

Community Voices

"How to Get to Paradise":

Latin American Migrant Women and Processes of Entry

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Immigration as a process which brings Third World persons to inhabit spaces in First World cities is normally presented in First World countries like Canada as the result of the will of individuals who choose to emigrate from their countries of origin. The reasons why Third World peoples want to leave their countries continue to be portrayed as the inability of non-First World countries to properly manage their internal politics and economies. Under this conception of immigration - that relies on the liberal discourse of individual choice - the primary responsibility for the process of immigration rests on the shoulders of Third World people. Immigration, however, is a much more complicated process than this approach would have us believe. It is a process which is embedded in larger historical, economic and political processes which have their origin in First World countries. As Saskia Sassen points out, immigration is part of a larger history of colonial and imperial expansion that culminates in present day globalization (1998).

Globalization relies partly on capitalist expansion and penetration of the domestic markets of less developed countries where foreign investment in industries that are export-oriented creates a disruption in the internal market dynamