifesto which stated:

We are convinced that it [immigration] does not constitute an economic advantage for rich countries or for poor countries. [...] Our position of harsh criticism towards migratory policies also derives from a particular conception we federalists have of man. The human being is not simply an economic agent, but in fact, he or she is also made up of affection, cultural values and identity, which can find their best expression in their respective historical and environmental collectivities.

(Lega Nord 1992: 2, quoted in Andall 2000: 64)

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<sup>11</sup> Several thousands of Albanian men, women and children, were forced to reside temporarily in the soccer stadium in Bari, in Apulia, in very precarious hygienic conditions.

<sup>12</sup> Italy's form of Government shifted from monarchy to republic in 1948.

<sup>13</sup> In the 1994 national elections the Northern League won 9 percent of the vote, 20 percent in the North, and almost 30 percent in Lombardy, the region where it had first started its campaign (Calavita 2005).

The populist rhetoric of the Northern League is further analysed in chapter 5 in relation to the campaign it pursued to address 'foreign prostitution'. However, it is relevant to mention that its anti-immigration agenda was and is shared by a much broader spectrum of political parties that focus on migrants as common enemies, promoting the idea that Italy needs to be protected from their cultural and economic threat.

In 1998, Law 40, also known as *Turco-Napolitano Law* or *Consolidated Act (CA)*<sup>14</sup> tried to bring some order into the numerous immigration laws and codes that had been passed, changed and repealed in the previous decade. It moved along three main guidelines: a) programmed number of entries within annual quotas; b) fight against illegal immigration and criminal exploitation of illegal migration; c) social integration policy for legal migrants. This law is particularly important for this study in that, in line with its second and third guidelines, it established a system of support and assistance in favour of 'foreign citizens' in conditions of abuse (Article 18), a measure that is adopted almost exclusively for women trafficked for sexual purposes. The difficult process that led to the formulation of this article and its inclusion in the CA is further discussed in the third part of this chapter. It is important to specify, however, that while on the one hand, the Consolidated Act included these new provisions, on the other, it fixed more severe punishments to counter illegal migration. It also established the creation of CPTs (*Centri di Permanenza Temporanea*, Centres of Temporary Residence), often referred to as detention centres, where those who have entered the country without documents are kept in custody while their identity and nationality is checked (Salih 2003).

After the fall of the leftist Government in 2001 and the victory of Silvio Berlusconi's right-wing coalition<sup>15</sup> (which included the Northern League and the neo-fascist *Alleanza Nazionale*, National Alliance), more initiatives were enacted to curtail immigration into Italy. The 2002 *Bossi-Fini Law*<sup>16</sup> amended the 1998 CA by further restricting the number of migrants with strict quotas, and established that a pre-established work contract is necessary to obtain a stay permit. Its purpose, as Bossi made

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<sup>14</sup> The complete name of this law is 'Consolidated Act of the provisions concerning the regulation of immigration and rules on the conditions of the foreigners' (*Testo unico delle disposizioni concernenti la disciplina dell'immigrazione e norme sulla condizione dello straniero*).

<sup>15</sup> That maintained leadership until May 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Named after its principal sponsors: Umberto Bossi, the leader of the Northern League, and Gianfranco Fini, leader of National Alliance.

clear, was that “immigrants are to come to our country for one purpose only: work. Otherwise, they will be sent back” (Calavita 2005: 35).

This brief overview of the developments of migration to Italy reveals both the growing social hostility towards the phenomenon in the past three decades and, linked to it, the intensification of border controls. Whilst the former aspect has consequences primarily on the living conditions and social integration of migrants once in the country, the latter seriously affects the various stages of migration for individuals who, unable to obtain legal working permits, often have to rely on third parties and illegal methods of border crossing (Andrijasevic 2003). Hence, as evidence suggests, the tightening of borders creates conditions favourable to both trafficking and smuggling, and heightens the vulnerability of smuggled and trafficked people (Marshall and Thatun 2005).

But the overview outlined also raises another important consideration. As some scholars point out, the overt anti-immigrant sentiments in the Italian public sphere and the tightening of the borders have much to do with the gender component of migrations to Italy in its recent past (Bonifazi 1992; Campani 1993; Wrench and Solomos 1993; Andall 2000). They suggest that the initial slow response to migration flows is partly attributable to the large number of women who migrated to Italy in the 1970s. Female migrants from the Philippines, Eritrea, Cape Verde and Somalia came to Italy in large numbers responding to a specific demand in the domestic sector. They were not perceived as a threat to the country’s social cohesion and social order; on the contrary, they were considered to be socially useful, especially at a time when Italian women were starting to participate in the labour market, and the care for the household and family needed to be redistributed to someone else. On the other hand, the notions of deviance and criminality attached to migration developed in conjunction with the increasing presence of *male* migrants since the mid 1980s (Andall 2000). Indeed until recently, in both the political discourse and in the collective *imaginarium*, the threat of migration has been usually represented with reference to male migrants, undocumented and engaged in criminal activities related to drugs, money laundering and trafficking (Colombo and Sciortino 2004) (see chapter 6).

These gendered aspects of perceptions of and reactions to migration are particularly interesting in relation to the response that was reserved for those women who, at the end of the 1980s, started to migrate to occupy positions in the Italian sex

industry. The contrast between these ‘new’ female migrants, many of whom soon became visible as street prostitutes, and the ‘old’ ones, invisible and ‘domesticated’, caused a major rupture in the representation of migrants as ‘deviant males and submissive females’. In order to understand the response to the presence of ‘foreign prostitutes’ – which is at the core of the discussion of the next three chapters – it is necessary to explore some of the meanings that have historically been attached to prostitution in Italy, and that played a major role in influencing the perception of the ‘new’ female migrants who engaged in it.

### 3. Prostitution in Italy: an overview

State intervention in the policy area of prostitution has occurred twice in Italy since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In February 1860, in the very midst of the wars of unification, Prime Minister Cavour passed the first law on prostitution for the Italian nation still in the making (Gibson 1999). A country which had not yet been unified was already establishing codes regularizing prostitution, because the ruling class and the new bourgeoisie maintained that they had to be put in the condition to consolidate their hegemony in a climate of morality, where the ‘dangerous classes’ had to be kept under strict surveillance (ibid.).

The dangerous classes of society are formed from all those individuals who, being destitute of the necessary means of subsistence, live in idleness and vagabondage at the expense of other citizens. Trampling on the supreme law of man, which is that of work, they constitute a permanent danger to social order; the danger is even greater in those cases where the idle abandon themselves to perverse instincts.

(Bolis 1871: 459-460, quoted in Gibson 1999: 17)

Despite being singled out as the most prominent representatives of the ‘dangerous classes’, prostitutes were not equated to criminals. By serving the function of a ‘safety valve’ for male sex drive – that would otherwise be directed towards ‘honest’ women – they were believed to help the preservation of social equilibrium. For this reason, any attempt to eliminate prostitution through its criminalisation was thought to be inadequate, and the state opted for its strict regulation in circumscribed spaces, brothels, also called ‘closed houses’ (*case chiuse*). Thus, whilst the visibility of streetwalkers had offended

the moral sensibilities of the middle and upper classes, “[e]nclosure prevented both the moral and physical pollution of society by contact with prostitutes” (ibid.: 32).

However, at the same time as the preservation of social décor had been achieved by making ‘vice and indecency’ invisible to the public eye, the working conditions of prostitutes in the *case chiuse* deteriorated (ibid.). The new law imposed that they comply with numerous new regulations<sup>17</sup> that soon led to a series of abuses suffered by prostitute women, including police harassment, overcharging by doctors, and difficulty in obtaining documents for marriage purposes. All these and many other complaints were listed in the hundreds of letters sent by prostitutes to the socialist MP Lina Merlin who, in 1948, presented for the first time a proposal to change the legislation on prostitution and end the regulatory regime. It took her ten years of persistence and determination to finally have Parliament approve in 1958 what has been known since then as the *Merlin Law* (Law 75), which to this day regulates prostitution in Italy. This typical abolitionist law forbids the establishment of new brothels, ordered the closure of the existing ones, and prohibits and punishes the exploitation of prostitution by others. Thus, prostitution is still legal in Italy, it could potentially be carried out in the streets, and by one person only in her/his own apartment.<sup>18</sup>

An important role in the formulation of both legislations was played by the Catholic Church which has always played a prominent part in the political life of Italy, an overwhelmingly Catholic country. The Church officially considers prostitution as a social scourge and a sin which, according to the Catholic Catechism, reduces the person (usually a woman) who practices it to an instrument of sexual pleasure. Within this view, the rehabilitation of prostitute women and their re-education to an ‘honest life’ have been traditional concerns for the Church (Gibson 1999). Interestingly, the position towards the clients of prostitutes has been much more tolerant in the Church’s approach, to the extent that many churchmen accepted prostitution in principle as a necessary outlet for the

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<sup>17</sup> For instance, registering with the police, undergoing biweekly vaginal checks, reporting to special hospitals for the cure of venereal diseases, etc.

<sup>18</sup> The criminalisation of activities such as loitering, kerb crawling, soliciting, etc., have created an aura of unlawfulness around prostitution that contributes to its further stigmatization and its association with deviant social behaviour (Danna 2004). This happened despite the fact that such regulations were instituted in the first place to defend specifically the person-prostitute. Soliciting for instance, applies to anyone who “in a public place [...] invites to libidinous acts in a scandalous or harassing manner or follows persons in the street” (Law 75, 1958). Its prohibition was supposed to protect primarily prostitutes from the harassment of clients, but ended up being one of the most frequent charges against prostitutes themselves (Danna 2004).



inevitable male sex drive (ibid.).<sup>19</sup> For example, this perspective has been supported throughout the centuries by Augustin and Thomas Aquinas<sup>20</sup>, and as recently as 1968 with the *Humanae Vitae* Papal encyclical<sup>21</sup> which “uncritically sanctioned prevalent male sexual practices by indulgently accepting men’s inability to resist the ‘tempting’ nature of women” (Andall 2000: 24). Gibson suggests that this approach certainly helps to account for the widespread acceptance of prostitution in Italy and the two semi-tolerant pieces of legislation that were passed on it since the unification of the country (1999).

However, as I explain in chapter 5, after the changes in the prostitution scenario brought about in Italy since the 1980s, the Church has significantly moved its discourse from a focus on the sinful nature of prostitution to aspects related to exploitation of victims of trafficking for sexual purposes. Although, it is now less tolerant of clients, the mission to save and rehabilitate prostitutes is still most prominent in its interventions in this area (see chapter 5). These considerations are also important to highlight the double standard applied to female and male sexuality, which condones men if they use prostitutes, whilst it vilifies women who are prostitutes (O’Connell Davidson 1998). As I further explain in chapter 4, this notion still informs the approach to prostitution, as seen in its prominence in the 2002-2003 political discourses and debates about a change of the 1958 Law.

Indeed, despite attempts to modify it, the Merlin Law has now been in place for nearly fifty years. Its endurance in the first decades after its adoption is partially explained by the progressive lack of visibility of prostitutes on the streets. Their ‘disappearance’ had been caused by the repressive methods used by the police in the late 1970s against streetwalkers, which forced Italian sex workers to either abandon their activities altogether or transfer into private apartments and clubs. This evolution contributed to a relative tolerance towards sex industry-related activities from the 1980s to the early 1990s and to a subsidence of any significant political interest to modify their regulation, with the consequent removal of prostitution from the public agenda as a major issue of concern. However, as Corso and Landi suggest, the shift from a state-regulated prostitution regime to an abolitionist law in 1958 has had profound

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<sup>19</sup> All of the Church’s documents are based on the assumption that clients of prostitutes are invariably men.

<sup>20</sup> Among the most important theologians of the Catholic doctrine, and also two of the five ‘fathers of the Church’.

<sup>21</sup> A Papal encyclical is a letter sent by the Pope to his Bishops to address aspects of Catholic doctrine.

consequences for the lives of prostitute people and of their social acceptance/rejection (1991). They claim that being regulated by the state (after the 1860 Law), had conferred upon prostitutes an institutional validity and public acceptability as important social actors which was inevitably lost after 1958 (ibid.). Hence, while it is true that those who persisted in their street activities (even after the police raids) were too few to attract any significant interest/complaint by the population, at the same time they ended up being more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, precisely due to the lack of consideration for their condition (ibid.).

It is in this context that prostitute women formed their first organized collective. In 1983 Pia Covre and Carla Corso founded the Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitutes after women operating in the sex industry around the area of Pordenone (a city in the North East) organized a protest against the physical and verbal violence they suffered at the hands of soldiers from the nearby American Army base. Since its inception the Committee has been actively fighting against the social exclusion and marginalization of prostitutes and to promote the recognition of prostitution as labour. As Pia Covre explained to me in the course of an interview, this position came from the hopeful belief that throughout the years the population was finally starting to accept prostitution:

Looking back to the 1980s, I really thought that for prostitutes the social stigma could be defeated. I thought that we would have a great 'opening up' and that we could even talk about 'work'. Even in some sectors of public opinion there was this evolution and there was the idea that one could think of prostitution as an acceptable phenomenon, limited as it was at that time, as something that had the right to exist, and that maybe could have been acceptable as a job. This is obviously based on the kind of prostitution we had at that time.

(Personal interview with Pia Covre, August 2002)

In fact, this situation was destined to change, as Italian prostitutes learned in the course of an international conference of prostitutes in Germany in 1984, when they were informed that both in Germany and in the Netherlands migrant women were progressively starting to occupy positions in the sex industry, and the same phenomenon was expected to expand to southern Europe as well (Corso and Landi 1991). In this respect, it is important to note that in view of the changes in the composition of the sex industry in Italy, the Committee later abandoned the 'prostitution as labour' position, and

started pursuing the decriminalization of prostitution as a legitimate activity among consenting adults.

#### **4. The arrival of 'foreign prostitutes'**

The very first migrant prostitutes to come to Italy in significant numbers are believed to have been women and men from Central and Latin America who, since the mid 1970s, occupied a niche in the 'closed doors' sex industry, i.e. night clubs, private apartments, saunas, etc. Their relative invisibility allowed them to carry out their activities mostly undisturbed, because their presence was either ignored or tolerated as not interfering with people's and Italian prostitutes' accustomed lives and occupations (Trappolini 2005).

It was in the early 1990s that local prostitutes started to notice the increasing presence of migrant women, primarily from Eastern Europe and West Africa, operating in street prostitution. In some instances they received the new 'colleagues' with hostility, due to the much lower price of the services they offered that inevitably attracted more clients and thus increased competition amongst them. However, Italian prostitutes were also the first ones to provide basic support to migrant women and to realize that the latter rarely operated independently, being under the strict control of their pimps. In her autobiography published in 1991, Carla Corso provides an insider's perspective of the very first impressions of migrant women on the streets:

Exploitation is experienced by prostitutes of colour, there are many women who live this drama, and in my opinion it is a really explosive situation. These are awful things [...], they are imported, just as at the times of the white slave trade, now however they are Black, South Americans, from South East Asia, it's a real trade. [...] There definitely have to be very powerful organisations, because these women keep staying here, otherwise one cannot understand how they can stay for months and months on our streets without a visa, with no papers, at times even without a passport. The police just look and keep going, the majority of the times they say nothing [...]. The drama of these women is that they have not chosen to be prostitutes, the majority of the times they come here because someone promised them another job.

(Corso and Landi 1991: 186-187; my translation).

Although this narrative is still based on vague notions of the phenomenon, Corso had been right in understanding that the situation would soon assume much bigger dimensions (ibid.).

The Italian Government, however, did not pay too much attention to the visible presence of migrant prostitutes and kept treating them with a *laissez faire* attitude of 'looking but not seeing'. While the state and the police ignored them, the population reacted with immediate hostility. The presence of 'foreign prostitutes', as they were called since the early stages of their arrival on the streets, became perceived as a *disagio*: the Italian word that is used to indicate a state of hardship, of disturbance of the public peace. Some local communities even started to organise street demonstrations to intimidate the women, to chase them off the streets, and in some cases they even made punitive expeditions "legitimated as the defence of public decency, nocturnal quiet and the innocence of the neighbourhood's children, as well as the protection of local women from harassment by clients" (Danna 2004: 166). The first areas to feel affected in the early 1990s were generally those of bigger cities such as Milan, Turin, Rome, Naples and Palermo, and a few years later, similar reactions took place in smaller localities when migrant prostitutes expanded into the territory (Carchedi et al 2000).

According to the reconstruction of Paola, the coordinator of an Article 18 Implementation Agency, it was 1995 when, in the city of the Northeast where she works, the population started to feel affected by the presence of migrant women in street prostitution:

A public debate opened up at the city level on the problem of illegal immigration, drug and the safety problems that the citizens were experiencing. So, on top of micro-crime, such as drug dealing, the population expressed their *disagio* towards the presence of these women on the streets, even if at the beginning there were very few of them. But in any case they were a disturbing factor. The debates were extremely intense and there were a lot of talks about prostitution and about the fact that nobody wanted it. At that time the phenomenon was new to everybody, the citizens, and the public administration. The social services knew nothing about it, it was new for the police, and this was the same all over Italy.

(Personal interview with Paola, August 2002)

While demonstrations against 'foreign prostitutes' were taking place, other groups of people showed interest in understanding who these women were, where they came from and whether they needed any help. The Committee was the first institution to mobilise to provide some support and assistance. In order to improve the quality of its services it started working with TAMPEP, what Pia Covre defines the 'mother of all support projects':

We have been working with TAMPEP since 1993. [...] We were working already as an association, as the Committee on the streets to give information, to help with the prevention [of STIs] with groups of our associates. It was something very self-organised and self-managed. That's how we started to conduct a more systematic intervention towards the foreigners. With TAMPEP we created a real methodology of intervention, we started to understand better who these prostitutes were, so that we could give a more solid basis and validity to our interventions.

(Personal interview with Pia Covre, August 2002)

Since then the Committee has coupled practical interventions on the ground with a variety of other advocacy-oriented activities, in which it progressively stressed the recognition of subjectivity and personal agency of 'foreign prostitutes', and criticised the false pity for victims of sex trafficking displayed by state authorities who harass and deport them at the same time (see chapter 4). Through its vocal interventions in these topical issues, the Committee gained public recognition for a brief period under the centre-left governing coalition (1996-2001), when, as discussed in the following section, it became an important interlocutor of the Government's Equal Opportunity Unit on issues pertaining to prostitution and trafficking in women, and contributed to the political mobilization that resulted in the formulation of Article 18.

The initiative of the Committee was followed by other organizations that had already been operating in the field of social exclusion, each adopting very different modalities of negotiating their encounters with 'foreign prostitutes'. As the coordinator of a major organization in Turin told me, during the first years the phenomenon of 'foreign prostitution' was so new and unknown in its various manifestations, that any method of intervention whatsoever was experimented with, and in some cases with negative repercussions on the women themselves.<sup>22</sup> In other instances, it was individuals who started to establish contact with the women, and subsequently organized themselves into registered associations of support. This is how a small organization in North East Italy was funded, as Antonella, a social worker told me:

The first contact was established by three people who were moved by the need and curiosity to understand what type of situation these people were living in, given the fact that there were animated debates at the neighbourhood levels and everybody was talking about prostitution, but nobody had ever

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<sup>22</sup> For instance, many women were beaten up by their pimps for having accepted free condoms. Others used two on the same client, to increase protection, not knowing that this practice leads frequently to the breakage of the condom itself.

thought of contacting these people and understanding in what condition they were living. So the first contact was established during the night, they took some hot tea during the winter and some flowers in the summer. And as soon as the women started trusting these people, they started talking about the way they were living, the way they had migrated to Italy, and their primary needs, which were clearly linked to their health. Because they were all illegal, and very few could speak Italian. So they needed to be informed about basic things, such as how to go to the hospital, because they were scared, being illegal, and they feared being repatriated. So little by little these three people started realizing that they needed to structure themselves as an institutionalized group, an association, and that's how we were born.

(Personal interview with Antonella, August 2002)

The reconstruction of the first arrival of, and responses to, migrant prostitutes is still very anecdotal and imprecise. As these extracts and comments reveal, before Article 18 brought some order in the organization of associations that provide assistance to 'foreign prostitutes', the provision of support was not coordinated and each institution worked on its own, often without a clear understanding of the best methods of intervention to adopt. By the mid 1990s, however, the people involved in these bodies had gained better knowledge of the complexity of the phenomenon and the exploitation and illegality that it was often connected to migrations in this sector. Moreover, with the further growth in the number of migrant women involved in the sex industry in the second half of the 1990s, it became evident that such scattered and irregular interventions were insufficient to address their specific and complex needs.<sup>23</sup>

It is at this time that *ad hoc* responses were finally solicited also from the Government, albeit reflecting opposite reasons for concern. While some advocated the development of a more appropriate and targeted system of support and protection especially for '*forced* prostitutes', others insisted that stricter migration controls should be put in place to immediately expel and repatriate all '*foreign* prostitutes', irrespective of the coerced and exploitative condition they may have been subjected to. Concurrently, international organizations took steps to raise awareness and urge national Governments to fight sex trafficking and address the needs of trafficked persons with specific regulations. Amongst them, starting in the late 1980s and early 1990s, various European

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<sup>23</sup> For example, medical check ups, STI prevention and treatments, protection from violence and exploitation. In most cases migrant women were unable/afraid to access these basic provisions due to their illegal migrant status in the country.

Union (EU) institutions<sup>24</sup> launched a series of initiatives to combat the trafficking of human beings aimed at involving various tiers of governance for a more effective response.<sup>25</sup> For measures to be taken specifically by national Governments, in 1997 the European Council of Ministers formulated a joint action on trafficking which “obliged member states to penalize the trafficking of persons, to pass measures to prosecute those profiting from trafficking and to confiscate their profits, and *to support and protect victims of trafficking*” (Outshoorn 2004: 12; emphasis added). Italy was one of the first countries to respond to this call for action – due in part also to domestic pressure of the associations that had already started to intervene with support services and to formulate specific legislation that guarantees assistance and protection to victims of trafficking.

## 5. Towards the formulation of Article 18

The approval and application of this measure in 1998 resulted from a tortuous policy process that had been marked by the shift from a centre-right to a left governing coalition in 1996. The former had focused on ‘foreign prostitution’ primarily as an issue pertaining to illegal migration and to be addressed with increased border control and expulsions of those involved – both prostitutes and their pimps or exploiters.<sup>26</sup> Left wing Governments<sup>27</sup> gave prominence to ‘the phenomenon of trafficking for sexual purposes’, but there was still confusion as to whether this should be understood as an issue of migration, prostitution or violence against women. In 1997 the Minister of Internal Affairs launched the first official proposal to introduce a protection permit for trafficked

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<sup>24</sup> In this respect, Chapter 1 outlined some of the most important protocols and resolutions passed by the United Nations, whereas here the focus is on European Union actions taken in this field. It is relevant to mention that the first measures taken by the EU were highly influenced by the abolitionist perspective, hence the first resolution passed in 1989 condemned both prostitution and sex trafficking. This approach was subsequently abandoned as a result of lobbying by anti-abolitionist feminist groups. More recent EU policies on trafficking do not concern prostitution, the management of which is left to the initiative of each member state (Outshoorn 2004).

<sup>25</sup> An example of these initiatives is the STOP program launched in November 1996 by the European Commission to encourage co-operation between those responsible for action against trafficking in human beings and sexual exploitation of children in the EU. NGOs, including a number of Italian ones, have been very active in this program (European Commission 1996).

<sup>26</sup> In chapter 5 I explain this position in further detail in relation to public debates initiated by the centre-right Government that came back into power in May 2001.

<sup>27</sup> Between 1996 and 2001 the political landscape in Italy was characterized by a series of unstable centre-left coalitions.

victims in the country. He suggested adopting legislation that would grant protection only to those who cooperated with police and judicial authorities in order to denounce their traffickers. Being concerned primarily with ‘urban safety’, he justified it as a preventive measure to limit the spread of the phenomenon of prostitution, and only marginally as an initiative offered in aid of trafficked persons (Danna 2004). Similar views and interests prevailed in the parliamentary debates that followed the discussion of such proposal, until a new approach began to be pursued by three women MPs attached to the left-wing Government. They declared their intention to work on an alternative measure that would address in the first place the unconditional protection of victims of trafficking – rather than issues of public order or illegal migration – without being penalizing or punitive. For this purpose, they set up a specific steering group (the Inter-Ministerial Committee for the Coordination of the Actions of the Government Against Trafficking of Women and Minors for Sexual Purposes) that included representatives from relevant ministries, psychiatrists, judges and lawyers and a large number of associations that had been already providing support to migrant women operating in the sex industry. The aim of this Committee was to study and analyze the phenomenon of sexual trafficking (of women and minors) to Italy and to advise the Government on actions to be taken to combat it, pursuant to the elaboration of a new law.

The unprecedented cooperation amongst different social and political actors – including people from a very diverse range of non governmental institutions (from Catholic organizations to the Committee of the Civil Rights of Prostitutes) – under the supervision of the Ministry of Equal Opportunities, played a crucial role in changing the scope and terms of the new legislative proposal (Danna 2004). The latter, despite initial resistance received in Parliament, was eventually passed and incorporated in the 1998 Consolidated Act on Immigration as ‘Article 18’. Anna Finocchiaro, one of the MPs who had taken the lead in its formulation, thus explains:

I remember the difficulties we had in the course of the [process for the] approval of Article 18. [A] first version [of the law had] subordinated the concession of the stay permit to the requirement for the victim to testimony [against her exploiters] in the penal procedure. The [new] proposal [which detached the release of the permit from the required testimony] generated a scandal. It was impossible to conceive the idea that foreign prostitutes could be given a stay permit [...], with the risk that [they could use it] to elude the fight against illegal immigration. [...]. The proposal to *concede* a stay permit to the victims also had the object to favour collaboration, in order to increase



the efficacy of a repressive action [against traffickers]. In the end we made it (*l'abbiamo spuntata!*)

(Finocchiaro 2000: 12, 13; emphasis added, my translation)

This comment is particularly interesting because it explains, from an insider's perspective, the process and struggle that eventually led to the approval of Article 18. Even more significantly, it underscores the extent to which the formulation of this law was marked by concerns for illegal migration and organized crime, and less so by preoccupation for the human rights violations to which victims of trafficking are subjected.<sup>28</sup> This is evident both from the very fact that this law was eventually framed within an Immigration Act, and also from the type of reaction it generated when it was first proposed. The possibility that 'foreign prostitutes' may be given a stay permit a) despite being undocumented migrants and b) without being requested to give any form of collaboration (the testimony) was seen as a scandalous 'offer' to 'foreign prostitutes' to elude migration control, rather than an opportunity to provide them with help from exploitative conditions. This shows, as Jordan puts it, how "Governments consistently fail to consider the crime from the perspective of the trafficked person and are particularly inept at understanding the problem from the perspective of trafficked women" (2002: 29). The battle that Finocchiaro and her colleagues conducted to break away from these types of approach resulted in the approval of legislation that is often referred to as unique compared to actions undertaken by other Governments.

The complexity of these issues and the content of Article 18 are further investigated in the following part of the thesis. Before reaching the conclusions of this chapter there is one important aspect that still needs to be included in this preliminary overview: the numbers and origins of migrant women operating in the Italian sex industry, and the reliability of data produced so far.

## **6. Migrant women in the Italian sex industry: data and their reliability**

There is no clear estimation of the number of female migrants operating in the sex industry in Italy. The largest groups are reportedly from Nigeria and Ghana, Albania,

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<sup>28</sup> For a similar discussion concerning the 'Palermo Protocol' on trafficking and smuggling, see O'Connell Davidson 2006; Kempadoo, Sanghera et al. 2005; Jordan 2002.

Rumania, there are also significant numbers of Bulgarians, Slovaks, Poles, Colombians, Peruvians and women from the former USSR (CABIRIA 2004; Aghatise 2003).<sup>29</sup> Due to the hidden nature of the phenomenon and the high rate of mobility involved, precise numerical documentation of their presence is still lacking, and estimates “rest more on ‘conventional wisdom’ than on hard statistics” (Lazaridis 2001: 75). This lack of comprehensive factual data has resulted in a disparity of numbers as shown in the following inconsistent quotes. In 1996, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Rome reported 20,000 to 30,000 female migrants who are believed to enter the sex industry each year in Italy (International Organization for Migration 2006). Until a few years ago, the Pope John Paul XXIII Association (*Associazione Papa Giovanni XXIII*)<sup>30</sup> estimated that the number of “girls forced into prostitution on the streets of Italy” amounted to 80,000, while more recently the figure has inexplicably turned to 50,000 or more.<sup>31</sup> In 1998 PARSEC, an Italian research association on population determined that the number of women migrants operating (not necessarily trafficked) in the sex industry in Italy was between 15,000 to 19,000 (Carchedi at al 2000).

Indeed, if those who publish these data explained how they estimated them in the first place, it might be possible to make some sense of the inconsistency of these numbers and of the whole array of other existing ones not cited here. If, as the IOM reports, the number of migrant prostitutes *entering* the country *each year* is between 20,000 to 30,000, and according to PARSEC – in a study produced only two years later – their actual presence on Italian soil amounts to 15,000/19,000, where have all these women gone? How has the other hyperbolic figure of 80,000 sex-trafficked ‘girls’ been put together?

As these considerations show, it is not possible to make an informed claim about the numbers of migrant women operating in the Italian sex industry. The incongruity of

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<sup>29</sup> According to many of my interviewees, another emerging tendency – which has however gone unnoticed – is the increasing number of the ‘oldest’ communities of female migrants such as Filipinas, Somalis, Chinese, and Moroccans, who are entering prostitution, catering almost exclusively for their male nationals. This type of prostitution is allegedly well hidden and protected within the various communities.

<sup>30</sup> As is explained in later sections of the thesis, this is a non-governmental organization which operates in different areas of social exclusion, and is particularly active in the area of trafficking for sexual purposes.

<sup>31</sup> There is no explanation of how these hyperbolic numbers have been produced. Moreover, the Pope John Paul XXIII Association considers prostitution invariably as a form of sexual exploitation, thus migrant women operating in the sex industry are viewed always as victims of trafficking for sexual purposes. In the quotations from other sources a distinction is generally made between those who are trafficked, and those who are not, although once again, it is not specified on what basis this differentiation is made.

the data produced is certainly a serious blemish in this field, and one that hampers the possibility to formulate *ad hoc* responses that take into account the real extent of the phenomenon.

## **7. Concluding remarks**

This chapter has presented the development of dominant approaches and discourses on migration and prostitution in Italy in the past decades, thus setting the context for an understanding of the impact of, and responses to, the arrival of ‘foreign prostitutes’. It has explained how, in the context of a hostile climate towards migration in the early 1990s, the relatively tolerant attitude that had developed towards prostitution in the 1980s started to be progressively replaced by concerns about the increasingly visible, and allegedly disturbing, presence of ‘foreign prostitutes’ on the streets. However, while on the one hand local communities treated them as public molesters, on the other, non-governmental associations, individuals and small groups of citizens started to approach them on the streets offering basic support and assistance. When the Government finally decided to take actions to deal with ‘foreign prostitutes’, many of these bodies played a crucial role in informing the drafting of Article 18, and became crucial in its implementation.

A number of important issues have emerged from this overview: a) the ways in which both migration and prostitution are viewed as disrupting and criminalized phenomena; b) the extent to which these views come together in the construction of ‘foreign prostitutes’ as a problematic presence, and c) the tension that characterizes their perception as either vulnerable victims of sex trafficking to be assisted, or as an issue of public disturbance and a threat undermining national values and social integrity. The chapter also introduced some of the main bodies which, in various and different ways, play an important role in the formulation of the response to ‘foreign prostitution’: the Catholic Church and its charities, the Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitutes, non-governmental bodies operating in the field of social exclusion, and, at the political level, the Northern League. The following part of the thesis explores these issues and the part played by these actors in detail, starting from the analysis of Article 18. In particular, drawing from my observations of its application and a close reading of its text, I discuss

and problematize some of its constitutive aspects and challenge the enthusiastic and all too often uncritical support that it has received.

## Part III

### Empirical Analysis of the Data

The review of literature in chapter 1 showed how both inside and outside the academy, debates on prostitution-related migrations focus primarily on the phenomenon of sex trafficking, the various strategies enacted to address it, and its being separated (or not) from ‘voluntary’ prostitution, or sex work. In her analysis of trafficking discourses, Sanghera adopts a highly poignant metaphor that effectively renders the complexity of the (anti) trafficking arena:

Issues of migration, trafficking, and sex work are peppered with constructs of sexuality, gender, and vulnerability, threaded through with categories of victim and agent, consent and coercion, and stirred together in a cauldron by cooks, who are far too many in number, much too disparate in their culinary skills [...]. These “too many cooks” have not only managed to spoil the broth, but some of them have also ended up bonking each other with spatulas.

(2005: 3, 4)

Along these lines, the overview of the evolution of dominant discourses on migration and prostitution in recent decades in Italy (presented in chapter 3) started to show how the understanding and response to the new presence of migrant women prostitutes into the country is characterized by conflicting perspectives. In this part of the thesis I investigate these aspects in greater detail. I focus on different constructions of the phenomenon of ‘foreign prostitution’ and of ‘foreign prostitutes’ in Italy, and on how they map out into different legal, social and political practices and discourses.

## Chapter 4

### **‘Foreign Prostitution’ and (failing) Law(s)**

Law figures as a factor in the power relationships of individuals and social classes, but also it [is so] omnipresent in the very marrow of society – that law making and law-interpreting institutions have been among the primary sources of the pictures of order and disorder, virtue and vice, reasonableness and craziness. [...]. The power exerted by a legal regime consists less in the force that it can bring to bear against violators of its rules than in its capacity to persuade people that the world described in its images and categories is the only attainable world which a sane person would want to live in.

(Gordon 1984: 109)

Moral and political debates concerning sexuality in this society [ ....] are surrounded by such a veil of emotion, dogma, ignorance and blind prejudice that informed debate and humane help remain scarce, while personal suffering and public confusion remain abundant.

(Plummer 1975: 4, 5)

#### **1. Introduction**

In discussing feminist legal theory, Lacey claims that most feminist legal scholarship is based on the assumption “that the law plays some part in consolidating, expressing, underpinning and maintaining social relations in societies, including those between women and men” (Lacey 2004a: 66). She explains how, seen within this perspective, laws have a dynamic role which does not end merely in regulating or empowering “women and men who arrive at the legal forum, but also in constituting us as sexed subjects” (ibid.). This is problematic when gendered assumptions are predicated upon ‘sexed subjects’, whereby men and women may end up being treated unequally by the law. A major matter of concern that arises in this context is whether, or even the extent to which, the law itself perpetuates disadvantaged (gendered, but also ‘raced’, sexually oriented and so on) legal subjecthoods (Lacey 2004b). This and related concerns have led some feminists to focus on legal systems with an interest in understanding how the law

may maintain unjust relations between men and women, or help in challenging them (Lacey 1989; Lacey 2004b).

The questions raised and points made by feminist legal theory have constituted an important starting point and recurrent reference for my investigation of the various legal measures (some in the form of existing laws, others still at the stage of proposed legislation) that have been formulated in the past decade in Italy to address various aspects related to the expanding phenomenon of 'foreign prostitution'. More specifically, the empirical evidence I collected during my fieldwork prompted me to analyse in greater detail Article 18 of the 1998 Consolidated Act of Immigration. This piece of legislation establishes and regulates the provision of protection and assistance in favour of women trafficked for sexual purposes. My aim was to find out whether Article 18 contains biases that reinforce the gendered notions of both female victimhood and sexual looseness that, as I observed, often inform its application (also discussed in chapters 5 and 6). After reading and learning from relevant legal literature and texts, I became familiar with Italian juridical language and systems, and was able to make sense of various legislations and regulations. However, my investigation was complicated by the inconsistency between the information I had been given by Article 18 implementers, what I had read in legal scholarship on Article 18, and the actual text of the law and its annexes. Clearly such discrepancy is a discovery in itself which underscores the ambiguity of the way the norm is formulated and the extent to which this inevitably leaves room for different, questionable interpretations (see chapter 5).

Furthermore, since January 2002, when the Head of the Government had expressed preoccupation about Italian cities being swamped with 'foreign prostitutes', heated debates raged amongst politicians, experts and various stakeholders about possible new legislation on prostitution to replace the 1958 Merlin Law (see chapter 3). The climax of these debates was reached in the spring and summer 2002, while I was preparing for and then conducting the first phase of my fieldwork. Researching the content and enforcement of the legislation that addresses trafficked women for sexual purposes (Article 18) while debates about the 'threatening and invading' presence of 'foreign prostitutes' were in full flow, highlighted the co-existence of two discrepant discourses about migrant women in the sex industry in Italy. One focuses on forced prostitution in its transnational dimension, i.e. sex trafficking, addresses the women involved as victims in need of protection, and led to set up an apparatus of support for

them – including the release of a temporary residence permit – that was regulated by immigration legislation (Article 18 of the 1998 Consolidated Act on Immigration). Conversely, the other discourse that characterized the political agenda of the right-wing coalition starting 2001, constructs ‘foreign prostitutes’ as a health hazard and a menace to the wellbeing and moral integrity of the ‘social body’. The response advocated is to ‘get rid of’, or at least hide them by addressing the practice of prostitution itself and modifying its regulation with a stricter regime of controls.

By analysing first Article 18 and then the proposals (and debates surrounding them) made in 2002 for a new law on prostitution, this chapter seeks to investigate some fundamental aspects of the types of knowledge produced around the presence of ‘foreign prostitutes’ in Italy in the last decade.

## **2. The legal response to sex trafficking: Article 18**

Article 18 guarantees ‘foreign citizens’<sup>1</sup> who are both subjected to a condition of abuse or severe exploitation *and* are in a situation of danger the right to receive protection, assistance and a temporary visa. Two options are made available for the accessibility of these provisions: the so-called social and the legal procedures. The former is applied when a woman or girl contacts and asks for protection and help through an Implementation Agency, one of the bodies specifically designated to implement Article 18. In this case the IA, after verifying the required conditions of serious violence or exploitation and danger, may request a stay permit for social protection reasons (*per motivi di protezione sociale*). The legal method comes into force when, during the course of a criminal proceeding, it is ascertained that the woman or girl is in imminent danger due to severe exploitation, based on the statements she makes to police or legal authorities. If she agrees to start a judicial procedure against her exploiter(s), she is entitled to request a residence permit. In both cases the actual granting of the visa is

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<sup>1</sup> As in the case of ‘foreign prostitutes’, the expression ‘foreign citizens’ is used here as a translation of *cittadini stranieri* that is used in the text of the law, and not as my personal terminological choice. Even though Article 18 applies to ‘foreign citizens’ who are trafficked, so far it has been adopted nearly exclusively to *women and minors trafficked for sexual purposes* (minors here applies to under 18s). To simplify the discussion, and given the focus of this thesis, unless specified, in this and other chapters I refer to Article 18 specifically in relation to women and sexual trafficking. However, important considerations will be made in relation to the gendering and gendered nature of this legal measure.



subject to the applicant's participation in a 'project of social protection' (*progetto di protezione sociale*) as part of a 'program of assistance and social integration' (*programma di assistenza e integrazione sociale*) offered by an Implementation Agency. The permit, whether obtained through the legal or the social option, is valid for six months and can be renewed for one year or more if the holder has found employment. It also gives access to social assistance services, public education and provides registration with the national employment agency.

*De facto*, this piece of legislation became effective nearly two years after it was first incorporated into the new immigration act in 1998. The reason for the delay was that the regulations for its implementation were made available to the public only in November 1999, when an Inter-Ministerial Commission for the Implementation of Article 18 was finally set up with the aim of managing the programs of social assistance and integration. A month later, the tendering documents for the selection of institutions (Implementation Agencies) responsible for the management of 'projects of social protections for victims of trafficking for sexual purposes' were published, and the first program began in February 2000.<sup>2</sup>

### **3. Problematic aspects of Article 18: integration, victimhood and prostitution**

Article 18 is often referred to as an exemplary norm whose main objectives are to offer victims of trafficking a concrete opportunity to get away from situations of abuse and to favour the fight against trafficking networks (Giammarinaro 2002a). Its 'progressive' nature emanates from the fact that it allows the trafficked person to benefit from protection and assistance, and to obtain a stay permit. When a social procedure is followed, the visa should<sup>3</sup> be issued based on the abusive and exploitative conditions

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note, in relation to what was mentioned in footnote 1, that this bid for programs of integration and social protection was addressed to 'victims of trafficking for sexual purposes', whereas, as specified, Article 18 should be geared towards crimes related to trafficking more generally.

<sup>3</sup> As specified in chapter 5, the actual implementation of this provision is still very problematic. Despite the addition of new Government directives in the year 2000, aimed at strengthening the social procedure, IA staff I interviewed in 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2005 still lamented the fact that too often the fastest (and only) way for a woman to obtain a temporary leave to remain is to start a criminal procedure against her exploiters (see also Crowhurst 2006). Concordantly, Pearson states that "the implementation [of Article 18] still shows a tendency for permits to be granted when victims report their traffickers, but at least it is a

suffered, the declared intention to start a ‘project of social protection’, and not *exclusively* on collaboration with law enforcement and immigration officials in investigations and prosecutions – as was the case in other proposals made before its adoption, and in trafficking legislation currently in place in other countries.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, both Article 18 and other legal documents attached to it present a number of ambiguous and problematic aspects that, being open to arbitrary interpretations, in some instances map out in questionable typologies of implementation, as explained in this and following chapters.

### *Social integration, recuperation and victimhood*

One of the most prominent features of Article 18 is the delivery of a program of assistance and social integration through projects of social protection. The meaning of ‘assistance’ is spelled out in more detail in Article 18’s implementation regulations, i.e. it entails: provision of accommodation, insertion into employment, information, orientation, health care, etc. On the other hand, little further specification is added in relation to the concept of ‘social integration’ and the meaning it purports in the context of the law.

Castles and Miller suggest that the type of ‘integration’ that is most commonly advocated in Italy and other Southern European countries is one in “which immigrants are incorporated into certain areas of society (above all the labour market), even though they are often denied access to others (such as welfare systems, citizenship and political participation)” (Castles and Miller 2003: 245). Indeed, the focus on the labour market is also mentioned in the implementation regulations of Article 18, where the term used in conjunction with integration is ‘socio-labour insertion’ that suggests that the legislator meant inclusion in the labour market as an important aspect of the programs of assistance

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step in the right direction by removing the quid pro quo of residency in exchange for testimony” (2002: 58).

<sup>4</sup> In this respect it is relevant to mention the 2002 European Commission proposal for a Council Directive on ‘short-term residence permit issued to victims of action to facilitate illegal immigration or trafficking in human beings who cooperate with the competent authorities’. This provision required victims of trafficking to cooperate in criminal investigations in order to enjoy a protection lasting only for the time of the cooperation. Human Rights Watch harshly criticized the European measure stressing that “victim protection for persons who have suffered serious human rights violations – including those abuses associated with human trafficking – should not be predicated upon a victim’s cooperation with state authorities” (Human Rights Watch 2002).

and social integration. This view is also maintained by Giammarinaro, an attorney who published extensively on legal aspects of Article 18. In a document presented at the ‘United Nations Expert Group Meeting on Trafficking in Women and Girls’, she writes:

The residence permit is connected with the participation in an assistance and social integration program. This implies that the trafficked person is provided with medical and psychological assistance, legal counselling, training and *help for job opportunities*.

(2002b: 5; emphasis added)

Nevertheless, nowhere in the official documentation is the meaning of social integration specified in detail. As a result, it is possible to observe how, at the implementation stage, a variety of interpretations of this expression are translated into practice. Many of the IAs I visited, for example, view social integration as part of a cultural process during which the trafficked woman who starts a project of social protection has to embrace and learn a new way of life according to Italian norms of behaviour. Within this understanding, integration is closer in meaning to assimilation, which indicates a migration policy model that assumes and promotes the subordination of one culture (that of the migrant) to another (that of the ‘natives’). Clearly, given that the ideal of ‘Italianness’ and the values, cultural practices, and behaviours attached to it are subjective, a multiplicity of models of integration are enforced (see also chapter 5 and 6).

The ambiguity surrounding such crucial concepts describing the very aims of Article 18 programs is enhanced even further by the adoption, in the implementation regulations, of alternative terms – in lieu of and in addition to integration – that retain yet other meanings, as shown in the following extract:

Another important aspect of the law [Article 18] is represented by the attention given to the *recuperation* [*recupero*] of the victims of this form of exploitation [sex trafficking in persons]. In the majority of the cases, these are extra-communitarians, *mainly women and minors*, infiltrated into Italy with coercion and abduction and subjected to unheard-of acts of violence whose effects are very difficult to efface [*sottoposti ad inaudite violenze i cui effetti sono difficilmente cancellabili*].<sup>5</sup>

(Ministero delle Pari Opportunità 2002; my translation, emphasis added)

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<sup>5</sup> The formulation in Italian seems to suggest that ‘efface’ (*cancellabili*) is used in reference to the elimination of experiences of exploitation and violence from the memory and selfhood of those who have been subjected to it.

In this document – and others published by the Ministry of Equal Opportunities which are not strictly part of the legal texts *per se* but are constitutive of the legal context of Article 18 – the main beneficiaries of the program of assistance and social integration are ‘women and minors’, as opposed to the gender-neutral ‘foreign citizen’ adopted in the text of the law. For them specifically the concept of *recuperation* is adopted. The use of this alternative terminology suggests that the legal subject, around whom and for whom the law is constructed, is conceptualized upon the assumption that victims of this type of abuse and exploitation are prevalently women and minors who need to be recuperated or rehabilitated from a state of degradation.

This formulation is questionable for the following reasons. First of all, it diminishes and overlooks the widespread phenomenon of trafficking in male migrants, either for labour or sexual purposes.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, as “it is believed that minors cannot be expected to act in their own best interests as their ability to exercise full agency is not yet entirely developed” (Sanghera 2005: 13), the coupling of women and minors is problematic to both. It infantilizes women, and reinforces the idea that they lack autonomy and capacity to make decisions for themselves, whilst ignoring the fact that trafficking in minors should be addressed by a different legal regime (Coomaraswamy 2000). Moreover, when women and minors are ‘brought into the picture’ so is the irreversible damage attached to their status as *victims*: “unheard-of-violence whose effects are very difficult to efface”. In this sense, the legal text appears to be based upon, and to reinforce, a narrative whereby women and minors who are trafficked have not only lost agency but also the capacity to overcome traumatic experiences. Why is this critical, given that trafficking is by definition an exploitative practice? The answer can be found in the fact that the law attributes to its subjects a questionable set of predetermined characteristics and meanings that do not necessarily reflect reality. By searching exclusively for vulnerability and the abuse and repression experienced by trafficked women, the crucial and “dynamic interplay between repression and resistance” and their capacity to react to violence and coercion is completely ignored (Kapur 2001: 857). This has inevitable repercussions on the response provided when the legislation is implemented. Kempadoo addresses this issue and explains that to:

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<sup>6</sup> The limited awareness and knowledge of trafficking in male migrants is also common amongst the staff of IAs, thus making it more difficult to address their situations. For example, as I observed in the course of my fieldwork, the shelters and accommodations provided by IAs can host only women, and no special arrangements are in place in case a male migrant should ask for protection as per Article 18.

ideologically locate the trafficked person as helpless and pitiful, has strong implications for how change is imagined and brought about through anti-trafficking interventions. Victims, who by definition are passive and child-like, are deemed incapable of undertaking any action, thus requiring 'rescue' or 'saving' from their circumstances by others who stand outside of the trafficking process, and who, it is believed, know best.

(Kempadoo, Sanghera et al 2005: xxiv)

In this respect, Giammarinaro proposes and urges making a crucial distinction between the use of victim as a legal concept, and the cultural and social significance that may be attached to the notion of victimhood. The latter should not inform the way the law is formulated.

In order to avoid any discrimination or stigmatization, the approach of institutional and social actors to women and girls who have been trafficked should be based on the idea that they are not criminals, nor illegal aliens or prostitutes, but victims of a crime. But it is important to underline that the definition of victim is a legal concept. A cultural and social approach should not stress the condition of victim as the essential aspect of the identity of a trafficked woman. On the contrary, trafficked women and girls should be regarded as persons willing to escape from traffickers, to reach full self-determination and freedom in their own lives.

(2002b: 7)

Moreover, by assuming that being a victim of sex trafficking invariably entails powerlessness, helplessness and complete subjection, the law implicitly excludes women (the majority) who do not conform to this model from being legally recognized as victims, and thus treats them as criminals, denying them support and protection. In this way, an innocent-victim/guilty-criminal divide is created with help and assistance provided only to those who manage to fulfil the 'requirements' needed to reach the high threshold of victimhood (Demleitner 2001; Chapkis 2003; O'Connell Davidson 2006). But the reality is much more complex than this, "the abuses that come under the umbrella of 'trafficking' can vary in severity, generating a continuum of experience rather than a simple either/or dichotomy" (O'Connell Davidson 2006: 9).

In her study of trafficking in women from Eastern Europe to Italy, Andrijasevic presents the compelling example of two women who did not meet the 'standards' required to be recognized as victims by the law and were repatriated as undocumented migrants. One of them lied to meet those standards (following the advice of the Italian immigration officer who was handling her case), and when pressing charges against her

traffickers “included a false statement saying that, due to the threats made on her by a third party, returning home would constitute a threat to her safety” (2004: 131). The other had her request for permit to stay as per Article 18 “rejected by the authorities, and justified as follows: ‘Currently, there are no concrete dangers for the safety of the claimant, which would be caused by the claimant’s attempt to escape organizations that exploit prostitution’” (ibid: 132). In both cases the women were exploited by traffickers, against whom they were ready to press charges, yet their cases were not ‘severe enough’ to be granted protection and a visa.

The examples and considerations presented so far reveal the definitional problem implicit in the notions ‘severe exploitation’ and ‘abuse’ used in the text of the law as pre-conditions for the provision of support. What if the exploitation is not ‘severe’? Can it be ‘not severe enough’? And what happens when one is subjected to ‘severe exploitation’ but is not in a situation of danger? As seen, the answer is quite simple: expulsion and repatriation. Indeed in some instances migrant prostitutes are expelled well before anyone may have time or the desire to make the effort to investigate whether they are victims of trafficking. For example, especially in the years 2001 and 2002, many migrant women operating in the Italian sex industry were raided by the police and quickly repatriated to their country of origin. This happened despite the fact that they may have been trafficked, thus having the right to receive protection and assistance under Article 18. In complete contrast to this is the scenario described by one of my interviewees, Marco, director of an Implementation Agency, who enthusiastically explained to me the ‘efforts’ made by the police to extrapolate from some women ‘confessions of victimhood’:

I have seen some of the police inspectors spending entire nights with these women, up until early morning. They really did a good job, they would not let them go until they told the truth: ‘come on tell me the truth’ they would say. You know at midnight they could have easily told them: ‘ok you don’t want to cooperate, goodbye, we repatriate you’. But they did not, they persisted: ‘come on, come on, come on, come on’, until they broke down. In the end, it is just a question of [the police] having a conscience!

(Personal interview with Marco, March 2005)

Bearing all the characteristics of a criminal interrogation, Marco’s narrative describes the process some women have to go through to *prove* they are *exploited enough* to receive assistance. These types of procedures carried out by police and

immigration authorities raise questions about who decides what ‘severe exploitation’ is, what kind of ‘requirements’ are needed to be accepted as being in a condition of severe exploitation and danger, and whether these criteria are standardized. The discussion so far and the analysis that follows seem to suggest that the evaluation of the status of victim is still very arbitrary.

### *Article 18 and prostitution*

A review of the body of literature produced on Article 18 shows that a common assumption among those who write about and ‘work’ with it – including attorneys, social workers, researchers, director of IAs, etc – is that one of the conditions upon which trafficked women enter a program of assistance and social integration is the abandonment of the activity of prostitution. For example, Giammarinaro emphatically claims that the apparatus of support envisioned by Article 18 applies exclusively to those who “wish to abandon the circuit of prostitution in a *definitive* way, and who are subjected to a form of conditioning which is not necessarily comparable to that of slavery, but is such as to put them at risk when they decide to leave the activity of prostitution.” (2002a: 66; my translation, emphasis added). The Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitutes has even renamed its Article 18 projects of social protection as ‘projects for the abandonment of prostitution’, thus underscoring the paramount relevance of this particular aspect.

However, despite a close reading of the text of the law and its related documentation, I could not find where this particular requirement had been framed and worded. On the other hand, in my research I came across the statement of another attorney who questions this very assumption. Petrini writes:

It is worth remembering that the permit is not given to ‘favour a sort of moral amendment of the victim’: as a consequence, the decision to go ‘back on the streets’ should be evaluated in such a way that the complexity of the behaviour of each woman has to be taken into consideration individually [case by case], in order to avoid the automaticity of the withdrawal [of the permit].

(2002: 487; my translation)

In light of this consideration, I set out to retrieve the section in the law (always supposing there was one) which had originated the belief – in juridical analysis but also

in everyday practice – that the norm contains a specific requirement to abandon prostitution for women who want to participate in a project of social protection.

Article 18 specifies that there are two cases that might lead to the withdrawal of the permit to stay (and connected to it, the right to stay in the country and to continue a project of social protection). The first one is when a program is voluntarily interrupted, and the second is caused by the ‘inappropriate conduct’ of the legal subject. In the latter case, as Petrini and Ferraris claim, “the legislator does not provide any further element to interpret the meaning of such expression/locution [inappropriate conduct]: it is all [its interpretation] left to the discretion of the bodies that implement the programs of assistance and social protection and the police (*forze dell’ordine*)” (2002: 52). Here Aghatise describes what happens when an IA gives notice to the police of the inappropriate behaviour of a woman under their care (as per Article 18):

The police will call the woman and try to find out why her program is not proceeding in a satisfactory manner. After due consideration, the police may advise the woman that her *behaviour and activities* are not *compatible* with the provisions of the law for *reinsertion* into society. This may prejudice her right to remain in the program and lead to the loss of her residence permit.

(2004: 1141; emphasis added)

The question is how to determine what ‘inappropriate behaviour and activity’ may be, given that the text of law fails to be more specific about its meaning. Bertone and Ferraris note that in their analysis of Article 18 programs throughout the country, “all the Police Authorities (*Questure*) maintain that going back to the activity of prostitution is automatically a reason for the withdrawal of the stay permit, in that it displays a conduct that is incompatible with the final aims of the program of assistance and social integration” (2002: 153; my translation). It seems therefore that inappropriate conduct includes different ‘behaviours’, and the return to the activity of prostitution is invariably considered one of them – despite what Petrini explains on the ‘case by case’ evaluation.

In sum, the research conducted allowed me to conclude that this ‘requirement’ derives from common practice, rather than being explicitly mentioned in the law, as is often assumed. Having clarified this point, it is important to reflect upon what motivates such interpretation, and the consequences it bears. As I will explain, we are brought back here to considerations about the law producing and reproducing an innocent/criminal binary.



The request to abandon prostitution has bearing in particular for those whose ‘inappropriate behaviour and conduct’ exclude them from receiving help. By providing assistance to ‘deserving’ victims contingent on their willingness to abandon prostitution, a dichotomy is created between legally-recognised victims entitled to protection, and those who are not – or are not recognized as such – and are therefore treated as criminals, brutalised by the police, and repatriated on the basis of their illegal status and occupation in the stigmatized activity of prostitution. Some may be women who, though abused, do not want or are not able to report to the authorities, others are actually voluntarily involved in the sex business but may still be trafficked. For example, Carla Corso, the president of the Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitutes explains how,

thousands of foreign women on our streets want to work and earn from prostitution. They would like to do that freely, with no pimps so as to keep all the money for themselves and their families, but they cannot do that. The law does not allow them to denounce the criminals *and* continue with prostitution, the law wants them to be either redeemed or expelled.

(7<sup>th</sup> January 2002; my translation)

In line with this argument, Andrijasevic claims that by requesting applicants to abandon prostitution, Article 18 institutionalizes and essentializes a rhetoric of victimization grounded in very particular forms and patterns of violence that fails to recognize how, for some women, prostitution might well be part of their migratory project (2004).

Moreover, the fact that taking part in a project of social protection and operating in the sex industry are deemed as incompatible (if not by law, in common practice) may be viewed as an implicit criminalization of prostitution. If this was an illegal practice in Italy, receiving assistance and being a prostitute would be self-explanatorily untenable, but this is not the case, in that prostitution is a legal practice (Merlin Law, 1958). For this reason Petrini warned against the automaticity of the withdrawal of the stay permit to avoid the risk of ascribing to Article 18 a finality of ‘moral amendment’ that would be beyond its scope (2002). In order to avoid this, Kapur advises that anti-trafficking legislation should make a distinction between the process of sex trafficking – to be addressed and criminalized – and its purpose, prostitution, which is not always and necessarily performed in conditions of exploitation (2005). The two should be distinguished in those cases when it is possible to do so, otherwise “by collapsing the process with the purpose, the abuse and violence inherent in trafficking is mistaken for

the actual site of work and form of labour” (ibid.: 30). In this sense, it would be interesting to observe whether, in the case of an individual trafficked for labour in a shoe factory, the anti-trafficking intervention would go as far as considering the type of occupation *per se* – working in a shoe factory – and ‘going back to it’ as ‘incompatible conduct’ leading to the loss of the permit and right to participate in a project of social protection. Even at a merely intuitive level it is hard to believe that this may be the case.

Of course, the abandonment of prostitution may be seen as a requirement dictated by practical and safety reasons for trafficked women themselves, rather than a ‘ban on prostitution’ *per se*. Although this explanation is not mentioned anywhere in the literature, it is not difficult to see how the protection that migrant women should be guaranteed when they participate in an Article 18 project may be at risk if, by continuing their activities in the sex industry, they are exposed yet again to abusive situations and/or enter into contact with their exploiters. Whatever the view on the incompatibility between being a migrant prostitute and receiving assistance may be, it is clear that, despite its status in current legislation, prostitution is still viewed and treated as a highly stigmatized practice. Thus, to receive help, migrant women have to demonstrate their *coerced* involvement in the sex industry and be willing to abandon it. Those who do not comply or satisfy these requirements will be treated as unworthy of staying.

To conclude this part of the chapter on Article 18, and to further clarify how pervasive images of victimhood are in the discourse around trafficking, I present here an extract from a keynote speech given by Stefania Prestigiacomo, the Italian Minister of Equal Opportunities, in 2002 in the course of the conference on trafficking ‘Trade as hell. The duty to suppress. The commitment to save’ (*Inferno tratta. Il dovere di reprimere. L’impegno per salvare*)<sup>7</sup>:

The trade in persons is a new form of *slavery*, a tragedy that entails the coerced migration, with violence or deceit, of hundreds of thousands of human beings, *primarily women and minors*. [...] Our streets are *invaded* by these poor *girls*, Nigerians, Albanians, from Eastern European countries, *bought and sold* by the new slavers, moved from one city to another, as if they were *expendable wares* [...]. Faced with this reality, *our civilized country* has the [...] moral duty to contrast with all its energy the systematic violation of human rights that is perpetrated on thousands of women. [...Article 18] is a measure that aims at *freeing* women coerced with violence into prostitution

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<sup>7</sup> This is just one of many similar speeches that were given by Stefania Prestigiacomo – Ministry for Equal Opportunities between 2001 and 2005.

from criminal organizations; it *concedes* them a special visa and leads them towards social and labour integration. [...] Most likely, [through it] *we have saved* the lives of many of them.

(Prestigiacomio 2002: 9-13; my translation, emphasis added)

A number of stereotypes and recurrent tropes are used here to convey a narrative of desperation. These include the depiction of trafficked women as objects/goods of exchange, the reference to hyperbolic numbers, the adoption of the term slavery to describe the phenomenon of trafficking, and the infantilizing and patronizing expression ‘poor girls’ to indicate trafficked girls and women. Although not strictly an integral part of the legal discourse under analysis here, the words uttered by the Minister – the person ultimately in charge of the management of Article 18 programs – reinforce the notion that it is the state (through its legislation) that is responsible for ‘saving’ otherwise helpless trafficked women by making the concession of allowing them to stay. The Minister’s terminological choice also reveals an underlying ambivalence towards the phenomenon of trafficking, where predominant representations of victimhood are in sharp contrast with the threat implicit in the term ‘invasion’ echoing with the terminology adopted by panic-led anti-migration propaganda, which is so pervasive and widespread in the country.

As I explained in this section, the tension between the ‘moral imperative’ to provide support to – or even save, as some view the intervention – migrant women involved in the sex industry, and the hostility to their very presence as illegal migrants and as prostitutes is a prominent feature, crucial to the understanding of the response and governance of ‘foreign prostitution’ in contemporary Italy. These aspects are now explored in more details in relation to the events of the year 2002, when a change in the regulation of prostitution was sought to respond to the increasing presence of ‘foreign prostitutes’ on the streets.

#### 4. Solutions for a legal response to ‘foreign prostitution’

The previous section was primarily based on the analysis of the text of a law that has already been adopted. Here the chapter turns to explore ‘laws in the making’, although they have not been – and most likely will not be – passed and implemented.

In 2002 the regulation of prostitution-related migrations returned on the governmental agenda once more as a priority. As had been the case in the 1990s in the debates that had preceded the adoption of Article 18, the centre-right coalition (this time in Government) expressed concern in particular towards the disturbance of public order caused by ‘foreign prostitutes’ on the streets, as well as their threat to the preservation of public morality and the integrity of the ‘social body’. Thus, the imperative to address and respond to sex trafficking that had characterized much of the action of the left-wing Government was superseded by the new priority to restrain the ‘invasion of foreign prostitutes’<sup>8</sup> – as it was often referred to.

Following a chronological line, in this section I explore three significant events that marked the debates on (foreign) prostitution in 2002. Firstly, the circumstances that brought the issue itself onto the political agenda, and then two proposals made for a new legislative system regulating prostitution. In addition to this, the final part of this chapter turns to investigate more closely some reactions and positions of Italian prostitutes and clients on issues raised by these events.

##### *The beginning of a new wave of debates on prostitution*

The events explored in this second part of the chapter pertain to a moment in the historical continuum of the ‘stigma of prostitution’ in which the acrimony towards prostitutes reached acute levels comparable to the ‘hysterical fear’ of the 1870s, when poor Italian women migrated from villages to larger urban centres to operate in the sex industry. The head of the Italian Police of the time wrote referring to them,

as a wave runs to the sea, so to the large cities flow all those perverse and roving people who shun work and disdain the slender salary of a labourer’. These ‘disgusting worms which infect society’ flocked to the cities’ ‘most dirty streets,’ which resembled ‘polluted and filthy sewers’.

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<sup>8</sup> ‘L’invasione delle prostitute straniere’, prostitute here is feminine, i.e. female prostitutes

(Gibson 1999: 20)

At the beginning of the twenty-first century prostitutes are still viewed as polluted bodies and folk devils to be either eliminated or removed from the public eye.

*January 2002. The Head of the Government raises issues of (foreign) prostitution*

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of January 2002 Italian newspapers published an interview with the Italian President of the Council Silvio Berlusconi<sup>9</sup> in which he addressed the main actions to be undertaken by the Government in the course of the new year. Whilst discussing new measures to be put in place to combat criminality in the country, the President made a comment – which was to raise much controversy – over the expanding phenomenon of street prostitution and the need to control it.

We have to *clean* the streets [of prostitutes]. Like many Italian people, I can no longer stand feeling ashamed when walking in the streets with my children<sup>10</sup>. Prostitution is everywhere, you can see people's g-strings on display, and also the rest, everywhere, shamelessly! Maybe we will have to open the closed houses [brothels] again, and regularize [prostitution], we will see. In the meantime, also in order to protect those girls – many of whom are in slavery-like conditions – we will soon have to start an extremely rigorous fight against the criminals who rule over them, and we will make the streets suitable for families to walk on them again.

(*La Repubblica* 5<sup>th</sup> January 2002a; my translation, emphasis added)

In this statement Berlusconi expressed a sense of indignation for the status of moral degeneration of the public space (Quassoli 2004). Being primarily concerned with the visibility of street prostitutes, he depicted them as shamelessly displaying their bodies<sup>11</sup>, thus threatening and limiting the freedom of the 'good citizens', embodied by children

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<sup>9</sup> In Italy the Head of Government – equivalent to the Prime Minister in other political systems – is called the President of the Council of Ministers. In what follows, I occasionally refer to this position with the shorthand term 'the President', not to be confused with the President of the Republic who is the Head of State. Silvio Berlusconi has been President of the Council twice, the first time from May 1994 to January 1995, and more recently from June 2001 to May 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Berlusconi has five children whose ages, as of 2002, ranged between 14 and 36.

<sup>11</sup> The notion of 'display' that prostitutes make of their bodies has been looked at by scholarly literature in relation to the fact that it is a mark needed to 'advertise' their presence, but more importantly, as is the case here, as a feature reproduced by anti-prostitution discourses (see Roberts 1992). In this respect, Hubbard argues that "while this ignores the variety of ways that prostitute may dress on and off-street, this image of the female street worker operates to 'sexify' the prostitute and distance her from the idealized and well-mannered (but essentially de-sexed) female body" (Hubbard 1999: 165).

and the family. With the verb ‘clean’ he implicitly compared prostitutes to polluted and polluting bodies and suggested a return to the pre-1958 regulationist system with the reintroduction of state brothels, the so-called closed houses (see chapter 3). Lastly, without specifying how the interests of ‘girls in slavery-like conditions’ may be served, he suggested a stricter criminal approach to trafficking while stressing again his primary concern with families being able to access public spaces. This last comment is also interesting because by mentioning “those girls”, the previous reference to prostitution becomes gendered, and the allusion to trafficking brings more clearly into the picture the transnational dimension of street prostitution which in Italy is constituted in its largest part by migrants<sup>12</sup> (see chapter 3, and Carchedi et al 2000; Bimbi 2001; Trappolini 2005).

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of January 2002, Berlusconi’s words were reproduced again in national newspapers, followed by the reactions they had provoked amongst politicians and, to a lesser extent, some of the stakeholders whose opinion on prostitution-related issues is often sought by the media.<sup>13</sup> Of the many controversial themes touched upon by the President, what appeared to ignite the strongest reactions, some favourable and many contrary, was the proposal to re-open state brothels. In general, Berlusconi’s political allies showed unrestrained support towards this possibility. The Minister of the Interior Claudio Scajola, reportedly stated:

Berlusconi said: we have to take prostitutes away (*togliere*) from the streets. The 1958 law didn’t solve the problem. These days, there are cities that are invaded: prostitution is a widespread problem that hides drugs, trafficking and all sorts of awful things. It’s a problem that needs to be dealt with because we cannot allow our young people to see this public display (*spettacolo*), our cities have to be serene and peaceful [...]. We are considering acting with a strong intervention, to eliminate at least what is scandalously under the eyes of everyone, even children and young people.

(Delfino, *La Stampa* 6<sup>th</sup> January 2002; my translation)

Echoing the earlier message of the President, the concerns expressed here focus on the alleged threat (“invasion”) that street prostitutes represent for the social stability of local communities. Within this discourse, the victims of prostitution, its public display

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<sup>12</sup> In fact the majority of newspaper articles that reported this statement took for granted that Berlusconi had criticized the visibility of *foreign* prostitutes and new measures were about to be enforced to limit their presence.

<sup>13</sup> These include Pia Covre and Carla Corso of the Committee of Civil Rights of Prostitutes, don Benzi and don Cesare Lodeserto, two priests who funded and manage Article 18 Implementation Agencies (see chapter 2 and 5).

and related criminal activities, are the residents of the localities where prostitutes operate, especially 'families' and young people. The solution advocated is to purge the streets in an effort to move the 'problem' out of sight.

Another message of support to the President came from the histrionic leader of the Northern League, and at that time also Minister of Reforms, Umberto Bossi. According to his narration, the President behaved as a 'gentleman' given what had perturbed him in the first place. When Berlusconi saw some prostitutes with his children and they started undressing in front of his car "he wasn't too shaken, did not react and went away. Had this happened to me, with my own children, I would have got out of the car and I would have kicked them in the ass" (Savoini, *La Padania*<sup>14</sup> 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2002; my translation).

The support that the President received from his political allies was counterbalanced by the uproar of disapproval at the prospect of going back to regularizing prostitution with brothels, especially after it had taken long and painful years to get rid of them (see chapter 3). Representatives of the left and Catholic groups found agreement in opposing this possible solution, and concerns were raised about the negative impact that this approach may have on the fight against sex trafficking. Livia Turco, who had served as Minister of Social Solidarity under one of the previous leftist legislatures, said she was worried about the conflation of trafficking and prostitution that had emerged from the President's and others' statements, and warned that a conceptual overlap or misunderstanding between the two might result in inappropriate and harmful forms of intervention (*Il Corriere della Sera* 5<sup>th</sup> May 2002). The president of the Catholic *Forum delle Associazioni Familiari* (Forum of Family Associations) reportedly labelled the return to a regulamentarist regime a 'hypocritical initiative' aimed at hiding, rather than solving the problem. She questioned the fact that clients of prostitutes had been completely ignored, and attributed it to the double standard that tolerates various expressions of men's sexuality while controlling and limiting that of women (*Rai News* 5<sup>th</sup> January 2002). Don Benzi was particularly outspoken in expressing his disapproval of Berlusconi's proposal. He reportedly defined the possibility of re-opening brothels as "obscene and unjust. In this way the activity of the criminals who enslave women for the exploitation of their prostitution will be favoured. The state has to defend this dignity [of women] and cannot favour the criminals" (*La*

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<sup>14</sup> *La Padania* is the official daily newspaper of the Northern League.

*Repubblica* 5th January 2002b; my translation). Don Benzi also took the opportunity to divulge his own view on how to address the issue, i.e. banning prostitution and strictly prohibiting “men to have sexual interaction with foreigners [female foreigners, *le straniere*] in the street, in night clubs, in hotels and in private houses” (*Il Corriere della Sera* 17th January 2002; my translation). The priest also asked personally to meet the President to discuss his proposal and was promptly received less than two weeks later. In an interview published on his organization’s newsletter, don Benzi reported:

I thought I would take two women ex-prostitutes with me, both of them kidnapped at the age of 14, so that the President could listen directly to the drama of these creatures, and in the light of that might change his mind over his declarations.

(Zamboni, *Mensile Sempre* February 2002, my translation)

When he came out of the meeting, don Benzi radiantly told the numerous journalists surrounding him that “Berlusconi was shocked by the narration of these girls, he was moved to tears”, and as a “sign against the poverty of these girls” he donated five million lire each (£1500 approximately) and promised that “he would personally take care of it (*ci penso io*)” (*La Repubblica* 17th January 2002; my translation). The news about the President crying over the sad stories of the two ‘foreign prostitutes’, after having publicly equated them to trash only two weeks before, inflamed the debate over the regulation of prostitution in the country even further, with solution proposed varying from reopening brothels to creating red districts, toleration zones or simply leaving the situation as it was.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, despite all the attention and clamour that his declaration had caused, Berlusconi’s (and others’) way of referring to prostitute people as trash on the streets, to be cleaned away and to be ashamed of (or even kicked), was barely an issue in the debate that followed. In fact, the director of the prominent national newspaper *Il Giorno*<sup>15</sup> in a front-page editorial displayed accord with the view that prostitution is also a problem of aesthetics to ‘cure’ with some cleansing, and fully supported the initiative launched by Berlusconi (Canè, *Il Giorno* 15<sup>th</sup> July 2002). The issue of the scornful and offensive language adopted was brought up only by people

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<sup>15</sup> *Il Giorno* is a national newspaper with clear right-wing sympathies.



working to assist prostitutes. Carla Corso in a public letter<sup>16</sup> addressed to the President expressed the Committee's profound disapproval over the tones and terminology used in the debate:

There are fundamental aspects to safeguard: human rights, dignity and respect of prostitutes and prostituted people. Thus, to talk about them with statements such as: 'clean the streets', 'take away the dirt' or 'trash' is not tolerable. Civilization is measured also on language and on the respect one has of the people involved.

(Corso, 7<sup>th</sup> January 2002; my translation)

On the other hand, Corso expressed agreement about the need to change the anachronistic Merlin Law, but underlined the importance of doing so in the light of a realistic appreciation of prostitution and of those who operate in it. Whilst the President had talked about street prostitutes as a monolithic and homogeneous group, she urged to make a clear distinction between (sex) workers from European Union countries who have the right to be in and to move within the EU, and 'foreign women' (*le straniere*), i.e. non-EU citizens who are often forced into a "pariah condition" by restrictive immigration laws that leave them entirely dependent on criminal organizations. Rather than hastily going back to an "obsolete state-brothel model", she suggested setting up a form of collaboration amongst the various parties involved, in order to formulate a law that would take into account the needs of all of them (*ibid.*).

Notably, despite being a crucial stakeholder, the Committee never received as much media coverage as other politicians, not to mention don Benzi and other priests; nor was it consulted by the Government on the matter – even after Carla Corso's offer of collaboration. In an interview in the summer 2002, Pia Covre<sup>17</sup> told me that, since its very inception, the Committee – the only official body representing prostitutes in Italy – had been neglected in debates and consultations over a change in the law on prostitution. However, while in previous years its members were not too worried about it and thought that little was ever going to happen, the development of the situation since January 2002 had been a matter of serious preoccupation, far beyond issues of abusive language, as also indicated in the letter written by Carla Corso.

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<sup>16</sup> The letter was disseminated on the 7<sup>th</sup> of January 2002 through the Committee's website and that of other affiliated organizations.

<sup>17</sup> Pia Covre is, with Carla Corso, the founder of the Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitutes (see chapter 3).

For twenty years now we have been asking for a change in the law. For twenty years proposals for a new law have been put forward, then they discuss it for a while. In general it happens every summer, they make a huge fuss about it, and then nothing happens. But now that they promised the electorate that they want to clean up the streets, I think that they will do it, because the Government has a lot of difficulties. They are not doing too well on many other issues, and this might become the easiest thing to put in place: throw prostitutes in jail, kick them out of the streets...it is so simple! As representatives of the association of prostitutes I think we will have a 'hot autumn' due to the emergency caused by this [proposal]. [...]. It is an awful proposal and we will try to make sure that it ends up not being so horrible, we are mobilizing to limit the damage.

(Personal interview with Pia Covre, August 2002)

The comments and suggestions advanced by the Committee seemed to have little effect on the further developments that took place in 2002, when, a few months after Berlusconi's utterances, the Northern League presented an outline for a strict regulationist regime for the governance on prostitution.

*May 2002. Introducing Eros Centres in Italy: the Northern League's proposal to tackle (foreign) prostitution*

In the spring 2002 debates about a possible solution to the 'foreign prostitution problem' were marked by the divulgation of a proposal for new legislation on 'prostitution, paedophilia, and pornography' that the Northern League submitted to the Council of Ministers in May of that year.<sup>18</sup> Concretely, the Northern League proposed prohibiting the exercise of prostitution in public places whilst allowing it in specific private buildings – later commonly referred to as the Eros Centres<sup>19</sup>. It was indicated that no more than ten people ('ten women' in many of the Northern League's documents published on the proposal) could operate in each centre, and the latter must be located on the outskirts of cities with 50,000 or more inhabitants. Another crucial specification of the proposal was the re-introduction (as it had been before 1958) of the requirement for prostitute people to register with the police in order to obtain a specific work permit; this may be issued upon exhibition of medical documentation attesting the absence of STIs.

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<sup>18</sup> Due to the focus of the thesis, I refer primarily to the proposals concerning prostitution. The other two aspects covered by the law, paedophilia and pornography, are addressed only when relevant.

<sup>19</sup> Eros Centre is a term adopted in other European countries, such as Germany, Switzerland, and Belgium to indicate locations specifically dedicated to prostitution-related activities.

Moreover, every three months new medical certificates were to be presented to the police or health agencies who are allowed to conduct random health checks at their own discretion and initiative.

The motivations behind the Northern League's decision to pursue this strategy in order to address prostitution emerge from the comments made by various leaders of the party when the proposal was publicly revealed. Umberto Bossi described the initiative as a concrete response to protect the family from the menace represented by the three social 'scourges' addressed by the law.

For some time now the [Northern] League has chosen to engage in a fight, not only for the cause of federalism and institutional reforms, but [also...] to defend the family, fundamental nucleus of our society. An end to the rotten world that has been attacking the family is finally about to come. We have now launched a campaign against both prostitution on the streets, which is often seen as an alternative to one's wife outside the house, and also against the non-material (*smaterializzata*<sup>20</sup>) version of prostitution which is pornography. Pornography, when taken to the extreme transforms itself into paedophilia, and in manifested and extended (*estesa*)<sup>21</sup> homosexuality.

(Savoini, *La Padania* 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2002, my translation)

Roberto Calderoli, the Northern League's National Secretary, rehashed the saying that prostitution is 'the oldest profession in the world' to justify its being impossible to eliminate. "If someone has a real need to access it, they should go to specific areas, far from the normal context of everyday life [...]" In this way, he continued, not only would the practice cause less public disturbance – "we would avoid the shocking show that goes on in our streets at any hour of the day" – but also the risk of exploitation would be reduced, although he did not explain how. Furthermore, the health regulations imposed would reduce to the "minimum (the) sanitary risk that *weighs* on the client and *his* family", and prostitutes would finally pay taxes (Boiocchi, *La Padania* 6<sup>th</sup> January 2002; my translation, emphasis added).

Outside the Northern League's constituency, MPs and politicians of all the political spectrum showed little enthusiasm for this proposal. In particular, it was noted that the potential law included no provision to aid trafficked women, and the opposition

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<sup>20</sup> It is not easy to find an appropriate translation here given the obscure meaning of the original text. With the word *smaterializzata* I assume that Bossi meant not in the material form of live 'flesh and bone'.

<sup>21</sup> As before, also the meaning of *omosessualità estesa*, 'extended homosexuality' is not clear.

accused the Northern League of using the issue of 'foreign prostitution' to appeal to voters in view of the forthcoming elections. Interestingly, in fact, the Northern League's proposal seemed to attract the favour of large swathes of the Italian population. This was observed with concern in many of the interviews I conducted with the staff of Implementation Agencies in the summer of 2002. According to Camilla, a social worker, both the scuffle raised by the Northern League and the panic created around 'foreign prostitution' since the beginning of the year had created such palpable hostility and fear that the population was expecting a firm response from the state. Thus, the quick-fix solution presented by the Northern League came as a reassurance that the Government could really have the situation under control. In fact, as Quassoli argues, the fight against crime and insecurity brought about by 'the immigrants' has represented a good opportunity for Italian right-wing-governments who "can show they are still able to exert some kind of control and consequently power over reality." (2004: 1177). However, in the view of those working with migrant prostitutes on a daily basis, such as my informants, a regulationist regime would have worsened the situation of 'foreign prostitutes' even further. Camilla pointed out that the Northern League had not come up with a real solution, but simply a 'relocation' of the problem:

They want to re-open the closed houses again, but they don't call them brothels, no! This is not appropriate! So there we go, now we have the 'Eros Centres', such a modern name! [...] What they are saying is basically this: I don't want to see vulgarity on the streets, but if vulgarity is done inside, well everybody can do what they want.

(Personal interview with Camilla, August 2002)

Elena, an IA project officer expressed similar frustration at what she described as the manipulation of public opinion on such complex matters:

What they are proposing is something similar to police raids. I mean they give a quick answer that keeps the citizens quiet for a while. But it is not an answer that proposes any long-term solution, especially because with the Eros Centres everything changes. The girls work inside, in more dangerous places, darker, outside the cities. They will pay the negative consequences of this law and we don't know what might happen to them at that point.

(Personal interview with Elena, August 2004)

In the end, the Northern League's plan did not get very far. However many of the principles it contained were to reappear in a new proposed law, this time the result of a working group consultation commissioned by the Government itself.

*August 2002-January 2003. A new proposal is drafted by Government initiative*

On the 4th of August 2002 the Council of Ministers constituted an inter-ministerial group with the specific aim of drafting a new law on prostitution. Three MPs were appointed to be responsible for its works: Gianfranco Fini, leader of the right-wing party *Alleanza Nazionale* and vice president of the Council of Ministers, Umberto Bossi and Stefania Prestigiacomo, who, as already seen, was the Minister of Equal Opportunities at the time. After two months of intense and, reportedly, vicious debates amongst the group members, a new proposal was drafted, later accepted by the Council in December 2002 and finally made public in February 2003.

The so-called 'design of law' (*Disegno di Legge*, DdL hereafter) follows a regulationist model that forbids street prostitution and punishes with consistent fines both those who solicit business in public places and their clients.<sup>22</sup> Prostitution remains legalized but is restricted to private spaces, not however, as had been the case with the Northern League's proposal, in circumscribed prostitution-specific locations. According to the DdL, a maximum of three prostitutes can operate in *private* apartments, provided they obtain the consent of the other occupants of the building. Lastly, as opposed to the Northern League's proposal, prostitutes are not requested, but encouraged, to undergo medical tests. Nevertheless, according to the section "Evaluation of the degree of guilt" (*Valutazione del grado di colpa*), if a client falls ill or dies due to a STI transmitted by a subject who regularly exercises prostitution, the latter may be prosecuted, and in a potential criminal trial a judge may, in order to evaluate the existence and/or degree of guilt, take into account the frequency with which the incriminated prostitute underwent health checks.

The Minister of Equal Opportunities presented the proposal as a 'courageous and extremely balanced' first step to bring change into the world of prostitution and finally defeat exploitation (*La Repubblica* 21st December 2002). Bossi, in line with his previous statements, reiterated his priorities: "This is another step in a very specific project to re-

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<sup>22</sup> However a prostitute (but not the client) may also be incarcerated for up to three months if recidivist.

launch tradition and the family” and “to clean the streets from the squalid display of prostitution (*ripulire le strade dallo squallido spettacolo del mercimonio*)” (*La Padania* 9th April 2003; my translation). Other reactions were not as supportive, in fact, even before its text was made public, the DdL started to cause controversy. Between 20<sup>th</sup> December 2002, when the Council of Ministers issued a press release delineating the main features of the recommended law, and February 2003, when the full text was made publicly available, many stakeholders, including the Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitutes and other Article 18 Implementation Agencies, complained vociferously both about not having been consulted and having been denied the right to view the entire law proposal.<sup>23</sup> Maria Virgilio, a feminist lawyer and activist, in an article in *Il Manifesto*<sup>24</sup> harshly criticized the Government for merely ‘announcing’ the fact that legislation was being formulated, whilst keeping citizens uninformed about its precise content. Such a way of proceeding, she mentioned, is particularly dangerous when the object at stake has to do with sexuality and the private sphere – issues that “need to be thought of, proposed and publicly discussed and not simply taken out of the hat [when already drafted...]” – otherwise only the use of force, discipline, and repression will succeed in enforcing it (Virgilio, *Il Manifesto* 13<sup>th</sup> January 2003; my translation).

Once publicly released, the DdL attracted two main criticisms. One, as indicated by Virgilio, concerning sexuality and its regulation, and the other the negative impact it would have on ‘foreign prostitutes’ in general, and particularly trafficked women. Arguing that with this proposal “the state wants to get into the bedrooms of the Italians through its usual prohibitionist and repressive logic” (*La Repubblica* 21st December 2002; my translation), the leftist MP Franco Grillini condemned what he saw as the state’s interference in the sexual sphere of its citizens as well as the “ethnic cleansing of

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<sup>23</sup> In January 2003, Pia Covre, don Benzi, Stefania Prestigiacomo, Umberto Bossi and other right wing politicians were invited by the national television channel RAI 1 (the equivalent of the British BBC 1) to discuss the new proposal drafted by the Government at the popular evening program ‘*Porta a Porta*’ (Door to Door). All guests, with the exception of Pia Covre, had in their hands the text of the law that at that time had not yet been made public. Pia Covre showed her surprise at the fact that don Benzi apparently had been faxed the text days before directly by Government official. This incident could be interpreted as preferential treatment (also in consideration of the meeting that Berlusconi had agreed to have with don Benzi) displayed by the Government towards Catholic Church representatives, as opposed to the self-proclaimed leftist Committee. But it is also relevant to mention that during that period in the many television programs to which they took part in, the Committee were given little coverage space to express their views. The request for their opinion had become an almost tokenistic obligation, just to make sure that the ‘box is ticked’ and prostitutes had the opportunity to have their say, rather than a full acknowledgement of their opinions and perspective.

<sup>24</sup> *Il Manifesto* is a communist newspaper; it has always, and predictably, been very critical of the right-wing’s political moves to modify the *Merlin Law*.

the streets” (ibid.). Similarly, the Italian Movement of People with Transsexual Identities (*Movimento Identità Transessuale*, MIT) published a press release which criticized the proposal for contributing to the social exclusion of prostitutes by forcing them into working in private apartments. In this way, they argued, prostitutes will have constantly to negotiate with housing committees and will inevitably be constrained by the decisions of other people:

And what about those who will not even manage to find a house? Well, what do they [the drafters of the proposal] care, in the end we are just whores, aren't we? How disgusting! But we will not passively accept 'state-controlled sexuality', and we will denounce those men of power who are also clients of prostitutes. [...]. As usual when regimes want to limit the freedom of their citizens, they always start from the weakest.

(Di Folco, 24<sup>th</sup> December 2002, my translation)

The leftist trade union CGIL expressed its disapproval of the proposal, again seen as an unacceptable interference in the private sexuality of citizens and of prostitutes in particular, “left at the mercy of the next-door neighbour [...] and in clear-cut contrast with every person's fundamental right to privacy.” (*La Repubblica* 21st December 2002; my translation). These points were also raised by the Committee in a detailed document that critically reviewed the new regulations envisioned by the DdL. This raised the issue of the worrying 'disappearance' of 'foreign prostitutes' from the proposed text of the law and asked whether it meant that the Government simply intended to expel all of them. Moreover, contrary to what the Minister of Equal Opportunities had said, the Committee expressed concern about the fact that rendering prostitutes less visible would make them more easily exploitable (Comitato per i Diritti Civili delle Prostitute 2002). This preoccupation in particular was shared by both sex workers and more conservative IAs, which would otherwise stand on very opposite ideological sides on many issues. The Committee tried to use this common point of agreement to form a potential collaboration, as Pia Covre had explained already in the summer 2002:

There is a huge opposition [towards the restoration of a regulatory regime] from the Catholics and in my opinion, if we manage to convince them that they have to fight against it with us, it's already a good start. We only have to be careful that the prohibitionist approach of some extremist priests doesn't prevail, because what they want is to put clients in prison, and that would be as horrible as a [regulatory] law. We should just try to think of other alternatives to putting people in jail, whether clients or prostitutes.

(Personal interview with Pia Covre, August 2002)

A proper alliance, like the one envisioned by Pia Covre, was never formed. Nevertheless, the DdL attracted such strong opposition from so many different groups and individuals that by 2004 it silently became a forgotten item, lacking the necessary support to move forward in the various stages required for a 'Design of Law' to become a 'proper Law'.

*Some comments on the 2002 events*

Despite their failure, the proposals presented here – and the context from where they were generated – raise important points on the discourses produced around 'foreign prostitutes' and the extent to which they inform the response formulated to address their presence. First, there might seem to be an inconsistency between what generated the debates described here – 'foreign prostitution' and its visibility – and the type of solution advocated. The Northern League and the Government's working group pursued a strategy aimed specifically at regulating prostitution with strict rules and mandatory controls. These new arrangements would apply directly only to a minority of prostitutes, i.e. Italians and documented migrants, and exclude *a priori* the remaining majority: 'foreign prostitutes' without a permanent stay permit. On the one hand, registered and 'legal prostitutes' would be removed from the public eye and be subjected to regulations intended to protect the integrity and health of the rest of the population. On the other hand, the majority of 'foreign prostitutes' would be expelled as illegal migrants. For a few others, able to prove their status of victims of sex trafficking as per Article 18 requirements, support and temporary visa provisions would be available. In this way, if the DdL (or the Northern League's proposal) had been approved and properly enforced, Berlusconi and his (now former) Government would have obtained the 'sanitation' and full control of the public space that seemed to be their paramount preoccupation in the first place. Indeed this solution fails to take into account the negative impact it would have on those it addresses and completely disregards their needs, although it is dubious whether these aspects have ever been a matter of concern for the right-wing coalition.

Second, a crucial assumption that informs the type of intervention pursued is the inevitability of the demand for prostitution. This is based on a double standard which is typically applied to men's and women's sexuality, and particularly in discourses about



prostitution.<sup>25</sup> Described as the ‘oldest profession in the world’, prostitution is tacitly condoned as a ‘necessary evil’ being the result of a (biological) need of men to sexually relieve themselves. A male client of prostitutes is thus justified and tolerated because of the ‘natural’ character of his sexual urges, “consistent with the attributes associated with his gender” (O’Connell Davidson 1998: 127). Conversely, prostitute women are viewed as being “inconsistent with their gender” (ibid.), hence sexually transgressive, despite the fact that they are satisfying a ‘legitimate’ demand. Undoubtedly, this is not a new argument and the ‘fixation’ on and stigmatization of those who sell sex, rather than those who buy it, has not changed in western discourses on prostitution since the eighteenth century<sup>26</sup> (McIntosh 1978; Weeks 1989; Diduck and Wilson 1997; O’Connell Davidson 1998; Agustin 2005b). It is worth pointing out that Lina Merlin, in the current law that goes under her name (see chapter 3), had tried to move from a physiological explanation of prostitution to viewing it as a private sexual exchange between two consenting adults (Felina 2004). By contrast, both the Northern League and the DdL proposed a system of regulation which brings the ‘old’ model back and invariably penalizes the prostitute over the client<sup>27</sup>.

Third, in contrast to the Merlin law (which prohibits prostitution in private places), the 2002 proposals analysed here restrict the practice of prostitution to enclosed locations. In this scenario, the regulation of public spaces reflects undemocratic and exclusionary practices based on gendered, sexed and racialized notions of who belongs and who does not (Hubbard 1999). Among the latter, some are still tolerated within the social body (and have to be, given the ‘need’ for their services – see above), so long as they are marginalized, socially controlled and compelled to hide their transgression of social codes. Bossi’s statement is quite revealing in this sense: “even the Church explains that what is ineradicable should at least be taken away from the eyesight!” (Savoini, *La*

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<sup>25</sup> The gender neutrality adopted in the proposed texts of law is not maintained in the League’s and Government’s documents and statements commenting them. These invariably refer to a heterosexual exchange involving a male client and a female prostitute.

<sup>26</sup> Because of the gendered assumption made on male and female sexuality, women prostitutes in particular are viewed as the ‘degenerated others’. However the transgressions of both male *and* female prostitutes are considered to be dishonouring (O’Connell Davidson 1998).

<sup>27</sup> One example of this disparity is the fact that according to the DdL, recidivist prostitutes could be penally prosecuted, whilst in case of repeated offences clients are only subjected to pecuniary fines. Also, health checks are required (in the Northern League’s proposal) or recommended (in the DdL) only for prostitutes and not for their clients. Moreover, the responsibility for a client being transmitted a disease is put on the prostitute, whilst this does not apply when it is the client who transmits a disease to a prostitute.

*Padania* 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2002; my translation). This approach is evocative of Foucault's (1981) discussion of the Victorian bourgeoisie's repression of sexuality and the limited concessions made to its silencing. He explains how the few illegitimate sexualities for which it was felt truly necessary to make room, were removed from public visibility.

Let them take their infernal mischief elsewhere: to a place where they could be reintegrated, if not in the circuits of production, at least in those of profit. The brothel [...] would be [one of] those places of tolerance [...]. Words and gestures, quietly authorized, could be exchanged there at the going rate. Only in those places would untrammelled sex have a right to (safely insularized) forms of reality, and only to clandestine, circumscribed, and coded types of discourse.

(1981:4)

As seen, those permitted to operate in these enclosed 'places of tolerance' are very few, and their suitability is contingent upon their legal citizenship status and willingness to abide by the newly imposed rules. All the others, the majority, who are undocumented or unwilling to follow such strict regulations are subjected to much more than a relocation from public to confined private spaces, they are expelled from both. It is likely that in either case, prostitutes' living conditions would get worse. The working practice and bodily integrity of 'legal' prostitutes would be put under state control, and 'illegal' ones would either be forced out of the country or 'underground', thus having to rely on trafficking networks (for a discussion on policies and practices with similar effects see also: Wijers 2000; Berman 2003; Andrijasevic 2004; Kempadoo, Sanghera et al 2005; O'Connell Davidson 2006).

The choice of the places where prostitution could be legally exercised is one of the crucial aspects that differentiates the Northern League's proposal from the DdL. The Eros Centres are conceived as *ad hoc* enclosures to be located at the margins of urban areas. Bossi emphatically noted that this strategic location had been chosen in order to remove prostitution from within the public space of the cities, but also to 'protect' the countryside by keeping it away from the distractions of the sex industry. "In this way the countryside people will keep doing what they always did [reproducing], thus guaranteeing a future to our society. Without newborns, it is the end of society!" (*Il Corriere della Sera* 30<sup>th</sup> April 2002). The DdL on the other hand relegates prostitution to private houses, but it also establishes that its practice has to be approved by co-habitants of the same housing unit. It goes without saying that the prospect of having prostitutes as

neighbours was not welcomed by landlords and tenants, hence, as the MIT had predicted, associations representing them put up a strong opposition, which undoubtedly contributed to the failure of the proposal.

A fourth crucial aspect to be considered, is the recurrent reference to 'the family' as the social unit most at risk from the increasing number and visibility of prostitutes. The scholarly literature that explores the political and social impact of Berlusconi's right-wing coalition, and of the Northern League in particular stresses that family values have progressively become one of the staples of their political rhetoric (Agnew 1995; Tambini 2001). Agnew, for example, mentions how in its political discourses the Northern League often evokes a "nostalgia for an archetypal Lombard peasant family with a clearly established internal division of labour within a wider social world with a stable set of hierarchical social relations." (1995: 168) The 'traditional Italian family' is referred to as the core of society, and the privileged locus where its social and cultural order is (re)produced. 'Traditional' comes to signify being sanctioned by its (supposedly) historical establishment in Italian society and being a nuclear, heterosexual, committed, monogamous unit between a husband, his wife and their children. Any variation from this model is viewed as a deviation and as a threat to the entire social body fabric.

Bossi explained that the Northern League had started promoting the well-being of Italian families since 1998, when it had successfully opposed heterologous assisted fertilization as a form of unnatural and deviant reproduction. The battle against prostitution, paedophilia and pornography had been conceived as the next necessary step of that campaign (Savoini, *La Padania* 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2002). The following quotes are another example of how these themes have been adopted also in a recent political campaign. In a leaflet distributed by the Northern League before the regional elections of April 2005, points eight and nine (out of a total of ten) of the party's manifesto are headed respectively: 'Family and children' and 'NO to prostitution in public places and NO to free pornography'. The former point is explained with this paragraph:

After the end of three iconoclastic decades that have turned upside-down (*ribaltato*) all rules, tradition is coming back and it is incarnated in the family. This is very much in contrast with the messages of '68 that supported: the end of the traditional family, free prostitution on the streets, free immigration and free drugs. In other words, it supported slavery.

The latter:

It is a crime to practise prostitution in a public place or one open to the public [reference to the proposal made by the Northern League]. Stop to free pornography on televisions, in the cinemas, newspapers whose only scope is to destroy the family and push it towards a multiracial society.<sup>28</sup>

(Lega Nord 2005: 7; my translation)

Together with the 2002 statements and law proposal presented earlier, these extracts confirm the prominence that the 'family trope' (McClintock 1993) has in the political discourse of the Northern League and, as seen, of the right-wing more generally. But it also shows how the theme of the 'family and defence of its values' is constantly found alongside threatening messages about the dangers of prostitution. Why is there such a 'fixation' with the family? And for what purposes is the latter so often brought up in discussions on prostitution?

The family, and women in particular, have always been fundamental in national(ist) projects, being constructed as the key site for the biological reproduction of the nation and its ethnic collectivity (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989; Hill Collins 1999; Mayer 1999; Jeffrey 2002). Because they are so intimately connected to the production, reproduction and maintenance of a specific community, families need to be protected from 'foreign' and corrupt ways of life and sexuality that may either be non-procreative or, possibly even worse, threaten the ethnic unity with miscegenation ("push for a multiracial society") (O'Connell Davidson 1998; Tambini 2001). Thus, the control of sexuality and sexual practices that threaten the reproductive role of the family becomes paramount for the preservation of national unity. In this sense, as Alexander points out, policing sexuality is certainly about sex itself, but also much more than that.

Embedded here are powerful signifiers about appropriate sexuality, about the kind of sexuality that presumably imperils the nation and about the kind of sexuality that promotes citizenship. Not just (any) body can be a citizen any more, for some bodies have been marked by the state as non-procreative, in pursuit of sex only for pleasure, a sex that is non-productive of babies and no economic gain. Having refused the heterosexual imperative of citizenship, these bodies, according to the state, pose a profound threat to the very survival of the nation.

(1994:6)

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<sup>28</sup> It is interesting to note, in particular in this second extract, how prostitution and other 'deviant practices' are linked to migration and changes towards a 'multiracial' Italian society. As seen in chapter 3, the notion of 'racial' purity of Northern Italianness is a crucial aspect of the League's ideology. Moreover, as I also discuss in chapter 6, the League describes the evolution towards a 'multicultural and multiracial' society as part of the leftist political agenda which, in this way, pursues the weakening of Italian identity.

Indeed, in the case of ‘foreign prostitutes’, both a lack of conformity to the reproductive heterosexual imperative (Luibhéid 2002) and ‘foreignness’ contribute to their being subjected to exclusionary policies by the state.

These considerations shed light on the different ways in which the proposals made by the Northern League and the Inter Ministerial Committee address more or less directly the protection of the family/nation. Firstly, the marginalization of prostitution serves the purpose of limiting the use of a non-reproductive form of sexuality by male clients, thus discouraging the possibility that prostitutes may be an easily available “alternative to the wife at home” (Savoini, *La Padania* 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2002). Secondly, assuming again that male members of the family will visit prostitutes, strict health regulations are put in place to make sure that *clients* are protected from sexual diseases that may ‘weigh’ on the family and put its reproductive functions at risk. Thirdly, the marginalization of prostitution is also needed to prevent young people – the children within the family unit – being negatively affected by the wrong models of sexuality and morality displayed by female street prostitutes. In this sense the latter represent a threat to the *cultural* reproduction of ‘healthy’ family and national values.<sup>29</sup> Lastly, the proposed regulations function as a technology of (sexual) citizenship (Peró 2005) by determining who is legally permitted to practise ‘unconventional sex’ and who is not – a selection which is once again justified to protect those who visit prostitutes and consequently their families. As already explained, if the proposals were approved, the majority of ‘foreign prostitutes’ would not be allowed to stay in the country, let alone register as prostitutes. Only a small and selected number of women, the majority of whom would most likely be Italian, would be allowed to operate in the sex industry, subjected to state and social control.

To conclude, this section has shown how historical prejudices against prostitutes and recent anxieties about ‘invading migrants’ have coalesced in the construction of the notion of ‘foreign prostitutes’ and contributed to their representation as a threat to the integrity of the Italian nation. Through the regulation of sexual norms, identities and behaviours, in 2002 the right-wing coalition tried to police sexual practices in an attempt to stave off the carriers of foreign and/or unmanaged sexuality. In so doing it aimed at preserving the unity and ‘sanctity’ of its community, whilst re-establishing and

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<sup>29</sup> See Hubbard (1999) for a similar discussion of the use of ‘vulnerable youths’ in discourses against street prostitution in a district of Birmingham.

reinforcing its political authority (Stoler 1995; Berman 2003). In fact, the emergence of anxious discourses of the invasion of dangerous ‘foreigners’ needs to be understood also, using Berman’s definition (see chapter 1), as an act of statecraft, i.e. “the practices and activities that engender the effect called the sovereign state” (2003: 59). In other words, both the Northern League and other rightwing leaders transformed the scare of foreign prostitution into a powerful propaganda ‘tool’ which empowered them as the protectors of the national community, its values and unity.

## **5. The reaction of some Italian prostitutes and clients to the 2002 events and proposals**

This final part of the core body of the chapter is not a distinct ‘third section’, rather I envision it as an appendix to the discussion presented so far. Here I seek to detach from the sites of production of legal discourses on (foreign) prostitution to explore the perspectives of some Italian prostitutes and clients on the 2002 actions undertaken by the Government.

As a subscriber to the Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitute’s email forum of discussion, in 2002 and 2003 I was able to follow the virtual and lively discussions that raged amongst some of its members (primarily Italian prostitutes and clients) on these matters (see chapter 2).<sup>30</sup> My ‘authorized lurking’<sup>31</sup> revealed the sense of impotency expressed by Italian prostitutes to stop, or at least ‘have a say’ in the actions undertaken by the Northern League and the Government. But it also exhibited an internal fragmentation between the approach pursued by the Committee and the less sympathetic view on ‘foreign prostitutes’ advanced by some Italian sex workers. As previously seen, the Committee had made a commitment to promoting the rights of both local and ‘foreign prostitutes’, paying particular attention to the needs of the latter. By contrast, many prostitute women and transsexuals on the e-list expressed their frustration at

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<sup>30</sup> Clearly, this discussion does not claim to be representative of the entirety of Italian prostitutes and clients in the country, being based on the interventions made by a small number of them in a virtual, shared space.

<sup>31</sup> I use the term lurk here, as a common terminology adopted by members of electronic network to describe the act of reading others’ interventions without directly participating or openly letting the group/network know about their presence (Jones 1999). However, as mentioned, in my case this activity was authorized by my subscription to the list which does not require any member to introduce themselves, let alone to participate.

having to “complicate their lives even further with the foreigners” (email intervention, 16<sup>th</sup> December 2002) when the defence of their own rights is already a difficult pursuit.

Predictably, the virtual debates on the Committee’s electronic forum became particularly intense in January 2002 – after Berlusconi made his first provocative statement – and they intensified even further when the Northern League’s proposal and the DdL were made public. The unfolding of these events and the neglect of prostitute people and the Committee – their only official representative body – in consultations over a change of the Merlin Law became a major item in the virtual discussions. One of the participants sent a message inviting all prostitute colleagues to pull their forces together and form a ‘united front’ against initiatives of the right-wing coalition.

I think we have to let go of all the problematic issues that at times divide us. In this way we can get together to make our voice heard. We can’t let them [politicians at the Government] constrain us. Let’s try to involve other groups and associations [...]. We have to scream our right to manage our sexuality, life, job in the way we think best for us. Having always respect for others but without repressing ourselves. [...] We have to let them understand that we need a law that guarantees our dignity [...] and they have to treat us as workers!

(9<sup>th</sup> January 2003)

The positive replies to this message led also to a series of considerations on the priorities on which Italian prostitutes should focus in order to be more effective in their response to the actions undertaken by the Government. The majority of the participants in the e-forum agreed that it is essential to concentrate their attention on their own situation as Italian prostitutes who had consented to work in the sex industry. Anna<sup>32</sup>, a transsexual prostitute wrote:

Let’s put an end to the repeated pattern that tends to equate a whore to a slave or, in the best hypothesis, to being poor, rejected and forced by bad luck to sell her dignity for a few pennies [*lire*]. This is 2003! [...] I might not be saying any innovative thing here, but we should never be tired of underlining that there is something called free will, and if one decides to do this job – which is not a crime – she has to be, not only respected, but also treated as any other person who does a legitimate job!

(12<sup>th</sup> January 2003)

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<sup>32</sup> All names of the participants to the forum are changed. The ones used for the clients however, are similar to pseudo names they used.

Those who followed up on Anna's email shared the opinion that prostitutes themselves tend to spend too much 'energy in helping foreign prostitutes'. Some manifested frustration and others more overt hostility towards the cumbersome and aggravating presence of the latter and the negative repercussions they had on 'local' sex workers. The following considerations from an email by an Italian female prostitute are indicative of this perspective:

I noticed that with the passing of time the discussion on prostitution carried out by representatives of various institutions such as political parties, churches, bodies of the state, etc., take increasingly for granted that a whore is a slave of colour, or at least not Italian. So, every proposal for a law starts from this assumption, and is modelled around the idea that the object of the law has to be a person beyond legality who exercises an activity because she is forced into it. This seems very dangerous to me, because as we know, there are people who do this job as a free choice and are not exploited. So now I am asking you: isn't it counterproductive to talk a lot, even among ourselves, about the integration of the extracommunitarians? Couldn't it be that, in order to be too good, too humanitarian, too understanding and democratic, in the end we contribute to reinforcing this perspective and we will end up with a law that is basically made only to address illegal actions? We need a law that regulates, in a more satisfying and updated way, a condition which is not a crime! I don't think it is selfish to talk about these things. And I don't think that talking about these things means being racist or classist. I just think we need a healthy dose of realism to understand whether we are moving in the right direction or not.

(15<sup>th</sup> January 2003)

Similarly, other messages revealed concerns about Italian prostitutes not being able to focus on their own priorities, the dispersal of advocacy energies as a potential cohesive group, and the little political and social consideration received as a consequence.

When the virtual forum started to address these themes, a small number of clients – as they identified themselves – stepped into the discussion. One of them, 'Mister X', encouraged both prostitutes and clients to put their resources and strengths together in order to form a stronger coalition for the request of the institutionalization of prostitution as a job. Only in this way, he claimed, will clients and prostitutes be able to oppose the new law proposals whose only objective is, as he put it, "to clean the streets from the Negro women [*le negre*] and the slaves. These are measures against illegality, not against prostitutes" (16<sup>th</sup> January 2003). However, a real problem to be faced in this sense, he also added, is that prostitutes are not at all united on whether prostitution should be a job or not. Before even thinking of asking to be consulted on the regulation of prostitution, it



is paramount that prostitutes and clients reach an agreement on such a contested issue. Another anonymous client expressed reluctance at the prospect of prostitution becoming completely regularized as a formal profession. As some other clients soon agreed, such institutionalization would take away the 'charm' from prostitution.

When prostitution becomes collective, as a consciousness and a category, I can see we inevitably have to refer to it with the pseudo-political language of an institution [...]. In your emails I found echoes of collectivism of the 1970s, trade union type terminology, sociology of employment...these aspects are very different from my imaginary universe of who whores are. [...] I feel that [...] for us [clients] going with a whore is like going for a walk outside a space shuttle, it's like an apnoea beyond the surface of emerged affections and real economy. We look for an excursion out of the daily protective cover of reality. It might be very modern to think that one day we will pay for a blowjob with a credit card, deduct it from the taxes as 'prostitution expenses', and park the car in the specific spaces for clients...but what a bore!

(17<sup>th</sup> January 2003)

In his contribution, 'Colombo' expressed dismay at the prospect of a new legislation which would favour only Italian prostitutes, thus curtailing the 'availability' of 'foreign prostitutes'.

We, the clients, vary a lot in terms of tastes. Some want them [prostitutes] black, some mulattoes, some yellow, how can we possibly do without the clandestine women? Shall we give them a temporary visa? Maybe, but then if one million Albanians come to Italy wanting to be prostitutes, what are we going to do with Bossi? We need the help of a good sociologist!

(17<sup>th</sup> January 2003)

Soon after this email was sent the forum started receiving derogatory messages from anonymous senders and had to be temporarily closed until a special subscription system was installed. Since then it kept being active but with less participation from fewer subscribers.

The observation of the 2002 events through the comments and debates generated in the forum reveal that the Committee's decision to pursue an inclusive policy strategy which takes into account the needs of both Italian *and* non-Italian prostitutes, was not necessarily shared by its constituency. On the contrary, the latter seemed to view this approach as disempowering and counterproductive. Some of the Italian prostitutes who participated in the discussion felt that it obstructed the already difficult path to defend their *own* cause, and led to the dispersal of the collective energy needed to form a

potentially more effective alliance. 'Foreign prostitutes' or 'the foreigners' are referred to as an impediment and also as unfair competitors who, with their 'special needs', attract all the attention of politicians and society at large. Nevertheless, when encouraged to get together and advocate for their right to prostitute and for the recognition of prostitution as a form of labour, a plurality of discordant voices revealed an internal weakness due to reasons that are not necessarily linked to 'foreign prostitution', such as the lack of a common position on how to conceptualize, thus regulate, prostitution itself. Discordant views were found also amongst the few clients who intervened in the discussion. While 'Mister X' encouraged prostitutes to pursue the prostitution-as-work position, other clients seemed to be adverse to the idea of losing the power to pay to engage in something non-institutionalized, 'beyond reality', as one of them wrote. Similarly, 'Colombo' stated that clients' multiple tastes need to be satisfied by keeping a 'vast array' of clandestine women readily available, hence his sense of loss at the idea of the disappearance of such 'supply' in favour of Italian prostitution.

Clients' interests in prostitutes involve primarily a relation of consumption (O'Connell Davidson 1998). Indeed, if a change of legislation limited the availability for that consumption, lessened the variety of prostitutes with whom it may take place, and even changed its modalities, clients would have, as in the case here, little incentive in pursuing the Italian prostitute's agenda, in that the result for them would be similar to the Government's proposals.

In sum, the difficulty of Italian prostitutes to campaign for their rights and be recognized by the state as a valid interlocutor on prostitution matters is due also to the lack of agreement, amongst themselves and their clients, over the social and economic significance of the activity of prostitution itself. It is also important to observe the failure or success of prostitutes' representative bodies in the wider political context (West 2000). For example, only just recently in February 2007, the Ministry of the Interior set up a new committee, the 'Observatory on Prostitution and the Criminal Phenomena Connected with it' (*Osservatorio sulla Prostituzione ed i Fenomeni Delittuosi ad Essa Connessi*), comprising delegates from the Ministry of the Interior, the police forces and various IAs, including the Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitutes. Its aim is to study, in a six-month period, the situation of prostitution in Italy and make policy recommendations to the Government on how to address it more effectively. At the time of editing this chapter, in March 2007, the Observatory has met once. It is far too early to

be able to assess whether it will be able, in such a short time, to produce any change in the prostitution/sex-trafficking legislation. However, what is relevant to note here, is that once again, under a left-wing Government, the Committee, as it had been for the drafting of Article 18, has been called as a recognized representative body to sit in a working group aimed at assessing and then drafting a new response to prostitution.

## 6. Concluding remarks

Laws and legal discourses constitute a crucial ground for exploration in this chapter. As mentioned at the outset, the law is

particularly effective in the reproduction and construction of essential notions of sexuality [...], assumptions about men's and women's sexuality are constructed and reinforced by law because law is situated within the context of, and actively engaged in, the projection of sexist visions of male and female sexuality.

(Evans and Lee 2002: 35)

The analysis of Article 18 and the two proposed legislations on prostitution revealed both gendered and sexist notions of sexual practices and sexuality in general, but also a much larger set of anxieties, meanings and social tensions about fears of migration, the 'foreign Others', as well as national values and citizenship (Bernstein and Schaffner 2005).

In particular, in the first section I critically examined the legislation that addresses women trafficked for sexual purposes in Italy. As seen, I explained how Article 18 is based on and reproduces the assumption that victims of trafficking are helpless women in a state of complete subordination. Within this construction prostitution becomes an unacceptable sexual practice that cannot be performed by any woman who would (want to) fall under the category of victim and thus be protected by the law. Thus framed, Article 18 creates and reinforces a dichotomy between legally-recognised victims entitled to protection, and 'guilty women' (in some cases 'victims' who are non-legally-recognised as such) who are left out of the official system of support and are treated as criminals.

Having presented the discursive context that Article 18 contributes to reproducing, it is important to make clear that my criticism of what Giammarinaro refers

to as the ‘cultural and social approach’ to female victimhood, and its having penetrated the legal discourse must not be viewed as a contestation or dismissal of the violence and exploitation that are attached to the phenomenon of trafficking for sexual purposes. The point is to underscore that the legal discourse operates a gendering strategy by (re)producing fixed gendered identities and roles (Smart 1992), which reinforce the notion that men turn women into victims, thus they invariably lose their capacity to resist and react. These characterizations are further reinforced in the implementation regulations with their focus on an intervention from without – in this case the state and its implementing arms – in order to recuperate those who would otherwise be unable to take actions on their own behalf. Lastly, it is worth noting (although further discussed in chapter 6) that legal and cultural notions of ‘victim’ are not only informed by gendered assumptions. As I observed with many of my interviewees working in Implementation Agencies, trafficked women are often depicted as victims of their own ‘backward and uncivilized cultures’ and even ‘biological race’. By contrast, the culture of the West is referred to as privileged and superior (‘our civilized culture’, as the Minister had said) thus justifying an imperative to intervene in ways that all too often dismiss and disregard the background of the ‘victims’ they claim to be helping.

In the second section, the analysis of the public debates initiated in 2002 over the modification of the long-lived Merlin law shows how the right-wing coalition shifted its policy agenda from an interest in *forced* prostitutes and sex trafficking – as it had been with the previous leftist legislature – to ‘*foreign* prostitutes’. Rather than addressing their unwanted presence within a migration regime, the Government set out to manage the practice of prostitution in such a way that ‘foreigners’ would be automatically excluded both from it and from the country (apart from a few ‘victims’). The control of women’s bodies in this strategy becomes an instrument to demarcate boundaries between those groups that supposedly threaten the nation, and thus need to be either eliminated or disciplined (Luibhéid 2002). Some Italian prostitutes viewed such potential changes in the regulation of their activity as a consequence of the negative presence of the ‘foreigners’, and expressed their need to be addressed differently by the law. This was a claim, however, that they never managed to voice publicly due to internal disagreements and their clients’ lack of support of this perspective.

In sum, the analysis of the two core sections of the chapter highlight the presence of two very distinct notions built around the presence of migrant women in the sex

industry: that of victims and that of a threat to the nation. The coexistence of similar contrasting discourses that represent the prostitute as either a public nuisance/threat or as a victim has been observed and researched in other European countries. This is generally explained as the result of the actions of international and European institutions against sex trafficking that emerged and had to be incorporated in contexts often hostile to prostitution (for discussions on Greece, Spain, the UK, France and the Netherlands respectively see Lazaridis 2001; Valiente 2003; Kantola and Squires 2004; Mathieu 2004; Outshoorn 2004). Sanghera also argues that an analysis of the discourses developed around legal systems addressing prostitution and trafficking reveal a persistent contamination and confusion between the two issues, to the effect that “the outcome of this conflation has resulted in the ideological burdens of the prostitution and sex wars transmigrating into the trafficking arena” (2005: 4). Interestingly, however, the analysis presented here seems to suggest that such ‘transmigration’ in Italy happened in the opposite direction, with the concept of ‘foreign prostitution/prostitutes’ being used to describe *all* migrant women involved, voluntarily or not, in the sex industry. The term ‘foreign prostitution’ is invariably negative, having become the receptacle of a double stigma, one which combines the deviancy and danger historically ascribed to the hyper-sexed body of the prostitute and the criminality of foreign bodies that pose a threat to the nation.

In the following chapter I look into more detail at the activities carried out by Implementation Agencies and other non-governmental organizations in the delivery of assistance and support to ‘foreign prostitutes’. I explore in particular the discourses underpinning the activities and services they offer in relation to their positioning towards the phenomena of prostitution and trafficking.

## Chapter 5

### Article 18 in practice: how Implementation Agencies interpret prostitution and the law

#### 1. Introduction

In the previous chapter I explained how one of the required conditions for ‘foreign citizens’ who want to benefit from protection, assistance and a temporary visa under Article 18 is to participate in a project of social protection managed by an Implementation Agency as part of a program of assistance and social integration. In this chapter I go back to analysing Article 18, this time to explore in detail its application. Based primarily on the data gathered in the course of my fieldwork, I look specifically at Implementation Agencies, how they operate and how the provisions in the text of the law concretely map out onto the day-to-day activities and support services they deliver. The two main questions I address are:

- What social order and whose interests are reflected in the application of this law?
- To what extent are contested aspects of Article 18 (as explained in chapter 4) affecting its implementation process?

The findings of my fieldwork suggest that different typologies of intervention are applied depending on the views that IAs have on prostitution and trafficking. The women assisted are treated differently and with different aims according to whether a distinction between the two is made. In some cases the focus of the intervention is to *save/liberate* ‘foreign prostitutes’ from prostitution. This is viewed as the primary reason that oppresses and reduces them to the state of victims – whether ‘foreign prostitutes’ claim to have chosen a sex industry occupation, or they have actually been forced into it. Other IAs maintain that prostitution is not confined exclusively to the abuse of sex trafficking. On the contrary, the former (prostitution) is not necessarily harmful *per se* (Kempadoo,

Sanghera et al 2005). They operate with the final objective of *empowering* ‘foreign prostitutes’ to be autonomously able to confront different situations, including participation in a project of social protection, a longer engagement in the sex industry, further migration, repatriation, etc.

Indeed, ambiguities in the text of Article 18 – in particular those concerning the meaning of social integration, recuperation/rescue and victimhood – contribute to its arbitrary interpretation and consequent contrasting implementation strategies.

The chapter is structured in four main sections: firstly I present a brief overview of the variety of IAs active over the national territory. This part is followed by an exploration of the perspectives of IAs on the phenomenon of trafficking for sexual purposes, prostitution, and related to this, of the women they target. This discussion provides the context for a better understanding of the following section, where I describe the activities carried out and various methodologies applied by IAs in running projects of social protection. The last part draws conclusions.

## **2. Implementation Agencies: an overview**

Between 2000 and 2006 the Ministry for Equal Opportunities – the governmental body in charge of Article 18 – issued seven calls for tenders for the appointment of institutions (Implementation Agencies) responsible for the management of projects of social protection for victims of trafficking for sexual purposes. The final selection of IAs is carried out by the Inter-Ministerial Commission for the Implementation of Article 18 on the basis of parameters that include: previous field experience of the bidder, the quality of accommodation and reception structures that an organization can provide, the capacity to establish networks and cooperation with other projects, the staff’s professional qualifications and experience, etc. (Dipartimento per i Diritti e le Pari Opportunità 2007a). Based on these criteria, in the course of seven years, the Ministry co-financed 448 projects of social protection in which a total of 9,398 *people* participated.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The majority of the projects, 183, were set up in the North of Italy, 87 in the South, and 178 in the Centre and Islands – a distribution that mirrors the numerical presence of both migrant women in the sex industry and non-profit organizations over the national territory. These data are reported from a document produced by the Ministry of Equal Opportunities and available from its website (*Dipartimento per i Diritti e le Pari Opportunità* 2007b). The document does not provide a gender breakdown of the aggregate number of those who were supported through Article 18 projects. However, apart from the initial use of the gender neutral term ‘people’, the rest of the document refers to the individuals assisted exclusively as ‘women victims of

Implementation Agencies can be either public bodies, comprising regional, provincial and municipal authorities<sup>2</sup> or non-governmental associations that need to be already formally registered as “institutions that carry out activities in favour of foreign immigrants” (*Ministero della Giustizia* 1999). The former – institutions which are to various degrees attached to the Government – are key players in the implementation of Article 18, both as providers of financial support and, in those cases where they have appropriate structures in place, also in carrying out projects of social protection. However, significantly more numerous than public bodies are non-governmental IAs. These may be faith-based organizations, voluntary associations, social cooperatives or advocacy groups. Some were formed as a direct response to the phenomenon of prostitution-related migrations of women to Italy, others had already been in existence for many decades, and only later introduced specific services to target this new group (see chapter 3).

Particularly large is the number of Catholic IAs throughout the national territory. This prevalence reflects the historical and still dominant role that the Catholic Church retains in the field of social exclusion (Bassi and Colozzi 1995). After World War II, in fact, the Italian Government incorporated the management of social security, health and education into the public welfare system, and delegated most other social services to Catholic organizations which had already gained substantial expertise in ‘helping the poor’ and could thus offer a wide range of support, including housing, medical assistance, etc. (ibid.; Barbetta 1997; Caponio 2005; Pojmann 2006).

Amongst the ones I visited in the course of my fieldwork are the following Catholic organizations: *Caritas Italiana*<sup>3</sup> – the Italian branch of the international NGO *Caritas Internationalis* – was founded in 1971 and is now one of the largest and most influential non-profit associations in Italy, dedicated to the reception and integration of

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trafficking’. For this reason it is not clear whether the total number reported includes men or not, and if so, how many.

<sup>2</sup> Administratively, Italy is divided into twenty regions, 92 provinces, and approximately 8,000 municipalities. It is relevant to point out that the IA that leads a program of assistance and social integration often subcontracts to other agencies, hence the total number of associations that have been and are involved in the implementation of projects of social protection is significantly higher than the number of projects itself and that were carried out since 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Given the often controversial content of the interviews I conducted and in order to guarantee anonymity to my interviewees, when appropriate, in this chapter and the following, I change both their names and that of the IAs they work for (see chapter 2). Hence the original names of the IAs mentioned here will not always appear in the following parts of this chapter.



migrants and socially excluded people (Danese 2001; Andrijasevic 2003). Many of its numerous branches are actively involved in Article 18 programs, particularly the Lombardy section *Caritas Ambrosiana* which in the past five years organized a number of national and regional conferences and workshops on sex trafficking and prostitution.<sup>4</sup>

The *Casa di Orientamento Femminile* (COF, House for Female Orientation), was founded in 1950 in Northern Italy to help in the “moral and human recovery” of prostitute women, and is still currently involved in projects of social protection (COF 2002: 25).

The *Ufficio Pastorale Migranti* (Office for the Pastoral Care of Migrants) in Turin, has been active since the early 1960s and established a ‘women’s project’ in 1995 that has since provided support also to ‘foreign prostitutes’.

The *Associazione Papa Giovanni XXIII* (Association Pope John Paul XXIII) and the *Fondazione Regina Pacis* (Foundation Regina Pacis), active since 1968 and 1997 respectively, are undoubtedly amongst the most well known in the country, specifically for their activities of assistance to migrants and migrant prostitutes. The former has its headquarters in Rimini, Central Italy, but is also present throughout the national territory. It was founded by don Benzi, the priest already mentioned in the previous chapter, who has gained remarkable (un)popularity, being often in the media whenever issues of prostitution rise to the public agenda. Don Cesare Lodeserto, who runs both the *Fondazione Regina Pacis* and, attached to it, a Centre of Temporary Residence (*Centro di Permanenza Temporanea*, CPT)<sup>5</sup> in southern Italy, used to be considered an expert on issues of sexual trafficking and has been invited to give talks and keynote speeches in Italy and also in many international settings.<sup>6</sup> In May 2005, as mentioned in chapter 2, his notoriety further escalated – and reputation collapsed – when he was arrested on charges of private violence and kidnapping. Now released, he still runs the Foundation and the CPT.

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<sup>4</sup> *Caritas* also publishes an annual statistical report on immigration (*Dossier Statistico Immigrazione*), one of the most reliable sources of information on the quantitative dimension of migration in the country.

<sup>5</sup> The 16 CPTs that have been active in Italy since 1998 serve to temporarily host asylum seekers whilst their refugee status is assessed (see chapter 3). In some instances they also serve to accommodate illegal migrants, including migrant prostitutes whose status is unclear, or who are waiting to be repatriated.

<sup>6</sup> The first (and only – see chapter 2) time I met don Lodeserto was in Brussels in March 2001, when he had been invited by the European Commission – where I was an intern at the time – to give a speech at an International Women’s day seminar.

Together with these more established and long-running bodies are also smaller Catholic associations that only very recently have become involved in this field. For example, in the course of an interview, a Catholic nun explained to me that, with her fellow consecrated sisters who are part of a Franciscan order, she established a community in a small village in Northern Italy with “the specific aim of dedicating our time to the reception and assistance of women victims of trafficking” (personal interview with Sister Michela, July 2004). The Church recognizes their particular service, and the group has established strong links and various forms of cooperation with other local NGOs.

It is worth mentioning that there is also a small number of non-Catholic Christian institutions active in the field. In the majority of cases they function independently from the system put in place by Article 18. *Progetto Ruth* (Ruth Project) for example, was set up in Rome in 2001 by the Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy to coordinate various initiatives – including pastoral care, awareness enhancing and counselling – carried out by Protestant churches in support of trafficked women.

Non-faith organizations also play an increasingly important role in this field. Having multiplied in number since the 1980s, lay voluntary organizations proved to be crucial in addressing the needs of migrants (Caponio 2005), and many have specialized in the provision of services to ‘foreign prostitutes’. One of the most prominent and well established among them is the already mentioned Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitutes, (see chapters 3 and 4) which has been operating for more than twenty years to promote the rights of prostitute people. Since 2000 its own IA, *Stella Polare* (Northern Star), provides support specifically to ‘foreign prostitutes’ and manages Article 18 projects of social protection as well. Moreover, as mentioned previously (see chapter 2 and 3) the Committee is the Italian affiliate member of TAMPEP – the European Network for HIV/STI Prevention and Health Promotion among Migrant Sex Workers – which works across Europe to develop and implement programs in aid of migrant sex workers.

*On the Road*, with headquarters in Central Italy, has been extremely active since 1990, not only in the provision of services to migrant prostitutes (including Article 18 projects), but also in conducting research on sex trafficking in Italy, organizing national conferences and co-operation initiatives among IAs, and building transnational networks and projects to share best practices.

The *Gruppo Abele* (Abel Group) has been active in Turin since the mid 1960s. Even though it was founded by a priest, since its inception it has underlined its lay character and has progressively become a very large organization in the North West of Italy, providing support to prostitute women since 1965.

Those mentioned above are amongst the most renowned organizations in this field in the country. Less nationally visible, but vastly widespread, are also numerous smaller NGOs that operate within their local territory. As explained in chapter 3, these were formed in the mid/late 1990s by groups of people who wanted to give support to the migrant street prostitutes present in their local area. This is how *Associazione Mimosa* (Mimosa Association) was created in 1996 in the North-East and with time assumed the status of an institutionally recognized non-profit organization. Since Article 18 became operational, even more institutions have been set up to access the funds provided.<sup>7</sup> *Progetto Roxana* (Roxana Project) in the South of Italy is one of them, having been active since the first call for tenders in 2000, specifically to carry out projects of social protection.

In this introductory section, while briefly presenting some of the organizations visited in the course of my fieldwork, I have also provided a preliminary overview of the variety of Implementation Agencies over the national territory in terms of affiliation, period of existence, scale and types of activities carried out. In what follows, I explore in more detail their motivations and beliefs and lay the ground for an exploration of different typologies and methodologies of intervention.

### **3. Implementation Agencies: perspectives and beliefs**

For a better understanding of the activities carried out by Implementation Agencies in running projects of social protection, it is important to explore how these organizations conceptualize the phenomena of trafficking and prostitution with which they operate. As I observed even before starting my fieldwork (when conducting a desk based research on IAs over the national territory), at the heart of the differing strategies of support provided

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<sup>7</sup> Such expansion has undoubtedly resulted in a better ramified intervention that reaches more areas of the national territory. Nevertheless, this may also be seen as problematic in that new groups with little/less knowledge of the field are reducing the funds that might otherwise be available to more established and experienced organizations.

lie crucial distinctions in the way the presence of ‘foreign prostitutes’ is explained, which in turn depends primarily on how sex trafficking is conceptualized vis-à-vis prostitution.

### *Sex trafficking as a prostitution problem*

A widespread approach amongst IAs is that which views prostitution as an evil and a sexual degradation that violates the integrity of the persons who practise it. Within this perspective, prostitute women<sup>8</sup> are invariably considered to be victims, be it of organized criminal networks, clients’ sexual lust and a patriarchal system that allows the sexual objectification of women, or, more generally, of socio-economic circumstances. The emphasis on the forces that cause and drive into this state of abjection varies, but what brings many IAs together around this approach is the belief that there is no real distinction between prostitution and sex trafficking. The latter is seen as a particular manifestation – i.e. in a transnational dimension – of the sexual exploitation of prostitution.

For a more detailed explanation of this position and its constitutive aspects, I will now proceed to explore how it is supported in particular by some Catholic IAs. As already explained in chapter 3, the Catholic Church maintains that prostitution is an immoral, undignified and sinful offence against the wholeness and sacredness of the body.<sup>9</sup> Two of my interviewees, a nun and a social worker operating in Catholic IAs, explained their support for this approach and said respectively:

We [our order] are completely against any form of prostitution, and we think that it is impossible to ascribe to it the dignity of a profession.

(Personal interview with Sister Michela, July 2004)

The body of the woman cannot be bought or sold: it is sacred; prostitution is an enormous evil, and as such it has to be fought and prohibited.

(Personal interview with Marco, March 2005)

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<sup>8</sup> In this case, in fact, the act of prostitution is often conceptualized upon gendered and heteronormative assumptions that prostitutes are always women and clients are men.

<sup>9</sup> According to the Catholic Catechism it also is sinful to engage in prostitution (i.e. it is sinful to be a prostitute), although “the imputability of the offence can be *attenuated* by destitution, blackmail, or social pressure” (Catholic Church 2007; emphasis added)

This perspective has recently been further clarified in the *Church's Strategy to Help Women of the Streets*, a document released in 2005 which addresses specifically the phenomenon of sex trafficking. Resulting from an initiative of the Pontifical Council for Migrants and Travellers<sup>10</sup> at the end of an *International Meeting of Pastoral Care for the Liberation of Women of the Street* this instruction claims that:

Prostitution is a form of modern-day slavery. It is important to recognize that sexual exploitation, prostitution and trafficking of human beings are *all* acts of violence against women and as such constitute an offence to the dignity of women and are a grave violation of basic human rights.

(Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of the Migrants and Itinerant People 2005)

The document also rules out the possibility that someone may *decide* to sell sexual services, since this is always the result of external forces that constrain into doing so. The fact that a woman may (claim to) choose to prostitute herself is irrelevant. All prostitute women are 'prostituted', i.e. invariably coerced into this activity and need to be treated as victims – even more so when they are led to believe that engaging in the sex industry is something they have wilfully resolved upon. Along this line of thought, don Benzi writes in one of his books, "the truth is that free prostitution does not exist. All forms of prostitution are imposed: 90% are enslaved women, 10% are women who are coerced into prostitution by the conditions of injustice in which they live" (Benzi 2001: 109). Similarly, Marco, the director of a Catholic Implementation Agency, in stressing the impossibility that 'foreign prostitutes' may freely want to engage in prostitution, told me emphatically: "No woman was born a prostitute! There is always someone who made her become a prostitute" (personal interview with Marco, March 2005).

These quotes emphasize the notion of female victims as being in a perennial status of subjugation and powerlessness – 'enslaved women', 'coerced', 'made her become' – and imply that they are always and invariably acted upon. Such themes are constantly reproduced around representations of sex trafficking (see chapter 1), and were also discussed in chapter 4, in relation to Article 18 and the legal discourse surrounding it. As seen, one of the implications of these narratives of despair is the creation of a dichotomy between innocent victims and guilty criminals. In the case of the IAs

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<sup>10</sup> This is one of the bodies that constitute the institutional structure of the Holy See.

discussed here, this binary division is irrelevant because *all* ('foreign') prostitutes<sup>11</sup> are considered to be victims, by virtue of their being engaged in prostitution. The *Church's Strategy to Help Women of the Street* provides a highly emotive description of the extent to which the experience of sex trafficking/prostitution affect 'the victim':

[she] is torn apart, she is dead psychologically and spiritually. Each person has a different story, mainly one of violence, abuse, mistrust, low self esteem, fear, lack of opportunities. [...]

(Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of the Migrants and Itinerant People 2005)

In light of the 'damage' inflicted on victims of trafficking/prostitution, the role assumed by IAs that operate within these understandings is to rescue, save, liberate or rehabilitate them – all common terms adopted within their rhetoric – to a new, dignified life. As Marco explained,

on the basis of *our* beliefs, which are also Christian beliefs, if a woman was made in God's image, I really don't think that God wanted her to be a prostitute. So on the basis of *our* beliefs, we always *fight* to free all the prostituted women.

(Personal interview, March 2005)

The emphasis here is clearly on the righteousness of the belief system of the organization – 'our beliefs' – which justifies the intervention pursued to free from oppressive practices. Don Benzi in particular has been actively and publicly involved in disseminating his message of liberation of migrant prostitutes, whom he always refers to as *le schiave*, the slaves (with a feminine connotation), or *ragazze schiavizzate* 'enslaved girls' to highlight their lack of freedom. The image reproduced here (figure 2) is just one example of his 'liberationist campaign'. Reproduced from his association's website, it depicts a smiling don Benzi holding hands with two 'enslaved girls', with the footer stating: "Let's free the slaves [feminine] of prostitution".

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<sup>11</sup> Although this applies to all women in prostitution, the rhetoric of these IAs focuses primarily on *le straniere*, female foreigners, 'foreign prostitutes'.

Figure 2: *Liberiamo le schiave della prostituzione*



Don Benzi's motto is particularly interesting because in very few words – 'Let's save the slaves of prostitution' – it summarizes the belief system that informs the activities of his and similar organizations. Firstly, the onus of the liberation is on 'us': let *us* liberate *them*, *liberiamo*, which not only evokes a moral obligation to carry out the 'liberation', but it authorizes and empowers 'us' to do so, whilst belittling, if not even ignoring, the capacity and agency of 'the slaves' to contribute to their own re-conquest of freedom (supposing that, whatever is meant by it, this was lost in the first place). Secondly, the use of the term 'slaves' is quite common – and contested (O'Connell Davidson 2006) – in discourses around sex trafficking, and it serves to underscore a complete lack of freedom.<sup>12</sup> The last point is related to the focus on prostitution, rather

<sup>12</sup> The terms slave and slavery in the context of sex trafficking are commonly adopted in academic work, political and legal texts and discourses all over the world. They are also included in the 2000 United Nations *Protocol to Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children* that defines trafficking as "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, *slavery* or practices similar to *slavery*, servitude or the removal of organs". Sex

than on trafficking. The problem, as is clearly stated here, is that what forces the ‘slaves’ into a condition of subjugation is prostitution – and that is what they have to be liberated from.

Don Lodeserto’s *Regina Pacis Foundation* holds matching views and makes use of similar tropes and representations in its rhetoric. One of its documents states that the aim of the association’s intervention is to:

safeguard the freedom and dignity of girl victims of sexual abuse and exploitation of prostitution. More specifically, it [the Foundation] aims at offering assistance and protection, psycho-social integration and help, [...] to young girls *we snatched out* of the world of *prostitution and sexual exploitation* [...].

(Regina Pacis 2007, emphasis added)

When I first read this paragraph in its English version I assumed that the adoption of the expression ‘snatched out’ derived from an incorrect translation which had made use of a verb that in English is similar in meaning to abduction. In fact, ‘snatched out’ is indeed the best term to convey the meaning of the original term *sottratte*, which, as I checked, is used in the Italian text. As in the previous example, the choice of this particular terminology underscores the role of the IA and its moral authority to exercise the right to save and rehabilitate ‘the victims’ in a way that may even imply some sort of physical removal of the latter from conditions of exploitation. The focus here is on what the organization, not the ‘girls’, thinks is better for them (Jordan 2002). In fact, they are very much silenced and presented as completely inert and passive individuals who need external aid to safeguard their freedom and dignity.

Nevertheless, the reality is much more complex than a homogenous and monolithic representation in which *all* migrant prostitutes appear as ‘powerless slaves’. In many instances they are “likely to be strong, risk-taking individuals who have made rational choices and exercised their own agency in deciding to migrate”, and unfortunately some of them became victims of traffickers (Jordan 2002: 30). The

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trafficking, in particular, is also commonly referred to as sexual slavery “to indicate the conditions of debt bondage and illegal confinement to which trafficked women in prostitution are subjected.” (Andrijasevic 2004: 82). These aspects are important to contextualize the use of the term slave/slavery that don Benzi, and others in Italy, so frequently adopt in their campaigns as part of the ‘modern day slavery’ discourse. However, the significance and historical relevance of the racialized practice of ‘old’ slavery cannot be detached from the current use of the term. And indeed in the image above the adoption of the term ‘slave’ to refer to racialized minorities is reinforced, in this case with the portrayal of two Black women – the slaves of prostitution, as the footer reads – and of their smiling white saviour.



discrepancy between the simplistic ideals of organizations such as don Benzi's and don Lodeserto's and the more complex reality has inevitable repercussions at the level of practice, where the two inevitably clash. In the following chapter, for example, I present cases of staff of IAs ascribing to this perspective whose frustration for the non-victim-like (intended as powerless, completely subjugated and innocent) behaviour of 'foreign prostitutes' they provide support to, is displayed in hostile attitudes towards them, fuelled by sexism and racism.

Moreover, such limited perspectives are perceived by some people working in Catholic IAs as highly constraining. Despite the adamant definitions and statements produced by the Vatican on trafficking and prostitution, in the course of my fieldwork I observed a plurality of 'non conformist' views on these matters. Being confronted every day with the complexity of migrant women's lives, it is difficult for the staff of some Catholic IAs to agree with such clear-cut views or pursue these goals. Equating prostitution and trafficking is perceived by some as an oversimplifying approach that neglects the plurality of experiences they witness and have to deal with on a daily basis. Given this tension, in many instances the staff of the associations interviewed expressed the need to be clear about their (dissonant) perspective on prostitution and trafficking.

A Catholic nun, for example, was very keen to make sure that I understood the aim of the Article 18 project she was responsible for:

Even before I answer your first question, it important for me to make sure that you understand that we deal with coerced prostitution – i.e. not with prostitution lived as a *choice* by the woman. Here we are talking about women who have been abducted and exploited.

(Personal interview with Sister Maria, March 2005)

In this statement the interviewee admits the possibility that prostitution may be lived as a choice, despite the fact that, as mentioned, the official stand of the Catholic Church excludes it. Similarly, Elena, a project officer emphatically said:

Our association was not created with the intent of dealing with prostitution, we were born to intervene in the field of exploitation of prostitution and trafficking. Do you understand the difference? So our aim has never been to eliminate prostitution from the streets. Is this clear? We provide assistance to women who are *forced* into prostitution.

(Personal interview with Elena, August 2002)

The anxiety displayed by Elena in relation to my understanding of the scope of her organization's intervention was clarified after the interview. In the course of an informal and off-the-record conversation, she expressed frustration over the media attention received by a small number of Catholic priests (including don Benzi) who have, according to her, pushed people into thinking that all Catholic organizations working with prostitutes want to save them and eliminate prostitution, whereas this is not always the case.

Similar concerns were expressed in a conversation I had with Anna, the coordinator of one of the branches of an international Catholic NGO. When I interviewed her in 2002 the Church had not yet come out with the *Strategy to Help Women of the Streets*, and the only official documents to refer to were those on prostitution. Given the lack of clear guidelines on issues of trafficking, she explained, a few priests who have media appeal often appear on television programs expressing their views, but they are not, she stressed, the official ones of the Catholic world, although this is what it might seem.

It is not fair to ask only people like don Benzi to talk about the trafficking issue. In his own little world, however, he has some few clear ideas and has a large group of people following him. You understand? The first is that the client has to be condemned, and then all the women have to be saved because they don't want to do this job. But it's not true! There are some people who do want to do this job. They want to do it because it is the most remunerative, and then they want to go back home and buy a house [...]. Even if you take away the coercion, they still want to keep doing the job! And this has to be said! [...] Benzi again, once said that it's the wife of the client who is not good in bed with the husband, and that's why they go to prostitutes. That's what he came up with once, then fortunately he retracted the statement. The last thing we need is for him to attack women again, and then we're done for! It's always their fault! The thing that annoys me most is that don Benzi is seen as representing the Catholic Church, and the Church is not going to deny this, it's not going to touch a man who is a 'saviour'! There are some people who in the end really choose to do this job [prostitution]. If they want to do it because it's more profitable, or because they want to go back home to buy a house in their village, then it's their choice. If you take away the exploitation, they will keep prostituting: because they want to... and this needs to be said!

(Personal interview with Anna, August 2002)

Another social worker, Camilla, shared equal frustration, in her case for fear of being uncritically pigeonholed as "a Catholic with Catholic ideas". As she explained, the debate on choice in prostitution has become so ardent and polarized that whenever she

wants to express her opinion, she feels constrained by the preconceived idea that because she works for a Catholic NGO she must think in a certain way and thus receives very little credit.

As for the extreme respect for individual freedom, yes it's good, but it is always very difficult to determine to what extent one thing is chosen, or whether it is the result of a forced decision due to a real lack of alternatives. But you see, every time I mention this [the difficulty in determining whether prostitution can be really chosen] well, it is labelled and scorned as 'the usual Catholic thing to say'.

(Personal interview with Camilla, August 2002)

These considerations reveal the coexistence of a mainstream Catholic culture and a non-conformist, more progressive subculture in relation to this issue. The former is displayed in official documentation and pursued only by some associations that operate in this field. The latter is less visibly diffused usually among staff of Catholic organizations who keep a low-key profile, being caught in the middle between the views they are supposed to promote, and their own dissenting opinions.

It is important to add that the 'prostitution as exploitation' perspective and its conflation with sex trafficking is not just maintained and advocated by Catholic organizations. There are also a small number of organizations pursuing this position, which are not necessarily motivated by religious views and beliefs. One of them is the *Associazione Iroko* (Iroko Association), an IA funded in 1998 and operating in the North West of Italy. As its founder explains, its activities are based on the assumption "that prostitution is a violation of women's human rights and that it is inherently a humiliation of their dignity as persons, as women and as mothers. [...And as such] should never be tolerated as a valid and healthy social exchange between men and women" (Aghatise 2002: 2, 3). The association is affiliated with the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW), the international feminist abolitionist association which, as also seen in chapter 1, considers all migrant prostitutes as victims of trafficking. In this respect, and in light of the global distribution and resonance of the CATW, it is worth noting that the anti-prostitution feminist perspective in Italy is not nearly as vocal and organized as it is in other countries. In general, the Italian feminist movement, born in the 1970s, has historically been concerned with issues of abortion and divorce, whereas prostitution assumed relevance only sporadically, when new proposals were made to change the existing law (Bono and Kemp 1991). By contrast, abolitionist movements and women's

groups that *distance* themselves from feminism are more widespread, but with a very marginal socio-political impact. For example, the Milan-based *Associazione Irene* (Irene Association), which is not an IA, is primarily engaged in research and information on equal opportunities. As Danna explains, “it has quietly adopted a strict abolitionist stand, disseminating information that equates prostitution with violence against women, but is apparently reluctant to launch press campaigns with these contents” (2004: 170).

To conclude, the position presented here is widespread – though not necessarily popular – in particular amongst Catholic organizations, but also fewer feminist and women’s groups. It is based on the assumption that prostitution is invariably exploitative and abusive, consequently ‘foreign prostitutes’ are, by definition, victims. Thus viewed, the process and the purpose – i.e. trafficking and prostitution – are collapsed (Kapur 2005), hence the primary intervention is to address and stop/prohibit the practice of prostitution. The modality of the ‘liberation’ from exploitation varies, depending on how disempowered and powerless the victim is considered to be. As seen, in many instances, more radical Catholic associations act with the conviction that it is up to them to ‘save’ the victims, and little does it matter whether the latter agree or not. Less extreme positions derive from a more realistic acknowledgement, not only of the complex reality of migrant prostitution, but also, and more importantly, of the agency and decision-making capacity of migrant prostitutes themselves.

*Prostitution is a ‘complex social phenomenon’ and sex trafficking a form of violence against women*

A second type of approach I identified in the course of my fieldwork is that of IAs/NGOs which make a distinction between the process of sex trafficking and the practice of prostitution. The former is viewed as a process that entails violence and coercion and is not necessarily confined to the practice of prostitution. In fact, this is understood as a form of labour, and for this reason it is also often referred to as a job – an attribution that is considered to be dignifying and adding positive value to the perception that ‘foreign prostitutes’ have of what they are doing. Paola, the coordinator of an Article 18 project, explained:

As an association, we *do not* consider prostitution as an ethical problem (...). We never presented ourselves to the girls as a vehicle to take them away from the street, and especially we never made any judgment towards

prostitution. On the contrary, we have always valorised their job, we always consider it a job. In the course of our exchanges we always ask 'how is the job going? Because in our view this means giving dignity<sup>13</sup> to a person: a person who at a particular moment of her life story found herself in the condition of having to carry out the job of prostitution. We have always considered it as the temporary effect of a certain situation that we have no right to judge.

(Personal interview with Paola, August 2002)

Similarly, Simone, a social worker for a municipal authority in the North East explained that for him prostitution is an activity that is not dissimilar to his own work on the streets, and this is reflected in the type of intervention delivered.

We go on the streets to give them a hand, with no moralizing intent whatsoever. We acknowledge their dignity as street workers, in fact we are street workers just as they are! [...]. We do not offer a service with the aim of 'solving' the phenomenon of street prostitution: we are neither in favour nor against it, we don't want to judge, and we are aware that what we do is primarily harm reduction stuff. If the woman wants to, she will ask for our help. I don't go to her and ask: 'why are you a prostitute? This is not the right life for you'. This is something that she can decide if she wants to. It's the woman who will decide for herself, not us!

(Personal interview with Simone, August 2002)

Thus viewed, prostitution-related migrations do not necessarily involve violence and coercion and are not inevitably equated with sex trafficking, as in the previous case. It is contemplated that in the course of a migration trajectory prostitution may be a *chosen* temporary income-generating activity. As Antonella, a social worker, put it: "we don't think that prostitution is a crime, if one is in the condition to choose to do it, as happens to many of them, she should be free to do it" (personal interview with Antonella, August 2002). At the level of services provided, this position translates into a distinction being made between those who want and those who do not want to abandon prostitution. In the second case, the primary objective of the intervention is to assist the women in keeping good health and well-being and to be as autonomous as possible. Harm reduction strategies are often used, including distribution of condoms, counselling, basic health

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<sup>13</sup> Whether IAs subscribe to the first or this second paradigm, they repeatedly make use of the concept of dignity; the former to stress that migrant prostitutes, whether trafficked or not, retain their own dignity; the latter to point out that prostitution/trafficking entails the loss of human dignity. In the first case dignity appears to assume the meaning of individual self-worth, whereas in the second instance it is very much viewed in relation to the Catholic idea that dignity comes from God, and it implies an "obligation to live in conformity with the order of reason; where a person fail[s] to do so she would lose her dignity" (Ullrich, 2003: 8).

care and advice. No pressure is put on them to leave the sex industry, and help in this sense is provided only when requested by the women themselves. For those who are willing to exit prostitution and are in a condition of abuse and exploitation, Article 18 programs are available and are primarily geared towards a process of emancipation and empowerment – as opposed to the ‘liberation’ strategy – whereby they can gain means to foster self-determination and independence. Annalisa a project officer, made this clear:

we provide support both to those who choose prostitution, and those who don't. For those who don't choose it we have a series of support services, and Article 18 projects, when applicable. And for those who choose it we are always there for them, in case they need anything.

(Personal interview with Annalisa, August 2002)

This distinction is also clearly stated in the documentation produced by the relevant Implementation Agencies. For example, in its manifesto, the *Stella Polare Project*, managed by the Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitutes, claims to work for the “reception of victims of trafficking who decide to abandon prostitution and start a social protection program, [while it] supports and encourages self determination in sex workers who decide to continue sex work” (Promotional leaflet in English, *Stella Polare*, Trieste). Similarly, *On the Road* claims to operate:

in direct contact with people involved in prostitution, to lower the risks and reduce the harmful aspects connected with the activity of prostitution, to increase the possibility of detachment from conditions of exploitation and abuse, and [in the latter case] to offer the opportunity to go through a process of employment and social insertion, autonomy and self-determination.

(Promotional leaflet, *On the Road*, Teramo; my translation)

What emerges from this discussion is that all the organizations contacted that subscribe to this perspective stress that it is up to migrant women to choose what type of service they want to benefit from, if any. The activity of prostitution is not seen as problematic/harmful *per se*, and even in cases when the women are forced into it, great attention is put into making sure that a potential decision to break away from conditions of exploitation is taken by the woman herself, and not the organization. Rather than liberation, here the focus is on reinforcing a woman's self-determination and autonomy (Crowhurst 2006), which does not necessarily mean abandoning prostitution, rather

“gaining means of control of one’s own destiny, by acquiring the capacity to elaborate one’s own life story and personal experience” (Signorelli and Treppete 2001: 60)

The next section shows in detail how the two different views presented here map out into various methodologies of intervention.

#### **4. Running Article 18 projects of social protection: phases and approaches**

Article 18 projects of social protection entail many activities, ranging from making contact with ‘foreign prostitutes’, to helping them with their legal status, to finding them a job and independent accommodation, etc. Here I present the various phases in which the daily functions of Implementation Agencies are often organized, and also discuss aspects that may hamper the effective implementation of Article 18. When relevant, I also include comments and information gathered from my participant observation to add further insights into the various typologies of intervention. As will appear clear, support services provided are not always and necessarily strictly related to Article 18, but are aimed at targeting ‘foreign prostitutes’ more generally. In other words they may include both victims of sex trafficking, and those women who do not meet (or do not wish to meet) the requirements of severe abuse and danger that would allow them to take part in a social project. This is applicable only to those IAs that are closer to the second perspective explained above, which allows for this distinction. As seen, for the other IAs, this distinction is spurious, and all ‘foreign prostitutes’ need to be addressed and treated as victims of sex trafficking.

##### *Establishing the first contact*

One of the first – and often not easy – tasks for Implementation Agencies is to establish contact with migrant women operating in the sex industry. The majority of IAs have a street outreach program during which the staff of the so-called street unit (*unità di strada*) – usually comprising social workers, cultural mediators and occasionally volunteers – drive with a car or camper van (in some instances borrowed from the local public health agency) to the areas where migrant women are prostituting in the streets.

In the course of my fieldwork, I participated in the night-shift outreach activities of the street unit of an Implementation Agency in North-East Italy. On that occasion, the

chief social worker, a cultural mediator and myself approached a group of Colombian women who were already familiar with the organization and with whom we had a brief conversation. The women expressed concern about the lack of clients, kept away by the fear of police raids, and complained about the competition of Nigerian women working nearby. After taking some of the condoms distributed, the women left, prompted by the arrival of two clients. The cultural mediator later handed over more condoms and informative leaflets to the less approachable women of the Nigerian community, who, as they later explained, had just recently arrived and were very suspicious of all the movement of people around them. Only after two women expressed concern about problems with the use of condoms, and lubricant cream was distributed, did the 'ice break', and the mediator felt that a minimal basis of trust had been established and could be reinforced in the course of future encounters.

In this case, the street outreach program is structured primarily to inform the women about the activities of the IA, the possibilities offered by Article 18, and also basic health services available<sup>14</sup>. Equally important is the distribution of condoms and other material as part of a harm reduction strategy. This practice is harshly criticized by those – generally the staff of Catholic IAs – who oppose the use of contraceptives for ideological reasons. Paolo, who manages a Catholic IA, explained,

we don't distribute condoms. We've always been against it. Also because I think it is a way of inducing prostitution, it is not harm reduction. Because you are giving them the opportunity of having more clients. Yes, they will have 60 euros more in their pocket, but it was you who gave them that 'opportunity'.

(Personal interview with Paolo, July 2004)

For those who are critical of such harm reduction methods and do not distribute condoms, the street outreach program is seen primarily as an opportunity to meet women and often to convince them to abandon prostitution. As Paolo told me

even though we are against harm reduction, we do go out at night. But what we offer is a relationship, something that can lead to building up trust, rather than more chances to be violated. With our human exchange we want to convince the woman to abandon that world [of prostitution] because she has

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<sup>14</sup> Since 1998 the Italian Minister of Health established that urgent and essential health assistance can be provided also to those 'extra-communitarian people' who are in Italy without a regular stay permit (Jega 2000).



developed faith in us.

(ibid.)

On the other hand, some of my interviewees were opposed to attempts made to persuade women to abandon prostitution, especially when they are operating on the streets. Antonella explained how, particularly at night, when it is cold and there are a lot of police on the streets, many women are more easily induced into abandoning prostitution. However,

the problem is that these are decisions that are not pondered upon, they are the gut response to a series of negative contingencies [...]. But one has to take into account that these women have their own life, and rightly so! They have a relationship, often with their pimp, or with a client. They have their own friends, network. Whereas you, from the street unit, who are you? They don't even know who you are. Here you are, a completely unknown person, who goes there and tells them: do you want to change life? You understand what I am trying to say? It has no sense. If she wants to come out [of prostitution], it has to be a well thought-out decision.

(Personal interview with Antonella, August 2002)

The concern expressed by Antonella was not just related to the 'bad-timing' of this type of intervention. As she and others I interviewed also explained, this approach is problematic because trying to persuade migrant women to abandon prostitution is viewed as an intolerable intrusion into the women's lives. This is clearly one of the main issues of contention between IAs that support one of the two different views explored earlier. For some, an effort should be made to 'snatch' or remove women from the streets, for others, this can only depend on the decision of the person involved which should never take place under pressure.

Going back to the ways of establishing contact with migrant women, in addition to the street unit, another common way of doing it is through clients. As Carla Corso pointed out,

some of them are completely in love with the women, others simply realize that they [migrant prostitutes] are in a difficult situation and want to help them. There are also those whom I call the pseudo-boyfriends, because they actually have a sentimental relationship with the woman.

(Personal interview with Carla Corso, August 2002)

In many instances, it is the client who gets in touch with an IA to receive information about the various support services available. By informing migrant women prostitutes about the assistance they can benefit from, clients are becoming increasingly important, especially when they establish contact with those who operate in private spaces, where IAs have only limited access. In this respect it is relevant to mention that in 2004 a group of anonymous ‘client saviours’ – as they define themselves – formed the *Associazione Who*, Association Who, aimed at virtually exchanging experiences and best practices amongst clients on how to help trafficked women. In their website they state: “it is thanks to the clients that 90% of the cases of abandonment of coerced prostitution is possible (i.e. the liberation of those girls who are subjected to forced prostitution), this is the most visible effect of the intervention of saviour clients”.<sup>15</sup>

The role that a client can play as a mediator between an IA and a prostitute is generally effective exclusively with organizations that are not against the practice of prostitution. Don Benzi, through its Association *Papa Giovanni XXIII*, for example, has promoted since the late 1990s a campaign to ‘dissuade’ clients – the ones “responsible for the ugly slavery of women” – from purchasing sexual services and encouraged local Governments to enforce punitive measures against them (Benzi 2005). Clearly, it is unlikely that a client would want to collaborate with an IA with such a strong position against them. As a social worker pointed out, similar campaigns, and the fear of being publicly recognized and shamed as ‘guilty clients’ might deter them from helping prostitutes to make contact with IAs, thus reducing the effectiveness of an important resource in this sense.

During a fieldwork visit to an Implementation Agency, I witnessed the uneasiness of a man who knew that, given the circumstances, he could be considered a potential client. He had come to the agency’s headquarters with a Nigerian woman whose oral testimony in English I was asked to translate. While she explained her situation, the man kept interrupting our conversation to repeatedly say: “I don’t know her, I just saw her on the street, I just wanted to help her. I have nothing to do with her, and don’t want anyone to get the wrong idea about me”. With the passing of time, his remarks became increasingly unpleasant and he started insulting the woman he had helped in the first place. He said that, as a respectable man, he had ‘nothing to do with someone like her’.

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<sup>15</sup> The website <http://www.chisei.org> – of the Association Who is no longer active (as I found out when I tried to view it again in May 2007), which may imply that the Association does not exist anymore.

Whether he had been the woman's client or not, his insistence was revealing of the fear of being considered one. The staff of that IA and others I visited explained that similar 'scenes' are very common. The desire to help is all too often superseded by the fear of being judged negatively for having paid for a prostitute. The stigma attached to prostitution, they explained, has repercussions also on clients, and particularly at that time, when don Benzi and the mayors of some cities had launched an anti-client campaign focusing on shaming the latter for their 'immoral sexual behaviour'.

*Getting to know the Implementation Agency and thinking about starting a project of social protection*

When a woman expresses the desire to abandon prostitution and a situation of exploitation linked to it, she is generally encouraged to spend some time to evaluate the implications of such a choice. Two social workers from different IAs explained:

It's a phase of reflection, for the woman to make sure she really wants to start the program. At this stage we don't start the bureaucratic procedures, because we really want to make sure she did the right thing for herself and that she meets the requirements.

(Personal interview with Simone, August 2002)

When the woman comes, we accommodate her in a room, a place where she can sleep, eat, think of absolutely nothing apart from herself, and decide what she wants to do with her life. We call it the decantation period. She stays there and she waits. We don't exert any pressure whatsoever, we just give her what she needs.

(Personal interview with Paola, August 2002)

During this time, which may last from a few days up to two weeks, she is assisted with primary needs, receives medical care and is informed about the rules that Article 18 entails, the regulations of each project, and the required procedure with the legal authorities. All informants interviewed stressed the importance of being extremely honest about the difficulties of the program at this stage, a necessary pre-requisite to be realistically prepared to the phases that come next. The overall aim is not to be discouraging, rather to be clear about what needs to be known in order to make an informed choice for the future. Carola, a project officer, explained, "we inform her about her rights and about the program which is going to be long and difficult; but she is also

told that if she doesn't want to, she is free to go back home or back to the street, as she prefers" (personal interview with Carola, August 2002). This initial procedure also has the function of ascertaining that the woman is in 'real' danger to avoid both any instrumental use of Article 18 as a means to obtain a stay permit in the country, and a possible disappointment in those cases when a woman's condition of exploitation and danger are not considered severe enough to be admitted into a project of social protection (in which case, if her presence has already been reported to the police authority, she will most likely be repatriated; see chapter 4).

Those Implementation Agencies that are closer to the 'save-them-all' perspective, do not view the phase of 'reflection' as a valuable strategy of assistance. In their view, as seen already, it is not up to the women to decide whether to abandon prostitution or not. Marco, for instance, maintains that the sooner a woman enters a program the better,

all the organizations make this sort of selection [laughs]. I mean honestly, you really cannot *select* them. You have to take them all, and we'll see what happens. But that's not because they [the other IAs] are professional and we are not. It is simply because you are asked to provide a service and you cannot wait for *them* to decide whether *they* want to take advantage of it or not.

(Personal interview with Marco, March 2005)

It is important to mention that not all women come to the decision of starting an Article 18 program through the mediation of an Implementation Agency. For many of them who were detained after police raids, participating in a program of assistance and social integration does not represent a real choice. Either they must cooperate with the police and the IA, or they are forced to go back to their country of origin. As Marco emphatically illustrated:

Those who don't want to collaborate, well they are sent back home. I know that this thing might be questionable, but if you don't want to denounce your exploiter, if you don't want to start a program of reintegration, well you go away!

(*ibid.*)

However, according to many interviewees, the women who begin the project as an alternative to being repatriated, usually lack real commitment and are unable to face the required obligations. Thus many return to prostitution as a preferred solution, having less chances of being helped a second time.

### *Starting and carrying out the project*

Once the decision to start a program is taken (either by the woman or the IA), a contract is established among the parties to define each other's duties, responsibilities, and the goals and time frame to achieve them. As explained by an attorney:

as for the personalised contract we make, the woman has to have a specific project and establish her objectives together with the staff. The social workers will help her to make sure that her project is feasible, so that she does not start with absurd expectations.

(Personal interview with Natasha, August 2002)

In relation to possible difficulties encountered, one of the main concerns expressed by my interviewees is the fact that the issuance of the stay permit – which should be the primary condition for reassuring the woman, and place her in the best possible and most favourable condition to carry out the program – may take many months. This long wait is a source of great frustration also for the staff of IAs, as Anna pointed out:

Article 18 was made when the cultural debate was high. After the law was approved the permits were released very quickly. Now we are back to a situation in which bureaucracy is killing everything. [...] It is not easy to work in these conditions. The fact is that the fight against trafficking is not a priority in Italy, they spend much more energy in making mass expulsions!

(Personal interview with Anna, August 2002)

Moreover, despite the fact that according to the Ministry of Equal Opportunities “the release of a temporary visa for social protection reasons is absolutely not dependent on the obligation of the victim to denounce her exploiters” (Dipartimento per i Diritti e le Pari Opportunità 2007a), the permit is released in a much shorter period upon cooperation with legal bodies. For this reason, even women who chose the ‘social path’ are often encouraged to open a criminal procedure and report their traffickers. This was underlined by all my interviewees: the ‘social procedure’ is simply not an option. Munro’s comparative analysis of responses to trafficking for prostitution also confirms this finding (2006). In her discussion, she also mentions the case of an informant working from the Italian national information telephone hotline who very matter-of-factly tells the women who call her that it is nearly impossible to receive support and

assistance without cooperation to judicial proceedings (ibid.). Natasha, the attorney previously mentioned, explained to me that it is better to inform the women about this ‘weakness’ in the law at an earlier stage of their project. Otherwise they may get too distressed when faced with this systemic<sup>16</sup> obstacle. She explained:

I had to witness dramatic events and attacks of panic at the police station, women crying, or trying to escape, because even if we had started with the social option, the police wouldn’t understand that women were not obliged to start a criminal procedure.

(Personal interview with Natasha, August 2002)

However, as another social worker explained, the women rarely want to incriminate their traffickers, especially at a later stage in their program. Some fear violent repercussions against themselves and their families, others refuse to incriminate the person who facilitated their migration to Italy, “sometimes it’s as if there was a sort of complicity between them and their traffickers. They say: how can I incriminate him/her? You treated me badly, you hit me, but without you I would not be here” (personal interview with Paola, August 2002). Frustrated by the lack of a permit, unable to start a job, and burdened by the new environment and bureaucratic rules required by the project, some women drop out of and re-enter prostitution networks, often under stricter control by their pimps.

For those who stay and regularly proceed through the various phases of the project, a number of different types of accommodation are available, depending on the IA. Some organizations sub-divide the program into two phases that correspond to different types of accommodation. The first (*prima accoglienza*) is where a small number of women live in an apartment under the supervision of a social worker (educator or operator, see chapter 3), and the second (*seconda accoglienza*) in a similar private accommodation where women reside autonomously. According to Antonella,

this is an educational method, because it is aimed at teaching them to be autonomous. The objective is definitely for the woman to manage to be fully independent as soon as possible, we don’t want her to stay with us for ten years!

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<sup>16</sup> By using the term systemic, I aim to underlie that these problems result from obstructions generated within the structures and bodies that constitute the governmental system upon which the actualization of Article 18 depends.

(Personal interview with Antonella, August 2002)

Other Implementation Agencies prefer to accommodate women in self-managed flats from the very outset, with a social worker spending just a few hours in the apartment each day, or when required.

By contrast, one of the Catholic IAs I visited has a very different and unique method of reception. The director explained: “we don’t have apartments, or propose similar very unfriendly aseptic living conditions. We live directly with them, our nucleus is the family-home” (personal interview with Maurizio, March 2005). The family-home is comprised of members of the association,

who open the doors of their houses to receive homeless people, prostitutes, abandoned children. In the majority of cases it is constituted of a father and a mother with their children. Here the women live as if it was their natural family [...]. For us they are like our daughters, and we try to help them as much as we can.

(Personal interview with Maurizio, March 2005)

Marco, director of a different branch of the same IA, explained this method of reception also as way of compensating for the, supposedly, terrible and dramatic family environments where many of the women he works with were raised.

What we want to give these girls is reception and accommodation within a family-like environment, because I think that what saves a person is the fact of being able to have what she never had. [...] 60% of the Moldavian women of our first project [in Moldavia], apart from being trafficked, had been sexually abused by their family members. So you understand that they actually never had a family. So that’s why they go away, they escape from the terrible situations in their families.

(Personal interview with Marco, March 2005)

The notion that many of these women come from problematic families is widespread and is found also in written documentation. The following quote, for example, is an extract from a leaflet describing the activities of the Centre for Female Orientation (COF):

In the past three years we felt the pressing need to host women originating from extra-communitarian states, attracted to Italy by the mirage of a job, and instead lured into prostitution [...]. Life at the COF is led in a simple way with the aim of creating a ‘big family’ where each of the guests live a more ordered life away from their families (that are often non existent).

(2002: 26)

The family-home model was criticized by many of my interviewees who viewed it as an unfit solution for those who should learn to be autonomous in a relatively new country, and not be “confined in a family environment where everything is done for them” (personal interview with Antonella, August 2002). In Italy, Catholic charitable groups have often been criticized for being too ‘*assistenzialisti*’, i.e. providing so much assistance that the beneficiaries soon become too dependent on it and lose the capacity to reach autonomy for themselves (Chell 2000; Danese 2001; Versari 2002). Chell claims that this approach is a form of control “through which the migrant is not exposed to any kind of independence, and then is reliant on the church” (2000: 114). Moreover, some of my interviewees also expressed disapproval of the religious character of the family-model, where the women who are hosted are encouraged to pray with family members, and go to the Sunday mass, following Catholic rituals. These aspects are seen as an imposition and a form of disrespect, especially towards women with different or no religious beliefs.

To conclude this part, it is important to mention that, aside from the different typologies of accommodation, due to very limited funds that are made available by the state, the housing that some organizations can afford is often substandard and does not allow for the regular implementation of the program. In one of the cases encountered during my fieldwork, an organization, due to lack of adequate accommodation, placed all women in a safe shelter. The basic requirement of a safe shelter is to be in a secret location where, for their own safety, women are not allowed to leave unaccompanied. Those who were supposed to be already in the second phase of the project, thus living in private accommodation, had to abide by this rule and felt as if they were in a state of forced and unjust confinement, not able to benefit from any of the training or work experience they thought they were entitled to. Another organization that lacked funds for a shelter house, accommodated women in a house for mentally disabled children or in a rehabilitation centre for drug addicts; in both cases, they had already been staying in these ‘temporary’ shelters for a few months.

### *Finding a job and accommodation*

Within three months of the beginning of the project of social protection the women are supposed to begin work. This usually takes place in one of the local factories and



companies that have a special agreement with the IA to make use of a scheme of working grants funded by the Government. These bursaries allow the women to find a job more easily – as the employer has no obligation to pay them – and to work part-time, thus allowing them enough time to go back to school or attend Italian literacy courses. Many of my interviewees pointed out that being introduced into the labour market is an important step, especially when it is the first working experience outside the sex industry. In this case the woman has to learn new skills and the basic requirements involved in a job, such as the new time schedules involved, collaboration with other colleagues and managing one's own finances. As Carola puts it:

this is the perfect for them because we are talking about very young women who often never had a regular job. Starting with an 8-hour a day occupation would probably be too heavy for them. It also gives them economic autonomy as they are finally not completely dependent on us. It is humiliating for them to keep coming to us to ask for money.

(Personal interview with Carola, August 2002)

However, it is difficult to find jobs other than those that are funded by these Government bursaries, and the employment available is on an emergency basis, with little space for considerations of each woman's ambition (see also Pojmann 2006). This is problematic especially towards the end of the 6-month project when some IA require them to become autonomous. Sandra noted that:

the quality of the employment offered [is very low]: a foreign woman is always offered the same: assistance to elderly people, domestic labour, cleaning...and I work with women who have other aspirations!

(Personal interview with Sandra, June 2005)

During my second visit to the *Stella Polare* project, I met two interns who worked part-time specifically to help women at the end of their program to find a job and independent accommodation. As they explained, both tasks were extremely difficult due to a combination of hostility from the local population and the high level of unemployment in the area. This type of situation is common across the country and represents a major obstacle in reaching the 'labour integration' envisioned by Article 18.

To end this section of the chapter, and before drawing the conclusions, it is important to stress that the deficiencies of the law and its application herewith presented should not shed an exclusively negative light on the strategies employed to support

trafficked women and the extremely relevant efforts made by Implementation Agencies in this field. In fact, some of them have acquired a high level of well-grounded expertise; since the beginning of their activities, they have been improving their level of professionalism by constantly developing their organizational skills, and most importantly, the quality of the services provided. Having said this, it remains to be pointed out that there is a need for a more consistent collaboration between associations. The creation of a synergy of improved cooperation and coordination urgently needs to be developed in order to increase the impact and advocacy power of IAs and the effectiveness of their services, which should not be hindered by the inability to move beyond contrasting approaches (Crowhurst 2006).

## 5. Concluding remarks

As the analysis presented in this chapter shows, all the phases that constitute Article 18 projects are extremely delicate for the women involved, in that they imply the passage from one source of income to another, from an illegal to a legal immigration status, the construction of new social and work relationships and the taking up of new responsibilities (Signorelli and Treppete 2001). In addition to the difficulties faced by each woman in embarking upon a new way of life, the program – hence the ‘social integration’ of its participants – is also hampered by a series of systemic problems. The ones highlighted here, as a result of the findings of my research are: lack of adequate governmental funding; inconsistency between what the text of the law states and its enforcement (in particular in relation to the ‘progressive’ social option, which appears to be rarely applicable); slowness of the immigration system in the release of residency permits.

The discussion also mentioned a number of differences and contested matters over the methodologies adopted by IAs. This was particularly evident in relation to harm reduction strategies and the distribution of condoms, the type of accommodation provided (semi-autonomous vs. family-home models), and the possibility to collaborate with clients of prostitutes, as opposed to ‘blaming and shaming’ them. But the crucial difference between organizations – the one that determines both the treatment of ‘foreign prostitutes’ and typologies of implementation – is how *prostitution* is conceptualized. As I explained, for those who view it as a form of sexual violence *per se*, all migrant

prostitutes are considered to be victims. The strategy enacted is thus to liberate them from a state of abjection, a pursuit that is often justified as a moral duty, and for this reason needs to be carried out even when the women addressed are not entirely consenting. IAs closer to the second approach view prostitution as a remunerative sexual practice. Hence, for them the ‘problem’ with ‘foreign prostitutes’ is not prostitution, but their being vulnerable female migrants who should be put in the condition to make their choices – whether to prostitute themselves, start a project of social protection, return home, etc – autonomously and in an informed manner.

A question that needs to be asked at this stage is to what extent contested aspects in the formulation of Article 18 have bearings on these contrasting implementation strategies.

In chapter 4 I discussed a series of aspects related to Article 18 and its legal discourse. Crucially, I pointed out some ambiguous features of the law and their being left open to what may be arbitrary interpretations. Firstly, Article 18 lacks a clearly defined notion of the ‘victims’ towards whom its services can be provided. Giammarinaro (2002a) stressed that legislation such as Article 18 needs to rely on a legal notion of victimhood, as opposed to a cultural and social approach of the latter that makes the application of the law too easily subjected to mutable interpretations. The discussion presented in this chapter highlighted distinct and contrasting interpretations of the notion of victimhood that have consequences on the way ‘foreign prostitutes’ are viewed and treated.

Secondly, social integration and recuperation – both concepts that again were left unclearly defined in the text of the law – assume different meanings depending on how ‘foreign prostitutes’ are approached. If they are viewed as victims of prostitution, recuperation will entail a process of liberation that is primarily the responsibility of the IA. Within this understanding, integration is envisioned as a process of re-socialization. When ‘foreign prostitutes’ are not necessarily considered to be victims, and when being a victim does not necessarily mean being completely powerless and subjugated, recuperation and rescue entail primarily a process of empowerment that would enable a woman to socially integrate autonomously, building on her own strengths and skills.

Whilst arbitrariness seems to be a prominent feature in the text and application of Article 18, one of my interviewees, a social worker, viewed such lack of clarity as a positive aspect of ‘Italian flexibility’, a quality that – he claims – leaves more freedom to

formulate and apply new methodologies of intervention. Nevertheless, it is essential to interrogate the validity and acceptability of the methods applied and the beliefs informing them. Importantly, making contact with a particular organization is for a woman usually a matter of coincidence rather than a conscious ideological choice and/or statement. However, the formulation of her project of assistance and possibly the nature of her future integration depends to a large extent on the ideological stand of the organization whose services she is benefiting from.

To conclude, in this chapter I looked at how the notion of prostitution in particular affects the 'reception' of 'foreign prostitutes', with a focus on IAs and Article 18. In the following chapter, I further develop this analysis by looking into the meanings ascribed to the 'foreignness' of 'foreign prostitutes'. While there is a division between those who recognize and those who deny 'choice' and agency in the involvement in prostitution, the analysis of my data reveals that a widespread and common assumption among all my interviewees is that of the cultural inadequacy and backwardness ascribed to 'foreign prostitutes'. Even when their agency is acknowledged, and in some instances also praised, there is an underlying motive which seems to indicate that their foreignness is equal to 'racial inferiority'. Such representations obviously have an impact on the implementation of Article 18 projects and the treatment of 'foreign prostitutes' more generally.

## Chapter 6

### (Mis)representing ‘foreign prostitutes’

[W]hen they write their [Black women’s] herstory and call it the story of women but ignore our lives and deny their relations to us, that is the moment in which they are acting within the relations of racism and writing *history*.

(Carby 1982: 51; emphasis in the original)

#### 1. Introduction

In exploring how ‘foreign prostitution’ is constructed in public, political and legal discourses, policies and practices, one crucial aspect that this study has highlighted is the ambiguity that characterizes the notion of ‘foreign prostitution’ itself. Depending on the context, representations of ‘foreign prostitutes’ may shift from powerless victims to contrasting ones of threatening and socially dangerous individuals. Both are reflected in the dual and opposite ways in which ‘foreign prostitutes’ are treated – i.e. either assisted or rejected/repatriated – by the general public, the state, its laws, various assisting institutions, and the people behind them.

This chapter further investigates these aspects, and explores in particular the everyday discourses and practices (Essed 1991) that contribute to the production and reproduction of sexualized and racialized representations of ‘foreign prostitutes’. I adopt the notion of ‘everyday’ here with a specific reference to the work of Philomena Essed on everyday racism (1990; 1991). A focus on the ‘everyday’ – defined as the socialized meanings that make “*practices immediately definable and uncontested so that, in principle, these practices can be managed according to (sub)cultural norms and expectations*” (Essed 1991: 48; emphasis in the original) – enables us to look at practices and their meanings in the familiar settings where they are routinely performed. And it is precisely at the level of everyday situations – the daily, routine work of the staff of Implementation Agencies, the normalcy attached to the everyday display of yet ‘another’

racist placard of the Northern League – that racist and sexist representations and treatments of ‘foreign prostitutes’ abound, but rest unacknowledged nonetheless.

The discussion of these issues is organized in two parts. In the first I look into competing representations of ‘foreign prostitutes’ as sexual *victims* and/or sexual predators (O’Connell Davidson 1998) that emerge from the empirical research conducted with some staff of IAs. Here I suggest that the co-existence of such contrasting designations – victims and predators – is partly the result of the ambiguity surrounding the legal and cultural notion of victimhood that is so crucial in the definition/identification of victims of sex trafficking (Giammarinaro 2002a). The second part explores discursive and visual representations of Black ‘foreign prostitutes’. This discussion highlights how social meanings ascribed to both somatic and cultural difference are informed by racialized beliefs (Jones 1997) that, in turn, contribute to the construction of racialized and hyper-sexualized representations of Black female prostitutes and Black women in general.

## 2. Sexual victims or sexual predators? Contrasting representations of ‘foreign prostitutes’

It’s midday and a bell rings in another room. Leonardo (president) and Elena (social worker) stand up immediately and insist that I stay for lunch. I agree and we proceed to the dining room. Everywhere I turn there are statues and portraits of more or less familiar popes, saints and madonnas. The women who live in the house/shelter [migrant women trafficked for sexual purposes participating in an Article 18 project of social protection] sit at a separate table. This is a very unique situation compared to the ones I have seen before. The women stay for a much longer period, there are a lot of them living in the same building, some are with their children, who definitely brighten up the otherwise austere environment. The food is served and the conversation soon turns to the ‘spiritual’ meaning of Leonardo’s experience as president of this association. He mentions that as a male he is unquestionably tempted by all “these beautiful and young foreigners who after all will always be whores [*puttane*] inside”. And, as he claims, one can tell from the tarty clothes they keep wanting to wear. However, he continues, the temptation itself is a gift of God, because by overcoming it, he gains even more from these ‘girls’. [...] In the garden after lunch, Leonardo keeps teasing Monica, a Romanian woman. He heard that yesterday she wore a very short skirt. He keeps telling her to wear her miniskirt so that he can see “her beautiful legs.” Monica rolls her

eyes and keeps repeating that the miniskirt wasn't that short. Leonardo looks at me and winks as if to say 'I'm just joking.'

(From my fieldwork notes, August 2004)

The text reported here is a section of the notes I took in the summer 2004 on my visit to the Catholic association *Familia* in Northern Italy. As I learned from Leonardo, the president, *Familia* was opened a year after the Merlin law established the closure of state brothels in 1958. The aim of the founder was to provide a new home for all the women who had been working as prostitutes and who, from one day to the next, had found themselves unemployed and unemployable as prostitutes, and with few possibilities of re-entering the labour market due to the stigma attached with their previous occupation. It was hoped that in the new family-like environment of the association, ex-prostitutes could be 'rehabilitated' and placed in conditions to start a new and more 'proper' life. In the late 1980s, many of these women were still living in the protected shelter house of *Familia*, having found it impossible to be socially reintegrated. When they eventually had to leave to move to elderly people's hospices (by State fiat), the future of the association remained uncertain for a short period of time, until it was reorganized to become a hosting structure for migrant women who need protection and assistance to get out of exploitative conditions linked to their engagement in the Italian sex industry. When I visited the house, there were approximately forty women, mainly from the Balkans and Moldova, going through Article 18 projects of social integration.

The evolution that took place in the internal composition of this particular IA, and which led to the reformulation of its function, needs to be understood within the context of the broad changes in recent international migrations and restructuring of the Italian sex-industry which I have investigated previously (chapter 3 and 4). Most relevant to the discussion of this chapter, however, are the comments that Leonardo made about the women hosted by his association, and the behaviour he displayed towards them in my presence. He explained that, as a man, he is 'naturally' sexually attracted to the "beautiful and young foreigners" who reside at the shelter-house, but he personally viewed it as a challenge to develop a more fixed resolve against sexual temptations, and praised the capacity to control himself as a personal and spiritually significant success. Part of the responsibility for the arousal of his 'natural instincts', he implied, was to be placed on the women themselves, who have been, and thus "will always be whores". With this expression Leonardo seemed to insinuate that 'these women' are somehow

naturally prone to inviting men to sexually objectify them. This is what he did later, in the garden, when he teased Monica for her ‘tarty choice’ of clothes and encouraged her to get changed, demanding, with a joking tone, to see her legs/body, whilst winking at me to find consensus, and also as an intentional reference to our previous conversation.

Certainly, after the whole morning spent in the austere environment of the shelter-house listening to Leonardo’s explanations about the importance of re-creating a welcoming, safe, morally healthy and family-like environment, I was particularly surprised – and disturbed – by his ‘confessions’ and attitudes towards some of the women hosted by the association he presides. This, however, was not the first time I witnessed or recorded insulting comments and behaviours towards ‘foreign prostitutes’ by the staff of IAs.

When I reflected back on the events that took place at *Familia*, and other similar experiences and encounters I had in the course of my fieldwork, I observed common patterns in my findings. First of all, the sexually typified slanders against ‘foreign prostitutes’ that I collected in the field came only from men, and perhaps surprisingly, specifically male staff who work for IAs that approach prostitution as exploitation and ‘foreign prostitutes’ as victims. Clearly, the comments of these respondents show a discrepancy between the way their organizations usually represent and talk about ‘foreign prostitutes’, i.e. as slaves and defenceless victims, and their own ‘alternative’ portrayals of the latter as deviant temptresses, or, even more candidly, ‘sluts and whores’.

The following extract from an interview with Marco, the director of the Catholic IA *Speranza*, presents a particularly poignant example of how the same women are referred to both as exploited, torn-apart victims *and* sexually loose ‘sluts’. After commenting on the terrible and abusive conditions that the women he assists had to suffer within their own families, Marco continued:

*Marco:* A woman who is abused: it’s as if she is wearing a dress that is torn apart, what does she do? She can only tear it apart even more. And that’s why she enters the world of prostitution, because she lost dignity, a sense of her own persona, any capacity to value herself.

*Isabel:* So you are saying that prostitution is...

*Marco:* It’s an evil of society. It is also the oldest profession in the world, but it is also the oldest evil in the world. Because if we think about women: a man doesn’t have the sensitivity that a woman has; women have an imperceptible



sensitivity. A man can be a psychologist, a sociologist, whatever you want, but he will never manage to have that flexibility and sensitivity that a woman has. So every time I profane or rape a woman, in that precise moment I am inflicting harm to a person.

*Isabel:* So, how do you view your role?

*Marco:* Redemption. Yes, absolutely redemption [...]. We host these women primarily because they are human beings who need to escape [prostitution] and need to find their own dignity. Afterwards they will do what they want. What we are interested in is the person. If I have as my fixed objective that person, I will not even see her behaviours, I will not...even though I have to say that many times, excuse my language, but they really are sluts [*zoccole*] deep inside. Sluts, do you know what it means?

*Isabel:* Yes.

*Marco:* Because they really are sluts and I get fucking angry [*io mi incazzo*], but in the end you help them. They are stubborn and they might even tell you: ‘but why do I have to work in a factory and earn 300 Euro a month, when I used to earn 500 per night?’ [Laughs in disbelief]. So you do get these kinds of behaviours. But I must not look at these things. Because I am not here to judge them, I just want to walk with them and show them freedom. [...] Freedom from interior slavery [...]. It’s like a child in Sarajevo who will take 20 years to forget the bombs. In this case, for a woman who has been torn into pieces, raped etc., one life will not be enough to recuperate.

(Personal interview with Marco, March 2005)

In the course of the interview, Marco described prostitution as an evil that attracts in particular women who have already suffered traumas at the hands of their families and who want to harm themselves even more. Within this vision, the aim of *Speranza* is to offer an opportunity of redemption to the women it assists, i.e. regain the dignity and selfhood they lost or damaged because of their engagement in prostitution and the suffering of family abuse. Despite such a clearly set objective – the recuperation/redemption of the persona – Marco said that it is not easy to ignore the ‘unacceptable’ behaviours that the women keep displaying, and which are a source of frustration and upset for him. He made this consideration with a sudden change of tone, uttering a series of derogatory comments towards the same women he had just moments before referred to in a paternalistic way as powerless and fragile. The rage displayed in his language (‘I get fucking angry’), and the highly negative attributions he used (‘they really are sluts’ – further accentuated by the need to make sure that I understood the meaning of his words) are indicators of deep-seated spite that is in stark contrast with the

image of desperation and helplessness that he initially described, and that is so firmly maintained by *Speranza*.

Another similar event took place in a small city in central Italy when, sitting in a car with Luca – one of Marco’s colleagues – we drove past a Black woman who was standing close to the train station and whom Luca immediately assumed to be a street prostitute. As he casually explained to me, ‘African women’ have a notion of sexuality that is very different ‘from ours’. For this reason, he also commented, “Nigerian women just need to see a 10,000 lire bill [£3] to start undressing. I mean, after all, these women are whores and no matter how hard we try, they will always be whores” (from my fieldwork notes, August 2002).

Leonardo, Marco and Luca seem to imply that prostitution is a stigma that ‘marks’ women forever, no matter how hard ‘well intentioned’ people like themselves and their associations may strive in their work of redemption. Leonardo stressed this aspect with reference to the ‘tarty’ clothes that the women keep wearing (despite the fact that they are not street prostitutes any more), and ‘played along’ with his own assumption by making a sexual demand. Marco expressed angry frustration at the women’s aspirations and choices that are in contrast with his own/his organization’s vision of how they should think and behave. His explanation, ‘they really are sluts’, points again at an innate depravity that attracts these women to the sinful and evil activity of prostitution. Luca, on the other hand, gave an explicitly racially-based connotation to his representation of African/Nigerian<sup>1</sup> women as naturally attracted to prostitution and its economic gains, even when very minimal.

Indeed, competing representations of prostitute women as either sexual *victims* – “tragic ‘fallen’ wom[e]n [...] candidate for redemption” – or sexual *predators* – vilified outlaws, ‘sluts and whores’ – are not uncommon (O’Connell Davidson 1998: 136). And undoubtedly, the use of both – victim and predator – by Leonardo, Marco and other respondents may be dictated by their own individual hostilities/attractions towards prostitution, which in turn is informed by their own positioning in relation to gender, sexuality, morality and race (ibid.).<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, when I shared some of the above

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the adjective African and Nigerian to indicate Black women in general is explained in the next section.

<sup>2</sup> In this respect, it is relevant to note that Leonardo’s sexual comments and demands were openly directed at Monica, a white Romanian woman. It would have been interesting to see whether he had felt as comfortable and open towards a Black woman, for example. This point raises a number of issues around

findings with the president of the Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitutes, Carla Corso, she expressed doubts about the motivations that lead men to work with or research female prostitution. In her opinion, there are unclear mechanisms at work that have to do with repressed sexual fantasies and the power that these men can exercise from their respectable and privileged positions as ‘helpers’.<sup>3</sup>

It is impossible to determine whether, or to what extent, such sexually charged comments are, as Carla Corso told me, the result of deep and unclear subjective desires/repulsions with which my respondents were struggling with. Nevertheless, I suggest that one of the factors that favours the existence and co-existence of such split and contrasting representations – victims and predators – is the ambiguity that surrounds the crucial, yet contested, notions of victim and victimhood in the context of assistance and protection to victims of sex trafficking. In the following paragraphs I delineate this viewpoint in greater detail, making reference also to discussions already presented in previous sections of the thesis.

In chapter 5 I introduced Article 18 as a piece of legislation that is generally applied to women victims of sex trafficking. I also explained that the text of this law fails to define what exactly the notion of victimhood should entail, and, as a consequence, it remains unclear who can be legally identified as ‘victim’ and benefit from the assistance

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whiteness and prostitution, and white femininity and the racialization of desire. As Levine (2003) and Stoler (1991; 1995) explain, in the British colonies the presence of white women prostitutes was regarded as a source of distress by white colonizers given the ‘political semantics of whiteness’ which was linked to middle-class standards of morality and respectability that white prostitutes subverted (Stoler 1995; 1991). The powerful narratives linked to the ‘white slave trade’ (see chapter 1) somehow served the purpose of excusing the presence of white women in prostitution by depicting them as helpless victims who had been convinced by ‘foreign men’ to migrate, and ended up being trapped in brothels (Levine 2003; Guy 1991). This scenario, as Levine notes “linked race and sex in crucial ways, writing an implicit ode to the civilized Englishman duty-bound to protect the English girl from foreign perversions” (2003: 246). This brings us to contemporary representations of white women (generally described as ‘Eastern European’) within the context of current discourses on sex trafficking. As Andrijasevic argues, they are often portrayed as beautiful passive victims whose vulnerable captive bodies are also made object of eroticization and fetishistic fascination (2004), as seen in the case of Leonardo. These considerations are important to highlight issues related to white femininity and ‘race’, in consideration of the fact, as Ware points out, that to be white and female is to occupy a social category that is always gendered and racialized. It is not just about being a white woman, “it is about *being thought of* as a white woman” (1992: xii; emphasis in the original).

<sup>3</sup> As part of this discussion, it is relevant to mention Agustin’s interesting and critical work on those who desire to help prostitutes and women from their traffickers (2005). Her analysis focuses in particular on ‘women as helpers and savers’, thus little is said about men in these same roles. In general, in fact, while there is a well developed literature on the role of male clients of female prostitutes (McIntosh 1978; McKeganey and Barnard 1996; O’Connell Davidson 1998; Phoenix 2000; O’Neill 2001; Anderson and O’Connell Davidson 2003; etc), very little has been written – and primarily in medical literature (see Bell, Rogstad 2000) – on the position of men who occupy alternative positions around prostitution, i.e. not as ‘consumers’/clients, but as ‘helpers’, for example social workers, medical staff, etc.

and support made available in such case. The ambiguity that is thus generated around the very subject of the law – the victim – is further accentuated by other definitions and qualifications that are introduced in additional legal texts attached to Article 18 itself (including its implementation regulations). Here, as seen, the status of victim is characterized by a series of conditions and behaviours, including powerlessness, helplessness, complete subjection, and in line with Marco’s own words, pain and suffering whose effects are not easily forgotten. Such ‘victim typology’ (Walklate 2001) is reinforced in the discourses produced by some IAs, anti-trafficking campaigns of governmental and non-governmental organizations, conferences, politicians’ speeches, and also a large swathe of scholarly literature (see chapter 1). The representations of victims and victimhood produced by these discourses are problematic for a number of reasons that I discussed previously. Here I focus on two aspects in particular.

First of all, these representations are so widespread and un-problematically embraced that it is often assumed that the law itself defines abjection, disempowerment, subjecthood, etc., as *sine qua non* characteristics/conditions to identify victimhood. The confusion about prostitution described in chapter 4 – in relation to the (wrong) notion, shared by many, that Article 18 forbids victims of trafficking participating in a ‘project of social protection’ to engage in prostitution – is a revealing example of how such representations have penetrated social practices to the extent that they are believed to be sanctioned by the law. Moreover, and as a consequence, the ‘victim typology’ that such representations produce and reinforce creates a dichotomy between those, very few, who conform to this image of complete helplessness and vulnerability, and the majority who do not. As seen, this issue has been raised and problematized by a broad body of scholarly literature on trafficking and prostitution that point out that such innocent/criminal divide is flawed and dangerous. (Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Kapur 2001; Berman 2003; Chapkis 2003; Agustin 2003b; Andrijasevic 2004; Kempadoo, Sanghera et al 2005; Agustin 2005a; O’Connell Davidson 2006).

On the one hand, it is flawed because there are many different ways “in which women negotiate processes of powerlessness and oppression in their daily lives” (Gillespie 1996: 148). And more often than not, subjecthood and exploitation are not passively borne; on the contrary, they are challenged by resistant subjects who struggle and fight to be able to exercise control over their lives (Kapur 2001). On the other hand, the danger attached to gendered and pre-determined victim typologies and expectations

of victim-like performance has been pointed out by feminist scholars, often in relation to rape laws, where victims are either blamed for their non-victim-like behaviour, or have to prove their chaste/innocent history to retain 'victim credibility' (Kelly 1988; Kennedy 1992; Kapur 2001; Walklate 2001). The discussions of the previous chapters, and the empirical data presented in this section show how such problematic aspects are present also in the context of sex trafficking, where expectations of 'victim-like behaviour' clash with a very different reality. As seen, victims of trafficking who are participating in projects of social protection show determination, wear the clothes they like, want more money, and in some instances may even decide to go back to prostitution as a preferred solution. Certainly, they do not conform to widespread representations of powerlessness, helplessness and complete subjection, but this does not and should not imply that they are not victims of trafficking.

Nevertheless, the reality of everyday practices seem to suggest that due to their supposedly un-victim-like behaviour they are likely to encounter resistance and hostility. This may happen at the hands of those who enforce immigration laws and who may identify and repatriate them as illegal criminals, even before they have had a chance to claim their right to start an Article 18 project. Or they may encounter the personal hostility and vexation of individuals such as Marco and Leonardo, who project their sexualized and racialized prejudices onto them, even *after* they have started an Article 18 project of social protection.

In other words, the notions of innate sexual deviance that my respondents ascribe to the women they are 'assisting' are reinforced by the 'victim typology' that has arbitrarily come to inform Article 18 and its implementation. In turn, such gendered and racialized representations are constructed upon notions of female and male sexuality, whereby women are criticized and vilified for some forms of sexual conduct which are considered 'transgressing' and deviating from the attributes associated with their gender (Walby 1990; O'Connell Davidson 1998). By contrast, men like Leonardo 'get away with', or simply find it normal, to talk about their sexual urges and to display sexually harassing behaviours.

### 3. Representations of Black ‘foreign prostitutes’

#### *Representations of Black ‘foreign prostitutes’ amongst IA respondents*

Drawing again from my empirical data, in this section I present and analyse representations of Black ‘foreign prostitutes’ collected during my research with staff of Implementation Agencies, and explore how such constructions inform and affect their everyday practices in the provision of assistance as part of Article 18 projects of social protection.

Before engaging in the exploration of the data, it is crucial to make two clarifications. First of all, as the material presented here shows, in their comments my respondents refer to ‘Nigerian women’ as culturally different and inferior compared to the more advanced Italian culture and way of life. The IA staff I interviewed did not view their comments as racialized or connected in any way to racist assumptions. In fact, some of them explicitly denied that racism exists in Italy at all, and when they did mention it, they identify it in specific institutional arrangements such as housing and employment, but never in their own accounts and perceptions. Hence, when in this section I talk about ‘race’ and the racialization of ‘Nigerian women’ (unless specified) I refer to my analysis and interpretation of the data (as opposed to the terminology adopted by interviewees), in which notions of cultural differentiation and ‘difference’ are viewed as being at the basis of racist discourse (Brah, Hickman et al 1999). As Silverman and Yuval-Davis suggest, looking at the centrality of the cultural dimension in analysis of racism enables to explore links between racism and issues of nationalism, identity politics and the politics of cultural production (Silverman and Yuval-Davis 1999).<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the focus that my respondents put on the cultural ‘Otherness’ of ‘Nigerian women’ is looked at, using Gilroy’s words, as “a racism which avoids being recognized as such because it is able to link ‘race’ with nationhood, patriotism and nationalism, a racism which [...] seeks to present an imaginary definition of the nation as a unified

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<sup>4</sup> The centrality of cultural difference in ‘new’ racist discourse has been explored by a number of scholars. Barker, for example, talks about ‘new racism’ in relation to a model based on notions of unassimilable different cultures (1981). Similarly Balibar describes ‘cultural racism’ as one that posits the “insurmountability of cultural differences” (1991: 91). Essed emphasizes that biological claims for racism have now been substituted by notions of cultural superiority (1991). Thus, as Ben-eliezer explains ‘new racism’ or ‘cultural racism’ are characterized by the essentialization of ethnicity, culture and religion, that traps people in “supposedly immutable reference categories, as if they are incapable of adapting to a new reality or changing their identity” (2004: 249).

cultural community. It constructs and defends an image of national culture – homogeneous in its whiteness yet precarious and perpetually vulnerable to attack from enemies within and without” (Gilroy 1992: 53).

The second point is related to some definitional clarifications. In the Italian language in general, and in my interviews in particular, it is rare to find the equivalent of the English expression Black women: *donne nere*, or simply *le nere* (Blacks, feminine connotation). Other terms that are only occasionally used are *negre* (Negroes), *africane* (Africans), and even less frequently *donne di colore* (women of colour). Most common is the national appellative *nigeriane*, Nigerian (feminine), to designate Black women, whether they are *de facto* from Nigeria, or other African countries, Europe, Latin America, etc.<sup>5</sup> Angel-Ajani suggests that in Italy the appellative *nigeriane* is used specifically to describe African women as a result of the fact that “Sub-Saharan African women who traffic in prostitution tend to be largely Nigerian, or at least African women entering Italy with Nigerian passports” (2003: 6). As evinced from my fieldwork, however, in some instances the appellative appears to be given also to non-African women, simply on the basis of a darker colour of their skin. As Tatiana, a Colombian street prostitute, explained to me in the course of my fieldwork, “they [Italian people] call me Nigerian because I have a dark skin. Her [pointing to her colleague], they call her Brazilian, because she is much fairer!” (Fieldwork notes, March 2005). Being, or ‘passing’ as Nigerian has also other repercussions. The national attribute ‘Nigerian’<sup>6</sup> is, within Italian popular discourse, commonly used as a substitute for ‘prostitute’, and also to designate criminal and excessive behaviours (Angel-Ajani 2003; Ifekwunigwe 2004). My respondents never adopted the term ‘Nigerian’ in this sense<sup>7</sup> – although their comments are certainly not unaffected by representations of ‘Nigerian women’ as deviant and bearers of inferior cultural traits. Moreover, as this section shows, the repeated use of the incorrect term *nigeriana* to refer – often negatively – to the Black

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<sup>5</sup> An interesting example of this common usage comes from one of don Benzi’s books, in which he writes “[Nigerian girls] come in particular from Edo state, from Benin city, but also from *Cameroon and Ghana*” (Benzi 2001: 54; emphasis added, my translation). What might appear to be a remarkable mistake in the text – Nigerian women being from Cameroon and Ghana - is in fact a striking illustration of how the term ‘Nigerian’ is adopted as a collective term for all Black women.

<sup>6</sup> Unless specified, I use the adjective Nigerian as a translation of *nigeriana/e*, i.e. with a feminine connotation.

<sup>7</sup> As seen previously, however, Luca, one of my interviewees, assumed that a Black woman standing in the street was a prostitute.

women they assist – and who are or have been prostitutes – contributes to reinforce the connection that is often made between ‘Nigerian women’ and sexual looseness/deviance.

Much to my initial surprise, when I conducted my interviews, every time I asked the question ‘do you think that *Black women* who are or have been involved in the sex industry face further/or particular types of discrimination<sup>8</sup>?’ my respondents answered as if it had been formulated: ‘do *you* face particular problems with Black women who are or have been involved in the sex industry?’ A subtle but effective resistance was applied whenever I tried to go back to the original question, and my prompts kept being transformed into new opportunities to talk about ‘the problems that *we* face because of *them*’.

Mara, a Catholic nun who works for an Implementation Agency in the North of Italy, answered my initial question by expressing concern about *African women* not being able to bridge the gap that is created by *their* cultural difference. In particular, one trait of such difference, she claimed, is represented by

their rhythms that are effectively different from ours. We normally call them specifically African rhythms [*ritmi africani*] in the sense that everything is done with a lot of calm.

(Personal interview with Mara, March 2005)

Paolo, the coordinator of another IA in Northern Italy, defined such pace of life as monstrous.

Unfortunately it’s like this, I had *a* Nigerian woman staying over at my place, and *they* have monstrous rhythms. And I am not even talking about young women. Of all the ones I met, let’s say, a hundred girls, only very few of them are full of energy, the kind of people who could say: ‘I leave the house at 6 o’clock in the morning and I am not scared of doing so!’

(Personal interview with Paolo, July 2004)

It is interesting to note here how easily, in his narrative, Paolo shifts from talking about *a* singular Nigerian woman to *their* monstrous rhythms, thus generalizing one experience to that of a collective monolithic ‘group’. This process of discursive homogenization of the ‘Other’ was quite frequent in my data and is further discussed in later sections of this chapter.

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<sup>8</sup> The interview questions did not directly refer to racism in order to see if the interviewees would use the term at all.



The notion of 'African rhythms' was also mentioned by other respondents who described Black women as slower due to overwhelming laziness, procrastination and incapacity to respect punctuality. All these aspects, Mara further explained, have inevitable negative repercussions on the productivity and efficiency of the women, especially in the workplace where they found provisional employment as part of their project of social protection.

They might get a job but they don't think they necessarily have to be punctual. Because they are used to behaving differently in their country where, if you don't get somewhere one day, you'll get there the next day. I mean, and there is no problem in doing that! Also, they don't have the notion of letting you know if they won't go to work, because it is not a problem for them. So in this sense, it is very difficult for us to deal with them.

(Personal interview with Mara, March 2005)

Marco and Antonella, who work for two different IAs, also mentioned that 'Nigerian women's' unreliability at work compromises their chances of keeping and getting a job, and in some instances – as they mentioned off the record later – it might also be a reason of embarrassment for the IA, especially after an effort had been made to convince employers to hire them.

You have to understand that you can put them in a factory where they only have to repeat the same action all day, but because they come out of situations of extreme poverty, you really cannot think to ask them to do that... they would be able to slack off the whole day [laughs].

(Personal interview with Marco, March 2005)

All sorts of things happen during the program [of assistance and social integration, as per Article 18]. For some the job is not good enough, others ... they really can't make it. For instance the Africans [feminine/ *le Africane*] who have never worked in their country<sup>9</sup>, who are not used to our rhythms of work, to our timetables, our punctuality...having a timetable is for a Nigerian girl something incomprehensible. During the first few months, we have to work a lot on this, to get them used to the fact that it is not just important to do their work, but also to be there on time, because *that* job has to be carried out at *that* time. They say: 'but I did it for two hours, now I need a two-hour break' [laughs]. Obviously you can't. Or in other cases they would say: 'today I can't go to work, I'll send a friend of mine instead'.

(Personal interview with Antonella, August 2002)

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<sup>9</sup> Again the translation does not convey the real meaning of the sentence in Italian. Carla here is saying that in general *all* African women *never* work in 'their country' - *che non hanno mai lavorato*.

The latter extract is particularly interesting because it shows how easily the terms Africans and Nigerians can be interchanged. Moreover, like other respondents, Antonella attributes African/Nigerian women's uncooperative behaviours at work to the fact that the lack of punctuality, sluggishness and irresponsibility they display are common characteristics in their country of origin. Some also point out that their lives there was poverty-bound, a distinctive feature which, in some instances, is unclearly connected to the fact that they have 'never worked' before, or that they would not be able to work.

Unsympathetic sentiments towards 'Nigerian women' – marked by criticism of their 'cultural' beliefs and behaviours – appeared very clearly in the course of a group interview I conducted with the street unit team of an IA in central Italy. When I prompted the group of eight people to talk about their experience of the difficulties that Black women encounter in their daily life as prostitutes in Italy, the initial reluctance to speak was followed by a crescendo of negative comments against 'Nigerian women'. The first person to speak began with a complaint about the non-approachability of the women themselves, and their unwillingness to be friendlier with social or street unit workers, and then continued:

*Giuseppe:* With the cultural mediator things have changed a bit and we have managed to solve a bit the problems we had with Nigerian girls who at times only seemed to take condoms from us. And [laughs] Nigerians *do* take a lot of them, they take all that you give them [they all laugh]. [...]

*Ambra:* They also are very keen on wanting to be personally taken by us to the hospital or health services, to undertake analysis, etc. Very rarely do they go on their own. Even when they have been here in Italy for a long time and they know the neighbourhood and they regularly go to Venice, Padua, Verona on their own for their own things. But for these things, I don't know, even to go to the hospital, they want to be taken there by some of us. That's so typical of all Nigerian women! That's why we are thinking that because the care of their body is important, the very first time *we* will take them to the hospital, we will show them where to go, what to ask, but then, they really need to go on their own!

*Dario:* Yes, because they have to be autonomous. They even expect us to go and fetch them with the car right in front of their house [laughs]. [...]

*Enzo:* Yes, and another aspect of all Nigerian women is that they undergo [medical] tests and then they don't go to pick up the results, as if the test in itself were enough! [Laughs...] this is so typical! [They all agree and laugh].

(Group interview with eight members of a Street Unit, July 2002)

In this case, the respondents highlighted the importance that their IA places on making sure that the women who take part in projects of social assistance become progressively more autonomous and learn to carry out their daily activities – and particularly the visits to health services – on their own. Similar to the narrative of Paolo reporter earlier, what strikes in this interview, however, is the way in which a few behaviours observed became characteristics of *all* ‘Nigerian women’, and are treated as an object of mockery.

With an analogous undertone, Emilio, a nurse in a municipal health service, also mentioned the supposed ignorance shown by ‘African/Nigerian women’ towards western health practices. He explained that they constantly abuse western medicines, and attributed this approach to their naiveté and rural origins:

Many people, mainly African people, come from villages and they don’t have the culture to take anything chemical, so it’s not easy to suggest this type of instrument. In many instances, even the installation of the diaphragm is not that easy. Many Nigerians find it difficult to tolerate this type of contraceptive. It’s even curious to see that many Nigerian girls, after going to a gynaecologist [...], start using contraceptives, and then they realize they won’t get pregnant and so they think they have lost their fertility [laughs]. So they manage somehow to get pregnant. For them it becomes a sort of fertility test, because for a Nigerian woman if one doesn’t manage to have kids, she is not a real woman. It’s a bit of a paradox. [...] Then there is this culture of auto-medication especially amongst African girls who take antibiotics for any sorts of pain, and often use medicines simply to have an abortion. They use medicines which have counter indications for women who are pregnant and that pregnant women shouldn’t take. They take a lot of them so that they can have a pharmacological abortion, which is obviously very dangerous [laughs]. Sometimes, after that, they have to have surgery on the uterus to avoid problems.

(Personal interview with Emilio, July 2002)

Emilio’s narrative might be viewed as a plain explanation of the difficulty of ‘Nigerian women’ in approaching medical practices they are not familiar with. Nevertheless, his derisory tone throughout the interview underscored his paternalistic stance and scorn, both of these women’s failure to comply with western medicine and their own approaches to health and bodily functions.

The representation of ‘Nigerian women’ as irrationally attached to laughable beliefs and superstitions appeared to be particularly recurrent in relation to discussions of Voodoo or ‘Black magic’ rites, that are described as the traditional religion of ‘Nigerian

women'. Ajoke Hundeyin, president of the Association of Nigerian women in Italy, explains that,

Black magic is done to convince [Nigerian women about to be trafficked] to do what the *madame*<sup>10</sup> wants from them. Before coming to Italy, they go to a sorcerer [...]; the ritual consists of using small pieces of the woman's body (hair, nails...) that are mixed with other vegetal or animal substances. The paste that is thus formed is drunk or eaten by the women to seal the deal with the *madame*.

(2001: 91; my translation)

The mystery that surrounds this practice, of which only little is known in Italy (and the West in general), and whose very names 'Voodoo and Black magic' are imbued with negative imagery, associated with superstition and cruel, body-harming rituals, certainly contributes to the hostile portrayal of this religious practice (Bartkowski 1998; van Dijk 2001). As Carling notes, this magic-religious element in Nigerian prostitution has received much attention all over Europe, and Nigerian prostitutes are often described as completely subjected to the fear of the magic rites that keep them so attached and dependable on the *madame* (2005; 2006). Nevertheless, field research in Nigeria has shown that this religious pact is not necessarily intimidating in its own right, despite the fact that this is how it is most often portrayed (van Dijk 2001; Carling 2005; Carling 2006). On the contrary, in some instances "this participation in the spiritual world may be understood as a natural part of the wish of the women to travel to Europe" (Carling 2006: 28).

The comments of Sister Maria, a Catholic nun who works for an Implementation Agency in Turin, underlines how these traditions are seen as problematic:

*Sister Maria:* One of the fears they have is linked to the Voodoo rites they perform in their country and then also when they come to Italy. And if we say 'come on don't be scared of these things', clearly they don't believe you. [...]

*Isabel:* I am not too sure that all that has been said in the media about the Voodoo is actually true...

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<sup>10</sup> As with Voodoo and Black magic, also the role and figure of the Nigerian *madame* is surrounded by mystery and various discordant representations. The *madame*, also referred to as 'mama' or 'mama Lola' is the woman who is in charge of prostitutes in Italy and, before they leave, in Nigeria (Aghatise 2002; Achebe 2004). In some instances she is the person who finances the journey, and in Italy lives with, or supervises, the women, collecting the money they earn (Carling 2005).

*Sister Maria:* Well, it is extremely important for them, it is part of their traditional religion. Something that we have difficulty in understanding. It's something that even we missionaries could not really deal with. I am a missionary of [...] so my institute works abroad, prevalently in Africa. These are the kind of aspects that we couldn't change. Well, it's really part of their culture, it's a cultural problem, we cannot deny it. It's there. It's there and when they talk to me about this Voodoo rite, I have the same reaction as you<sup>11</sup>, but then I can see the high incidence it has on their psyche even on women who have been in Italy for many years. I realized it is something very strong for them because it is connected to their tradition, their culture. To betray the Voodoo means to betray your clan, your own culture, your ancestors [...]. Down there they signed a contract in front of a sorcerer. And they underwent these rites under a death threat, so clearly they are scared because it means that the contract was signed with blood.

(Personal interview with Sister Maria, March 2005)

In her account Sister Maria tried to explain the effort she makes to understand this 'traditional religion' and the impact it may have on 'Nigerian women's' lives, but she also kept referring to them as a problem, something to be changed. Later in the interview she returned to these issues in relation to the process of 're-education' that needs to be carried out in order to free and purify women from such traditional and oppressive cultural beliefs. She explained:

We realised that if, when we work on their formation, we don't begin from their traditional African religion, and help them in a process of liberation, we will not manage to take these women away from the streets. Well, in fact, we will take them away from the streets, because they are not going to be there any more, but sooner or later they are going to fall into it again. Not street prostitution necessarily, but another type of prostitution because they are not free inside. Those fears they have deep inside, linked to their culture, the spirits of their predecessors, these kind of things do not allow them to do anything, because they are afraid. [...] So either we manage to achieve an integral formation of the persona, one which is based on values, real values, in the sexual sphere, in the sphere of womanhood, also in their relationship with their family, otherwise, yes we can do things for them [we can help them], everybody does, but we will not manage to truly help them to get to the integration that we really want.

(ibid.)

Both extracts from my interview with Sister Maria present 'Nigerian prostitutes' as women who are at the mercy of powerful fears imposed on them by their own

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<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note that my original comment was misunderstood. While I had expressed doubts about the representation of these practices in the Italian media, Sister Maria reformulated my statement as if I had doubted about the seriousness of those who believe in them.

superstitious culture and that need to be washed away for them to regain mental freedom and a full sense of selfhood. Integration, within this perspective, is conceptualized as a process of ‘cleansing’ and purification from the old backward and enslaving culture to the new, enlightened way of life.

Similarly, other respondents explained their intervention as a form of rescue and rehabilitation, not just from the deviant and debasing experience of prostitution, but also from the ‘backward’ culture of these women, to enable them to fully fit and socially integrate in the country of destination and its more advanced culture. As Sandra, the director of an IA explained:

social integration, as spelled out in Article 18, means that in one way or another you have to teach them to live in a cultural context that is not theirs. So you literally have to take them by the hand and teach them how we live in Italy, what our habits are, our culture, in the employment environment, in the relationship with others, even in the management of the house, how to keep it clean!

(Personal Interview with Sandra, August 2002)

In addition to the aspects already mentioned, and as many interviewees also pointed out, the ‘re-education’ and integration of Nigerian women is further hampered by other obstacles deriving from these women’s way of life. The perception of Nigerian women as generally detached and unwilling to engage with IA staff and other ‘foreign prostitutes’ is one of them, as highlighted also in the previously mentioned group interview with an IA street unit staff:

*Cosimo*: I also think that Nigerian women are the ones who are the least integrated in the territory. Many of them form cliques, but it is very difficult to see a Nigerian woman with an Albanian woman, they stay only among themselves. Albanian girls and the Russians are more integrated, they go out more often. Whereas Nigerians rarely go out. Apart from when they work on the streets.

*Ambra*: The kind of relationship you can have with Nigerian women is more... I mean they talk and talk but they say nothing in the end.

*Giuseppe*: Yeah, In Italy you hear people saying that Nigerian girls are extrovert [...]. In reality they say very little, so the contact you have with them is very superficial, especially on the street. [...]

(Group interview with eight members of a Street Unit, July 2002)

The fact that 'Nigerian women' might want to 'go out' less often seems to be attributed exclusively to their 'groupy' and asocial behaviour. None of the interviewees who raised this issue commented on the fact that their visibility as Black women in a country in which, as seen, people often identify them with prostitutes, might be an important factor in their decision to get less publicly exposed than white women, who can more easily 'pass' as Italians.

Racism and the prejudices against Black women are not always acknowledged. As shown in the following extract, Paolo recognizes the fact that 'Nigerian women' are treated differently, but refuses to call this racism, and in fact ends up blaming 'Nigerian women' for having contributed to the construction of negative stereotypes against themselves:

*Paolo:* In Italy a Nigerian woman, unfortunately, is always excluded. She has difficulties, even if she's a good girl. Because she's a Nigerian and that's it. And so people don't want them, they have difficulties in taking them in, you see? [...]

*Isabel:* So what do you think about the popular stereotype that all Nigerian woman are prostitutes?

*Paolo:* Well, it's not really Nigerian women, it's Black girls [...]. But the Nigerian woman really has that stereotype. And unfortunately there are only few who... how can I say? Try to challenge these [stereotypes]...only few really do well in the labour market, few improve their career. Unfortunately they all do very humble jobs and it is difficult to see a Nigerian woman in an office, educated, etc. There are very few of them. I am always talking about Piedmont, but also somewhere else, maybe in England it's different.

*Isabel:* Yes, but there are still many forms of racism.

*Paolo:* Well, I don't think that in Italy it's a question of racism. It's more about stereotypes. And then it's true that Nigerian women have built it [the stereotype] over time, apart from the fact of being seen as prostitutes... they are also seen as a lazybones, because as a characteristic, the Nigerian woman is slow. And when we leave in the morning she still has to wake up. Unfortunately it is like this. Then you ask them if they can speak Italian, no way. Two Nigerian girls together do not speak Italian, and so they will always have difficulties speaking it.

(Personal interview with Paolo, July 2004)

Only in two instances have my interviewees explicitly mentioned the racism experienced by 'Nigerian women'; specifically in relation to exclusion and

discrimination they face in both the labour market and in finding accommodation. Elena, a project manager, and then Sandra director of an IA explained:

*Elena:* Unfortunately there is still a lot of racism. So being an African woman, at times can be penalizing even if they have amazing capacities [...]. And the most amazing difficulties we have are precisely in their insertion in the job market or in finding a house. The other great difficulty is our own little knowledge of the African culture and at times we are unprepared to deal with the problems it creates.

(Personal interview with Elena, March 2005)

*Sandra:* One of the things that frustrates me the most is the low quality of employment that is offered to these women. [...] A foreign woman is always offered the same: assistance to elderly people, domestic labour, cleaning ...and I work with women who have other aspirations! These are the problems, but then these problems are everyday problems because we live in a profoundly racist society. The fact that they only offer these jobs, for me, this is racism.

*Isabel:* What about the housing situation, is it a problem?

*Sandra:* This is not a problem, it is a drama. [...] There is an amazing exploitation in that sense, in addition, if they are Black they don't get a house at all, not even by being exploited [with requests to pay high rents]. A woman of colour cannot find a house even if she can, if she has a good pay. She is Black and they don't want her. This is where we are at. You can be Black African, Black from Latin America but there is no way. We are talking about a country, Italy, where up to 10 years ago people got upset and said: 'can you imagine, Americans are racist!' The problem didn't exist here. They had never seen a Negro, so obviously they said: we are not racist. And then this Italy came out, one which is so provincial, limited, racist, really miserable.

(Personal interview with Sandra, June 2005)

These comments reveal a focus on racism as a structural problem that manifests itself in forms of exclusion that pertains to socio-economic structures, such as housing and the labour market. However, whilst obstacles in finding accommodation and employment are acknowledged and attributed to racism, the comments that both Elena and Sandra made in the course of the interviews – such as problematic aspects of 'African culture', or the need to take 'African women by the hand' and show them how to behave properly in Italy (including how to clean a house) – are obviously not perceived as manifestations of racial prejudice.

In the following section I further analyse these and other aspects that emerged from the empirical data presented here.



### *Understanding representations of Black 'foreign prostitutes'*

In the comments presented above, my respondents refer to, in the vast majority of cases, 'Nigerian women' who are recipients of the assistance and protection guaranteed under Article 18. However, the negative representations and hostility displayed towards them that emerged from the data inevitably puts into question the quality and integrity of the services and assistance provided. 'Nigerian women', as they are constantly referred to, are represented as backward, tradition-bound, and incapable of adapting to the Italian socio-cultural environment. Notably, these characteristics and behaviours are attributed to their 'Other' culture, which is not just portrayed as different, but also as inferior, compared to the more advanced and enlightened Italian way of life/culture.

In this section, I explore these aspects with the aim of understanding how representations of Black 'foreign prostitutes' – essentialized as 'Nigerian women' – are constructed through subtexts of innate differences that denote them as one singular, monolithic group and 'race' (Brah 1996) .

The first consideration concerns the use of the appellative 'Nigerian women' to describe all Black women, irrespective of their being Nigerian nationals or not. To understand this widely (and incorrectly) used attribution, it is useful to refer to scholarly literature that has explored processes of 'Othering' and racialization. The initial reflections are drawn from Said and his discussion of *Orientalism*, specifically in relation to constructions of the 'geographical' boundaries where those who are recognized and categorized as 'Others' are often arbitrarily positioned (2002). As Said explains, designating the unfamiliar space occupied by the 'Other' (he uses the term barbarians) is a universal practice that serves the purpose of identifying which spaces are 'ours' and which ones are 'theirs'. Crucially, such geographical designations can be completely arbitrary. The purpose of constructions of an "out land-barbarian land", in fact, is not necessarily to be accurate, rather, it is primarily to designate a distinction between 'us' and the space 'we' inhabit, and 'them' and 'their' space. The 'Other' is not called into acknowledging or approving of this attribution. "It is enough for "us" to set up these boundaries in our own minds; "they" become "they" accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from "ours"" (2002: 20). Ahmed further elaborates on these aspects, particularly in relation to encounters with the 'Others from within', i.e. those who have come to occupy/invoke 'our' land, which was previously

seen as an uncontaminated space (2000). As she suggests, the re-reading of the bodies of the 'Others' who 'we' now face, and whom 'we' cannot initially recognize, is a way of achieving recognition not just of who 'they' are, but also who 'we' are in relation to 'them', and who 'they' are in relation to other 'Others' (ibid.).

In the case discussed here, the attribution 'Nigerian women' serves to identify and differentiate – from 'us' and other 'Others' – some women who become geographically and arbitrarily identifiable with an 'out-land', Nigeria. Such attribution is made on the basis of a number of crucial signifiers. The primary one is 'the fact of blackness' (Fanon 1970). It little matters if one is really from Nigerian or not; Black women are identified as Nigerian based on the essentializing notion that their black skin "leads (back) to Africa" (Ahmed 1999: 99). This was apparent in Tatiana's comment, the Columbian woman mentioned before, who explained how, as a Black woman, she is automatically considered to be Nigerian. 'Blackness', however, is not singular; there are many pluralities of blackness. As Ali suggests, blackness as a 'colour' is a non-homogeneous and complicated form of exoticism (2005). And as seen, for a woman to be recognized as 'African' or, more commonly, 'Nigerian', 'blackness' has to be of a particularly dark tone. Those with a fairer shade of 'blackness' will in fact be categorized through some 'Other' geographical appellatives (Brazilian, for example), with specific, different meanings attached. In other words, as pointed out by Alexander and Knowles, 'real' external bodily differences – in this case the particular skin colour of sexed female bodies – play a crucial function in constructing racial categories and meanings (2005). They become the "bodily manifestation of internal characteristics, attitudes and beliefs, which are seen as fixed and immutable, and which are inseparable from notions of (white) superiority and (black) inferiority" (ibid.: 10).

The empirical data revealed some of the characteristics, attitudes and beliefs that my respondents ascribed to 'Nigerian women', and that contribute to their portrayal – using Agustin's poignant metaphor – as women who were "only yesterday carrying water on their heads in some remote countryside" (2005b: 68). Extreme poverty, complete inexperience of employment, and laziness are amongst such traits, which are used to explain why 'Nigerian women' are deemed incapable of understanding how to operate in the western, faster and more efficient environment, where punctuality and responsibility are essential attributes that they either lack or ignore. By reducing 'Nigerian women' to a few essentialized characteristics my respondents are engaging in a

process of stereotyping, a signifying practice that is “central to the representation of racial difference” (Hall 1997: 257). As Hall explains, stereotyping deploys a strategy of splitting, i.e. a dichotomization which sanctions certain traits as unacceptable. In this way, stereotypes “symbolically fix boundaries, and exclude everything which does not belong” (ibid.: 258) and is thus treated as ‘abnormal’. Crucially, the distinction between the ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ is constructed upon a hierarchy of power: “the establishment of normalcy (i.e. what is accepted as ‘normal’) through social and stereotypes is one aspect of the habit of ruling groups [...] to attempt to fashion the whole of society according to their own world view, value system, sensibility and ideology” (Dyer 1977: 30, quoted in Hall, 1997:258). The harsher the hostility towards the ‘abnormal’ out-group, the stronger is the celebration of the in-group.

Similarly, another aspect that is presented as negative and indicated as an impediment to ‘Nigerian women’s’ full integration in the more advanced ‘receiving country’, is superstition. This notion emerges in particular in discussions about ‘traditional African religions’ and Voodoo rites. As explained earlier, hostility towards Voodoo and ‘Black magic’ need to be understood in the context of their recent representations in Italy (but also in other European countries) as terrifying occult rituals that are used to subject Nigerian prostitutes to their pimps, and keep them in a state of spiritual entrapment (van Dijk 2001). Interestingly, similar constructions of Voodoo in the West are not only manifestations of *recent* anxieties about poorly understood practices, but can be found also in European colonial accounts where they were talked about as primitive religions that forced their adherents into fear and terror (Douglas 1991; Bartkowski 1998). Similarly, the construction of ‘Nigerian women’ as unreasonably fearful or irresponsible in their use of western medicine has a resonance in the colonial past, in particular in relation to discourses elaborated in the British colonies by western doctors for whom “civilization was measured by proximity to and embracing of western medical techniques” (Levine 2003: 63). In her study on prostitution in the British Empire, Levine reports that descriptions of the ‘colonized’ as backward peoples mired in ‘custom and folklore’ were commonly used to justify their incapacity to “appreciate the rational ends of a system founded on the characteristically modern principles of sanitation” (ibid., : 64).

What these considerations highlight is that it is crucial to establish connections between historical and more recent representations of ‘Otherness’, because the latter

cannot fully be explained or understood without the former. This is also stressed by Ahmed when she states that “we cannot trace the production of racial bodies without reference to the history of European colonialism” (2002: 47). And while indeed, it would be a mistake to refer to European colonialism as one single ‘European’ experience, the historical examples reported here from European – but not necessarily Italian – colonial representations of ‘Other’ cultural beliefs allows to observe how contemporary racial prejudices reproduce *already* ingrained and preserved representations of racial and ethnic groups (Essed 1991; Ang 1996; Malik 1996). In this respect, Salih suggests looking at the Italian colonial past, its historiography, and legacy, in order to understand contemporary denials of racism and diffused and unchallenged racist representations, policies and practices in Italy (2003). More specifically, she explains that just as the colonial experience is still looked on in Italy as a historical moment circumscribed in the past, where notions of ‘race’ and racist practices that were so prominent then are now overlooked (to the effect that Italian colonialism is still seen almost as a humanitarian enterprise), so too, in contemporary Italy, there is a resistance towards acknowledging racism and the fact that social relations are, in the new multiracial Italy, highly affected by ‘race’ (ibid.; see also chapter 3). Also Dal Lago argues that the fact that contemporary Italian culture does not protest (apart from a few exceptions) against racism is due to a historical refusal to acknowledge that ‘race’ plays a primary role in the arrangements of Italian society (1999). Thus, he claims, “if right wing parties or the Northern League [...] hunt for the clandestine migrants, our democratic culture is only able to see in such initiatives something politically illegitimate or questionable, but *not* a new type of racism” (1999: 104; emphasis added, my translation).

Another aspect to consider is that these fixed, immutable, essentialized and undifferentiated characteristics and behaviours that my respondents attribute to ‘Nigerian women’ contribute to their representation as a monolith of ignorance and backwardness that completely ignores their personal and cultural richness and heterogeneity. The latter is crucial not only in relation to their real country of origin, but also ethnic group, rural or urban provenience, life experiences, financial status, class, religion, type of migration pattern, etc. In this sense, ‘Nigerian women’ are racialized through a process that operates on the basis of assumptions and meanings attached to both human physical variations and a ‘difference’ that is built on a bedrock of cultural inferiority, cultural essentialism and cultural determinism (Essed 1991; Lewis and Phoenix 2000). Indeed,

such process is sustained and reinforced by the notion that the Italian/western cultural model is uncritically constructed as the “norm and positive standard” (Essed 1991: 14) that ensures that any “cultural difference is overemphasized and conceptualized in hierarchical ordering” (ibid.: 189) where the ‘Others’ culture is identified with disadvantage.

As seen in the introduction to this section, focusing on cultural inferiority and difference is not seen by my respondents as a racist behaviour and in fact, as the data show, they refused to acknowledge racism in many circumstances. For example, whilst a recurrent theme in the interviews is the difficulty that my respondents claim to face due to the unruly and unpredictable behaviours of ‘Nigerian women’, little effort is made towards understanding their perspective and the difficulties and obstacles they encounter in the new country. Just as some of my respondents accused, and abused, ‘foreign prostitutes’ for their supposed sexual looseness, so too here the social exclusion and racial abuse that ‘Nigerian women’ are subjected to, is justified as a consequence of their ‘cultural ab-normality’ (Hall 1997).

As already explained, my questions about ‘discrimination’ remained most of the times unanswered, and the only time I made a direct reference to the term racism – in relation to England – my respondent made a point about explaining that discrimination “in Italy is not about racism”, but stereotypes, for which ‘Nigerian women’ themselves are responsible due to their unacceptable behaviours. However, when racism is acknowledged, as for example in the interview I had with Sandra and Elena, their points revolved primarily around institutional forms of racism, with a focus on the housing and employment sectors, while their own racist remarks ‘passed’ as normal and acceptable.

Indeed, as my analysis so far has confirmed, arguments that maintain the moral and cultural superiority of ‘the West’, as opposed to ‘the Rest’, are so commonplace that they have become normalized, together with assumptions of inferiority of the ‘Others’ (Malik 1996). And in fact, Essed suggests, even when individuals take some responsibility for – or at least acknowledge – the problem of racism, they can *really* take responsibility and initiate actions for change only when they have fully understood the process of domination (1991). This includes reflecting not just on macro system and institutions, but also on subjective perspectives and internalized forms of racism. But the fact that racial and ethnic prejudice is morally rejected among some, as something

'outside' in the social arrangements of institutional practices, may preclude them from identifying their own subjective prejudice (ibid.).

Another aspect that is worth mentioning here is that the same representations and constructions of 'Nigerian women' that emerged from my interviews with IA staff are also prominent in some Italian scholarly literature. For example, the following quote, which could be easily confused for one of my respondent's statements, is reproduced from an article on migrant prostitutes, published in 2002 in *Studi di Sociologia*, one of Italy's most reputed journals of sociology.

In this research, we started from the hypothesis that the West is the place where the culture of human rights has guaranteed the highest level of equality and reciprocal respect between men and women. Hence, we presuppose that immigrant women carry within themselves a more backward way of intending the position of women in society, thus leading to a submission to the figure of the man. Even though we are aware that this is a generalization and an idea which is not sufficiently articulated, we believe that it is a useful reduction [*riduzione*] nonetheless.

(Testoni, Tacchini et al 2002: 81; my translation)

Certainly, the discussion presented so far in this research provides a very different picture from that of an 'equal West', where in fact 'reciprocal respect between men and women' is often lacking, and gendered and racist notions are produced and reproduced by individuals, as well as various state institutions, their policies and enforcement bodies. Nevertheless, writings like this, where 'foreign prostitutes', and migrant women more generally, are constructed as poor victims of the social and cultural backwardness of their homelands, are common in the relatively little Italian literature on gender and migration, prostitution and sex trafficking (see, for example, Favaro and Tognetti Bordogna 1991; Picciolini 1991; Campani 2000; Ferrari da Passano 2000; Ambrosini 2002). Pojmann, in her study on immigrant women and feminism in Italy, confirms this and explains that "this is the case even when the author's intent is clearly to overturn stereotypes and increase the visibility of migrant women and their experiences" (2006: 5).

Universalizing and essentializing notions of 'the Rest', as opposed to 'the West', and particularly of the 'third world woman' as a singular and homogeneous subject have been matter of vigorous opposition by postcolonial and Black feminism(s), amongst others, for more than three decades now (Wood 2001). Here, I briefly mention the work

of Mohanty – with the awareness that this is just one example of such a vast and critical counter-hegemonic body of literature. The groundbreaking article that Mohanty wrote in 1988, *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, is particularly useful in this context, with her critical assessment of western feminism and its construction of what she calls the 'third-world difference', i.e. an undefined, yet stable, ahistorical 'something' that seems to oppress most, if not all, the women who come from the 'third world' (1988). Although neither the authors of the quote I reported above, nor my interviewees, ever mentioned their affiliation with western, or any, feminism, Mohanty's criticism to essentialisms can and should be applied to cases like the ones presented here, where 'Otherness' is colonized and silenced under discourses of dominance that replicate 'the West' and 'the Rest' dichotomy. The following quote, used to characterize self-presentation of western feminists and their re-presentation of other women, can also be re-read in the context of the analysis outlined so far, as an accurate list of the essentializing ways in which 'Nigerian women' are constructed in Italy.

This average third-world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being 'third world' (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, victimized, etc.).

(Mohanty 1988: 65)

If read in conjunction with what Testoni and Tacchini wrote above (2002), it is difficult to discern any difference between the two texts, as both highlight – although with very different aims – representations of 'Third Worldism' as 'backwardness' (Carby 1982), which is, as Mohanty continues, "in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the 'freedom' to make their own decisions" (1988: 65).

In sum, while it is possible that some 'Nigerian women' come from situations of economic crisis, or may have difficult family circumstances, or little education, both my respondents and the Italian body of literature mentioned above refer to them as *a priori* oppressed by their country's economic and cultural 'underdevelopment'. The problems with these representations concern, first of all, their being essentializations that dismiss the complexity and heterogeneity of these women's lives. Secondly, they reinforce a false dichotomy constructed upon a hierarchy of power between a supposedly superior 'first world' and culturally inferior 'other worlds'. Thirdly, these notions and processes

of 'race making' (Knowles 2003) reinforce paternalistic claims for altruism that serve to justify various, often dubious, forms of intervention, masked under the positive sounding and legally sanctioned label of 'social integration' and 'assistance and social protection'. The explanation given by Sister Maria was particularly telling in this respect. She stressed the need to carry out an 'integral formation of the *persona*', a process that would involve, as she described it, the complete eradication of any 'original' cultural trait of 'African women', in order to subsequently infuse in them the real values "in the sexual sphere, in the sphere of womanhood, also in their relationship with their family" which would allow them to finally reach the "integration that *we* really want" (personal interview with Sister Maria, March 2005). This approach appears to be motivated by an assimilationist agenda whereby the women in question are expected to give up all their socio-cultural beliefs and traits to become indistinguishable from the superior social and cultural model of the 'receiving country' (King and Rodriguez-Melguizo 1999). Lastly, these considerations shed a new light on the notions of liberation/rehabilitation/rescue and victimhood that were discussed in the previous chapters. As seen, specifically in the case of 'Nigerian women', my respondents construct a narrative of victimization in which the primary 'oppressing' factor is not (just) sex trafficking or prostitution, but their own backward, tradition-bound culture. Within this understanding, the objects of Article 18, as stated in the text, i.e. recuperation/rescue, are conceptualized with a focus also on a re-socialization/re-acculturation of these women to the new and better Italian way of life/culture. Indeed, this is also another example of the extent to which the use of the unclear notion of 'social integration' in the text of Article 18 leaves space for various interpretations, some of them, as in this case, leading to undoubtedly questionable applications

To conclude, in this section the analysis of individual subjective, but also collective, expressions of prejudice and racism highlighted common patterns in the racialized representations of Black 'foreign prostitutes' among my respondents. Moreover, I discussed how the essentialization of 'Nigerian women' as victims of their own inferior culture serves to authorize and justify forms of intervention that are beyond the scope of Article 18.



*Visual representations of Black 'foreign prostitutes': the example of a Northern League placard*

Previously I mentioned that a common aspect in the representations of Black women in Italy is their association with prostitution and, more generally, with criminal and deviant behaviours. In this section I further explore this connection by focusing in particular on a propaganda leaflet of the Northern League where the caricature of a Black woman – amongst that of other male 'foreigners' – is displayed as a symbol of 'foreign prostitution', which in turn is based on and reinforces the link that is often established between Black womanhood and sexual deviance (hooks 1982). Drawing from the meanings conveyed by this image, and also in light of the comments presented in the previous sections, I address the issue of racism and its accepted normality in everyday practices in Italy – even when it is unequivocally displayed in the political message of a leading political party.

The image displayed here (figure3) is reproduced from a leaflet distributed by the *Trentino-Tirolese* (a region in northern Italy) youth section of the Northern League<sup>12</sup>. It can also be found in the website of the *Movimento Giovani Padani* (the Northern League's youth section), where it is downloadable with 240 others – many with a similar anti-immigrants theme<sup>13</sup> – and is listed as 'leaflet against a multiracial society'.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> A very similar picture, with five, rather than six characters, was also previously adopted in a placard that the Northern League displayed in the 1998 regional elections. The first time I came across this image was in Dal Lago's book on the exclusion of migrants in Italy (1999: 47). Dal Lago told me that he personally took a picture of the placard in a small city in the Marche region of Italy in the summer 1998 (see also Crowhurst 2007).

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.giovanipadani.leganord.org/volantini.asp>

<sup>14</sup> In relation to the racist content of this image, it is relevant to mention that, while there is a law against incitement to racism in Italy (the 1992 *Mancino Law*), it is only reluctantly applied, having been repeatedly criticised as a limitation to freedom of expression. As reported by Vassallo Paleologo, the Northern League has been particularly opposed to this legislation. It declared that it "destroys liberty and has damaged or in any case, limited one of the basic rights of the people of *Padania*, the freedom of speech" and launched a campaign to remove it, supported by other extreme right-wing parties and organizations (2004: 7).

Figure 3: Leaflet of the *Gioventù Trentino-Tirolese*, Northern League



## GIOVENTU' TRENINO-TIROLESE

Via Torre Verde, 8 - 38100 TRENTO  
Tel. 0461/23.35.18 - Fax 0461/23.50.13

Sito Internet [www.giovanipadani.com](http://www.giovanipadani.com) info: [coordinamento@gtt@virgilio.it](mailto:coordinamento@gtt@virgilio.it)

# STOP CLANDESTINI !!



## DIFENDIAMOCI DAL MONDIALISMO COMUNISTA

The six characters represented here include a Black male street vendor who is asking: *vu cumprà?* This question, in the broken Italian version of '*Vuoi comprare?*'<sup>15</sup> (Do you want to buy?), became, in the 1990s, a derisive and slandering nickname ascribed to sub-Saharan African migrant men, many of whom had found employment in

<sup>15</sup> All the characters in the picture ask their questions with the same incorrect use of '*vù*' – as opposed to *vuoi*.

the street vending industry (often exploitative and illegal), and had learned to approach potential buyers in the streets with that question (Calavita 2005). A second male character is asking *vú struprá?* Which means ‘do you want to be raped?’ He is wearing a fez hat that, together with the threat of sexual violence he embodies as part of a common representation, identifies him as a North African, a *marocchino* (Moroccan man), as he would be called in Italy following the national-racialized attributions that are often adopted. The crescent on the hat of the third man, a car windscreen cleaner (*vú lava?* ‘Do you want to clean?’), symbolizes his Muslim faith, again a signifier of deviance in both the Northern League’s and Italian popular discourse. The other two men, a drug addict (*vú sballá?* ‘Do you want to get high?’) and a mafia man (*vú pagá lu pizzo?* ‘Do you want to pay the protection money?’), are not necessarily immediately recognizable as ‘immigrants’<sup>16</sup> (in fact, the mafia man, has a clear Neapolitan look), but are included to symbolize ‘foreignness’ to the values of ‘Northern Italianness’ that the Northern League claims to defend (see chapter 3 and 4). The only female character is a Black prostitute woman soliciting for clients with a very straightforward: *vú ciulá?* ‘Do you want to fuck?’ She is caricaturized with an afro hairstyle, exaggerated big lips and a curvaceous body emphasized by a stretch dress and her semi squatting position.

The six characters are used to create a ‘group picture’ of all the deviant and threatening traits that are commonly attributed to migrants in Italian popular discourses, and in the overtly racist propaganda of the Northern League. Their grotesque bodies are depicted with essential and exaggerated traits that enable to identify them with well-known stereotypical representations of ‘foreigners’ in Italy.<sup>17</sup> The threats that they symbolize are enhanced by their menacing and imposing verbal request. ‘Do you want to be raped?’, ‘do you want to fuck?’, ‘do you want to get high?’, etc. are questions that reinforce the violent charge the characters embody and display towards the viewers of this image – supposedly, those who are the recipients of their imposing ‘invitations’ – and that legitimizes and validates the Northern League’s messages added to the top and

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<sup>16</sup> Despite the fact that the messages written on the leaflet explicitly refers to *clandestini*, i.e. ‘illegal migrants’.

<sup>17</sup> As a matter of interest, and to compare my own reading of the stereotypes in the image, I asked ten Italian adults to tell me who they thought the caricatures represented. All of them gave exactly the same answer about five characters whom they referred to as: *vu cumpra*, *marocchino*, *drogato* (drug addict), *mafioso* (mafia man) and a *nigeriana*. The latter is particularly interesting in relation to the previously mentioned common use of the appellative *nigeriana* as a synonym for prostitution. The sixth character was referred to as a Turkish man, a Romani person, an Arab, or simply, as a window cleaner.

bottom of the leaflet, that read respectively: 'Stop to illegal migrants' and 'Let's defend ourselves from communist globalization'<sup>18</sup>.

The use of the only female character to symbolize 'foreign prostitution' is particularly relevant for the discussion in this chapter. Certainly, her inclusion in this image is not unexpected, given the fervent 'anti-foreign prostitution' propaganda of the Northern League which, as seen in chapter 4, is so prominent in its political agenda. And also unsurprising is the fact that it is a Black women who is used to embody such threat, an intentional choice that is in line with the well established *nigeriane*-prostitutes association, and the fact that in Italy popular representations of prostitution are commonly exhibited through Black African female bodies (Angel-Ajani 2003). In this respect, as Nagel points out, "the sexual ideologies of many groups define members of other classes or ethnicities as sexually different from, usually inferior to their own *normal* and proper ways of being sexual" (2003: 9; emphasis in the original).

Indeed, the racialization of Black womanhood as the embodiment of female evil and sexual lust has been taking place for centuries in the West (hooks 1982). Gilman claims that in Europe Black women's bodies have been identified with concupiscence, hyper-sexuality and deviance since the Middle Ages (1985). In turn, this association has found its visual manifestation in an established iconography in which images of Black women's bodies are used to signify deviance and African lasciviousness (Roberts 1994), with the negative meanings attached to their 'race' and sex reinforcing and magnifying each other (Nagel 2003). In fact, the image of the Black woman prostitute in the Northern League's leaflet retains many resemblances with the many caricatures of Saartjie Baartman, also commonly referred to as 'the Hottentot Venus'.

Saartjie Baartman was a Khoikhoi woman from South Africa who was exhibited in Europe at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in "freak shows and ethnographic exhibitions" (Sòrgoni 1995: 411) for her supposed steatopygia (enlargement of the buttocks). Her image and story were reproduced as a popular 'spectacle', in illustrations, caricatures, cartoons and melodramas (Hall 1997). In this way she soon became viewed as the embodiment of racialized, sexualized and pathologized 'difference' (ibid.), to the extent that, as Ahmed suggests, the imageries built around her contributed to associate

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<sup>18</sup> *Mondialismo* is a term that is generally used by left-wing parties in conjunction with *multirazziale*. *Mondialismo multirazziale* indicates a multiracial society, which, in the leaflet is clearly opposed to, and is associated with the political agenda of the left/communism. *Mondialismo* is similar, but not the same as globalization. The term implies increased contact between different cultures and does not have the economic underpinnings of globalization.

Black women with their bodies, that in turn were, and still are, seen as hypersexual and deviant (2002).

Recent scholarship has suggested (Magubane 2001; Ifekwunigwe 2004; Netto 2005) that the obsessive focus on Baartmaan's body in Gilman's article on gender and race (1985) and the numerous other academic studies that followed up and built on it (McClintock 1995; Stoler 1995; Hall 1997; Fausto-Sterling 2000; et alia) served to reproduce, without questioning, the already ingrained idea of the deviant sexuality of Black people. Whilst I concur with Magubane and Ifekwunigwe, among others, that the 'Hottentot Venus' as an icon should not be used as a 'universal' comparison in all representations of Black womanhood, its significance is important in this analysis to contextualize the image represented in the Northern League's leaflet. The use of a hypersexualized Black woman to embody prostitution, the sexual threat ascribed to the female 'foreigner' – as opposed to the sexual threat of the male character who is depicted as a rapist – needs to be located and explained as part of this traditional iconography that assumes and reproduces the idea that Black women's bodies are, or can be used as an icon of deviant sexuality (Ifekwunigwe 2004). Thus, as Ahmed explains, in order to understand the ways in which bodies are racialized, it is crucial to look at the processes that take place in space and time, whereby attributes such as the skin colour, for example, become invested with specific meanings, to the effect that they end up signifying not just skin colour but sexualized and racialized identities (Ahmed 2002). In this sense, as I also stressed earlier, racialized images and stereotypes are "the product of history and of a culture that perpetuates them" (Gilman 1985: 20). For this reason, they need to be understood as the result of the sedimentation of historical beliefs and representations that are produced and reproduced, but crucially, can also be challenged. In relation to this latter aspect in particular, the work of Black and post-colonial feminists has had a tremendous impact in raising awareness about, and problematizing, processes of racialization in various socio-political contexts (Carby 1982; Hooks 1982; Parmar 1987; McClintock 1995; Hill Collins 2000, et alia). Nevertheless, as this section on representations of Black women has shown, stereotypes about their backwardness, inferiority and deviant sexuality still abound in Italian public and political discourses and practices, and as seen, they also go unchallenged in scholarly literature. In other words, as Knowles points out, "whether we acknowledge and understand it or not, the present operates as a multitude of pragmatic accommodations with a past that may be

unacknowledged” (2003: 205). And ‘race’, as a source of social classification embedded in systems of power (Alexander and Knowles 2005), is still largely unacknowledged in contemporary Italy, just as, and perhaps because, it is still unacknowledged in the racial brutality of the colonial past.

Indeed, all these aspects are crucial to understand the ways in which ‘foreign prostitutes’ are constructed, represented and treated in Italy. More specifically, in this section I have explained how the unchallenged racist content of the Northern League’s placard is based on and contributes to reproduce and sanction politically, essentialist representations of racialized identities of migrants in general and, in relation to this study, of Black prostitute women in particular.

#### **4. Concluding remarks**

The different ways in which ‘foreign prostitutes’ are constructed and represented is a crucial aspect of this study that I have looked at in various contexts. In chapter 4 I explored how, on the one hand, representations of ‘foreign prostitutes’ through fixed gendered expectations of victimhood inform the legal discourse of Article 18. Whereas, on the other hand, in the 2002 debates on prostitution the very same ‘foreign prostitutes’ are portrayed as a sexual threat to the values and integrity of the nation. In chapter 5 I illustrated how the various and often opposed perspectives on prostitution and sex trafficking amongst IAs result in different representations of ‘foreign prostitutes’, which in turn inform different typologies of intervention in the provision of support and assistance. The focus of this chapter was on gendered and racialized representations of ‘foreign prostitutes’ that emerged primarily from the analysis of the empirical data collected in the course of my fieldwork, and also – as an example of a visual representation – from an anti-immigration leaflet distributed by the Northern League.

More specifically, in the first section I illustrated examples in which some of my respondents conceptualize ‘foreign prostitutes’ not just as victims of sex trafficking and prostitution, but also, in a completely opposite way, as ‘sluts and whores’. I argued that co-existing representations of ‘foreign prostitutes’ as both ‘victims and sexual predators’ can be explained by gendered assumptions about male and female sexuality, but also as

the result of the ambiguity surrounding the notion of victimhood in Article 18, that contributes, in its implementation, to such split and contrasting constructions.

The second section presented a discussion of representations of Black ‘foreign prostitutes’. The investigation of the data collected in my interviews with IA staff highlighted diffused and shared assumptions about their cultural inferiority. This latter aspect is viewed as an impediment to their social integration, which can only be fully achieved if they undergo a process of re-socialization to assimilate in the superior Italian cultural model. Black ‘foreign prostitutes’ are thus associated with the ‘third-world difference’ (Mohanty 1988), through a process of essentialization that is reflected in the way they are commonly referred to as *nigeriane*, ‘Nigerian women’, irrespective of their real national origin. The comments presented in this section need to be understood both as subjective expressions of prejudice and racism that my respondents project onto ‘Nigerian women’, but also within the broader Italian context of diffused and unchallenged notions of racism. In this respect, the Northern League’s leaflet, provided a telling example, through its unquestioned distribution and display, of the ‘normalization’ of racism, which in this specific instance is also politically sanctioned by its recurrent adoption as part of a major political party’s propaganda. A crucial point highlighted in this discussion is the lack of recognition of racism itself, which was explained in the context of systematic and historical patterns of denial, whereby ‘cultural racism’ still frequently goes unacknowledged, despite being deeply embedded in social relations in Italy.

As I mentioned at the outset, the discussion thus presented in this chapter has illustrated and explored how representations of ‘foreign prostitutes’ are produced and in turn inform everyday practices. A focus on the everyday allowed me to look at the centrality of people in making race and in routinely maintaining racialized regimes (Knowles 2003) in their own familiar world, a world of practical interest, a world of practices my respondents are socialized with, in order to manage the system in which they routinely operate (Essed 1991). The racist and sexist comments and behaviours they displayed are the expressions of their daily, now familiar and repetitive interactions with ‘foreign prostitutes’. Crucially, they are informed by a broader socio-economic and cultural context whose structural prejudices and racism – an example of which was discussed in relation to the Northern League’s placard – they do not merely ‘absorb’ passively and reproduce, but actively contribute to maintain.

# Conclusion

It is all too easy to attribute to the political class, both of left and right, the sole responsibility for the failures of a state or a society. In the last analysis, the strength of a democracy in a single country does not depend only upon the capability or the integrity of its ruling elite, but also upon the culture [...] and the energy of its citizens.

(Ginsborg, *Italy and its Discontents*. 2003: 324)

## 1. Introduction

This research has examined discourses, policies and practices underpinning legal, political and social responses to migrant women operating in the sex industry in the context of contemporary Italy. It has shown that female prostitution-related migrations in Italy are conceptualized as ‘foreign prostitution’, and it has analysed the multilayered intersections of gender, ‘race’ and sexuality that contribute to the social construction of this category. I argued that ‘foreign prostitution’ has been constructed as a phenomenon that catalyses and intersects fears and anxieties about both female prostitution, perceived as a deviant sexual practice threatening social values, and also foreignness/migration, perceived as a menace to the unity and integrity of the nation.

In this concluding section I wish to revisit some of the key themes that were explored in this research. In so doing, I also include some considerations on how critical aspects related to the responses to migrant prostitutes in Italy could be further explored and challenged, with a view to improving the ways in which these women are approached and treated.

## 2. The ‘foreign prostitute’ in contemporary Italy: gender, sexuality, ‘race’ and migration in policy and practice

Drawing from both primary and secondary sources, in this work I have sought to account for the positions of different actors and institutions which play a crucial role in affecting the conditions and statuses of migrant prostitutes in Italy. For a comprehensive understanding of the motivations, beliefs and perspectives that inform their approaches, I



have stressed the importance of looking at the socio-cultural and political context in which the notion of 'foreign prostitution' is generated, variously constructed and, in some instances, subjected to ideological and political manipulation.

In chapter 3 I showed that when, in the early 1990s, migrant prostitutes started arriving in Italy in large numbers, a strong anti-immigration sentiment was already prominent in the country. Fuelled by the media, this was given further impetus by the propaganda of certain political parties that used migration as a scapegoat for the ills of Italian social life, and to divert public attention from the 1991 collapse of the political system. Amongst these political actors, the Northern League has been particularly vocal with its overt racist and xenophobic agenda targeting migrants as criminals and as an economic and cultural threat to the nation. In this context, the increased presence and social visibility of migrant prostitutes represented a new opportunity to accentuate the message of the dangers attached to the 'invasion' of migrants into the country. Their 'foreignness' and occupation in the sex industry have since then become the targets of the outcry and outrage of both political parties and the general public. The historical and gendered association of prostitution with a social scourge and a degenerate sexual behaviour (for women practising it) contributes to the identification of 'foreign prostitutes' with a threat to national values and social integrity. Crucially, the criminalization of 'foreign prostitution' has never ceased to inform the response to the presence of migrant prostitutes in Italy, even when it was acknowledged that some of them may be victims of sex trafficking and new legal measures were set in place to assist and protect them.

While the attempts made in 2002 and 2003 to introduce new legislation on prostitution were primarily aimed at addressing (and eliminating) 'foreign prostitutes' in the streets, in 1998 Article 18 had introduced a system of support and assistance to favour the 'social integration' and 'recuperation' of women victims of sex trafficking. As the analysis of the debates over the change of the Merlin Law has shown, the co-existence of these two contrasting approaches to migrant prostitutes is based on the assumption that only some of these women 'deserve' to be helped and allowed to stay in the country: victims of sex trafficking. Those who are not included in this category are dealt with as illegal migrants to be expelled, and are stigmatized due to their occupation in the sex industry.

This study has shown that arbitrariness in establishing who is a 'real' victim and who is not constitutes one of the major problems of this differentiation. The analysis of Article 18 revealed that powerlessness, helplessness and complete subjection are conditions that are implicitly associated with/expected of those women who have been or are 'severely exploited' and 'abused' and can therefore be identified as victims, and receive support. However, evidence shows that the gendered assumption that a female victim of trafficking has to be in a status of total abjection and vulnerability is far from reflecting reality. As a consequence, women who have been trafficked for sexual purposes and who do not conform to the images/expectations associated with victimhood, either have to prove that they have been exploited *enough* to receive protection, or are expelled and treated as guilty criminals.

In view of these considerations, I have argued that while Article 18 is referred to as a progressive measure to tackle sex trafficking, the prescriptive notion of victimhood that it contains ends up working more to the advantage of anti-migration measures rather than to providing assistance to women who may be trafficked, but are not recognized as such. Indeed, assisting and protecting trafficked women was a matter of minimal concern for the past right-wing government (2001-2006), compared to its anti-migration priorities. On many occasions during the six years of the Berlusconi government, leading politicians alternated public statements about the groundbreaking policy in place in Italy to recuperate victims of trafficking, with other belligerent announcements about 'foreign prostitutes' either being successfully 'caught', or having to be expelled to guarantee the preservation of public morality. Constructed as unruly and disruptive sexual predators, 'foreign prostitutes' were thus identified as a menace to the maintenance of Italian social and cultural order, and to the unity and integrity of its core: the 'traditional Italian family'. This study has argued that the political agenda pursued by the right-wing government to tackle 'foreign prostitution' can be seen as part of propagandising moves and strategies enacted to publicly celebrate and empower the state as the 'moral guardian' of national boundaries and values from these unwanted 'Others'. The discussion of these aspects in chapter 4 highlighted how central women's sexualities still remain in discourses around the construction and 'preservation' of national identities (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989; Hill Collins 1999; Luibhéid 2002), and the extent to which women's sexual behaviours are still very much articulated along a 'madonna/whore' dichotomy.

The position that maintains that all ‘foreign prostitutes’ are sex slaves might be seen as a potential alternative to the dichotomy that differentiates migrant prostitutes into innocent victims and guilty criminals. Implementation Agencies and non-governmental organizations that support this approach view such distinction as spurious. They incorporate all migrant women who engage in the sex industry into the category of ‘victims’ who should all benefit from Article 18’s projects of social protection. The interventions of these organizations are often shaped by the emphasis on the need to ‘save the victims/sex slaves’ and to rehabilitate them to a dignified life. The problem with this position is that not all migrant women are, identify with, or would want to be treated as victims of trafficking or as ‘sex slaves’. Grouping all of them under this single category is an arbitrary act of power that annihilates their voices, expectations and desires, and that further contributes to position them as objects, rather than subjects (Jeffrey 2002). As I pointed out in chapter 5, this concern was shared by some of my interviewees who work for Catholic IAs that in principle support the ‘victim-centric’ approach. The dissenting opinions of these respondents stand as a testimony of the impossibility of maintaining such a unilateral perspective when confronted with the far greater complexity of the lives, experiences and choices of migrant prostitutes.

The fieldwork conducted with other Catholic IAs has also brought to light a different, and highly problematic way in which some of their staff make sense of the belief that all ‘foreign prostitutes’ are (and should behave like) ‘sex slaves’ vis-à-vis the realities and lives of the women they ‘help’. I argued that the gendered, sexist and racialized statements and behaviours so candidly displayed and shared by some of my male respondents can be explained as a reaction to their unmet expectation that female victims of trafficking will behave according to the ‘victim typology’ that depicts them as agency-less, pitiful and incapable of making autonomous decisions. Rather than questioning this assumption, these respondents approached and referred to the women who do not comply with the ‘victim-like’ behaviour by blaming them for their supposed innate depravity.

In chapter 5 I also explored the position of IAs and NGOs that make a distinction between the process of sex trafficking and the practice of prostitution. At the practical level, this approach translates into the provision of support that aims at reinforcing the self determination and autonomy of migrant prostitutes, whether they choose to abandon or continue their activity in the sex industry. In some instances, the staff of IAs that

maintain this position refer to prostitution as a job. They claim that this attribution adds positive value to the perception of what 'foreign prostitutes' are doing. However, whether the engagement of migrant women in the sex industry is conceptualized as exploitation or as a form of labour, both interpretations are at odds with the common stigmatization of prostitution and its treatment in the current Merlin Law. In its manifesto, the Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitutes suggests that the only way to comprehensively address the stigma and marginalization of prostitutes, both Italians and 'foreigners', is to decriminalize prostitution. In this way consenting adults could carry out a legitimate activity and be protected by existing legislation on violence and exploitation. On the other hand, forced prostitution should be treated separately through Article 18 measures. This study has shown that the strategy pursued by the Committee is not shared by all of its 'constituency'. Some prostitute people support a prostitution-as-labour agenda; others resent the excess of concern for, and involvement with, the 'foreigners' whilst Italian prostitutes themselves are in a state of exclusion and disadvantage. Clients, on the other hand, displayed their primary interest in maintaining availability for and variety in their consumption of prostitution.

The lack of agreement on prostitution amongst Italian sex workers has recently emerged again as a prominent theme in the Committee's email list. In discussing the line of action to pursue in the June 2007 meeting of the 'Observatory on Prostitution and the Criminal Phenomena Connected with it', an organized group of prostitutes based in Rome declared their disagreement towards the position that pursues the decriminalization of prostitution, and later withdrew from the email list stating that they would continue their 'battle against exploitation on their own'. As this study has suggested, such internal fragmentations weaken the political voice of Italian prostitutes and the consideration they could receive from their campaigning for the improvement of prostitute people's lives and rights.

Another key issue in this study concerns the gendered and racialized representations of 'foreign prostitutes' amongst the IA staff I interviewed. This emerged in particular in relation to the socially constructed category of 'Nigerian women'. Those who, on the basis of their skin colour, are arbitrarily positioned in this group are constructed and represented as tradition-bound and culturally inferior, compared to a more advanced Italian cultural model. Hence, according to this view, 'Nigerian women' need to be seen and treated as individuals who are victimized not just as a result of sex

trafficking or prostitution, but also by their own oppressive and backward culture. This has bearings on the ways in which Article 18 projects are conceived and implemented, i.e., as an opportunity to re-socialize/re-acculturate these women according to the new and better Italian way of life/culture. I suggested that this is yet another example of the extent to which the use of vague definitions in the text of Article 18 – in this case ‘recuperation’ and ‘social integration’ – allow for arbitrary interpretations that may lead to questionable modes of implementation.

In chapter 6 I explained that the IA staff I interviewed did not view their comments as based on stereotypical racist assumptions about Black women. On the contrary, some denied that racism exists at all in Italy. In this respect, this study has suggested that the common and historical resistance in Italy to acknowledging that ‘race’ is a source of social classification and is embedded in systems of power (Alexander and Knowles 2005) legitimizes tolerance for racism, precisely because racial oppression is denied *a priori*. The display of the racist placard of the Northern League, where the caricature of grotesque bodies is used to symbolize abnormalities and threats ascribed to various stereotyped migrants, was presented as another example of the normalcy attached to racist representations of ‘Otherness’ and the extent to which they have become an unchallenged part of familiar everyday life. Indeed, one of the main issues that emerged from this study is that, despite going frequently unacknowledged, racism, sexism and gendered assumptions play a crucial role in the formulation of often questionable responses to the presence of ‘foreign prostitutes’ in Italy.

To conclude this section, I wish to add a final comment on the use of the terms ‘foreign prostitution’ and ‘victims of trafficking’ throughout this study. In this research I have always attempted to utilize the terminology that is adopted in the texts analysed, by the individuals interviewed, or in other sources that have been employed. In this way it is possible to observe the alternating use of ‘foreign prostitutes’ and ‘victims of trafficking’ (often in the terminology used by the *same* source), and the lack of clarity about whom these categories may include or exclude. This point is particularly important because it reveals how arbitrarily and even subjectively these notions are used, as reflected also in the inconsistent policies and practices that this study has analysed.

### 3. Looking forward

In this concluding section I would like to put forward some suggestions as to what may follow from this study and that could contribute to more comprehensive research and improvements in the policies towards migrant prostitutes in Italy.

The review of the literature presented in chapter 1 has shown that the scholarship on prostitution-related migrations is characterized by deeply rooted divisions and conflicts. This is due to a number of factors, including contrasting approaches to prostitution, competing definitions of trafficking for sexual purposes, and scant and often unsubstantiated evidence of the numbers, origins, and conditions of migrant prostitutes. The two opposite perspectives that have dominated this field of study tend to conflate prostitution-related migrations either with sex trafficking or exclusively with the experience of sex work. I have argued that both approaches contribute to providing a limited and inaccurate understanding of the complexity of this phenomenon, particularly because, in both cases, the migration component is often collapsed and ignored. A more recent body of work, to which this study intends to make a further contribution, has reclaimed the 'migrant' in the analysis of migrant prostitution (Andrijasevic 2004), thus seeking to move beyond an exclusive focus on either voluntariness or coercion vis-à-vis prostitution. Taking a migration approach to this phenomenon leads to the exploration of a variety of issues: for example, the complexity of factors that contribute to channelling migrant women into prostitution; the ways in which they are socially positioned and constructed in the communities and countries from where and to where they migrate; and the many reasons that play a role in their migration projects. Further research that looks at these aspects, rather than assuming that there is one singular explanation or way of looking at migrant prostitution, is sorely needed. More contributions that move beyond the abstraction of prostitution-related migrations from the socio-cultural and political contexts in which they take place could allow for a better understanding of the lives, expectations and experiences of migrant prostitutes. Also, crucially, they could shed more light on the roles played by governments and their migration regimes, as well as the many people (and not just clients) who are involved in different ways with migrant prostitutes, and whose roles and impact on these women's lives are still too often unaccounted for.

This study has revealed that sexism and racism are deeply rooted in the social tissue of Italian society, and are often also reproduced, though not always intentionally, in some strands of Italian mainstream scholarly literature on migration and prostitution. In this respect, there is a need for additional study in this field that moves away from, and challenges, paradigms of migrant women and migrant prostitutes as backward and poor victims of their traditions and cultures. More work also needs to be carried out on processes of racialization and production of gendered roles in the country. I pointed out in various sections of this thesis how, for instance, Italian colonialism is still represented in Italy as a humanitarian experience, whilst there is a resistance to acknowledge the racist practices that it involved. Challenging this historiography would be a first step to shifting away from persistent denials of racism, a contribution that could bring more awareness on issues of 'race' in contemporary Italian society.

To conclude this section, I should like to add further, more policy and practice-oriented comments.

In the course of my fieldwork, I observed a number of problems in the application of Article 18, and I progressively identified potential solutions that could be enacted to address them. For example, more and better-targeted funding could contribute to ameliorating the services provided by Implementation Agencies. It may enable them to provide better structures, employ cultural mediators and train their staff. Setting more clearly defined tasks and targets expected from IAs would perhaps result in more regulation of their activities, as would more accountability. However, when I once advanced this latter suggestion to the director of an IA, he rather amusedly replied: "Accountable to whom? To the state that wants to kick them [migrant prostitutes] out?"

This comment, and the further research that I conducted for this study, made me realize that while adjusting the administration and roles of Implementation Agencies, or even modifying the text of Article 18, may be useful contributions, they would achieve only limited and partial results towards the improvement of the ways in which migrant prostitutes are treated. The first step in this direction has to come first and foremost from the Government and the 'political class'. As my respondent suggested, the current migration regime undermines the work done by Article 18 Implementation Agencies, and the rhetoric of politicians who praise them is only increasing IA's distrust in the state. The Italian government has the moral obligation to recognize and do something about the direct relationship between its anti-migration regime and the position of vulnerability in

which it confines migrant prostitutes. The victim/guilty distinction that is applied in the enforcement of its policies should be acknowledged as untenable. Racism and sexism should not be tolerated in the political arena, nor in any other sphere of society. On this premise, a serious commitment should be made to modify the current and now obsolete legislation on prostitution.

As O'Connell Davidson states, in fact, "debate on forced labour in the sex sector cannot be bracketed off from debate on the more general regulation of that sector", and an agreement is needed on what constitutes an unacceptable level of 'exploitation' in prostitution (2006:19). To achieve this, an effort must be made by all stakeholders involved to engage in a constructive debate, one that interrogates the gendered assumptions, racism and sexism that keep informing social constructions of '(foreign)prostitution' and 'trafficking', shaping legislation, political debates, policies and social practices.

To conclude, while I am aware that these are indeed ambitious suggestions, I also believe that the ills associated with migrant prostitution can be comprehensively addressed only with far-reaching changes that target the causes of the stigmatization, exclusion and vulnerability of the women involved. As this study has demonstrated, one of the first steps to accomplishing these urgently needed changes is to develop a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon by deconstructing and challenging the ingrained assumptions and social constructs that limit our understanding of its complexity, and of the many people involved in it.



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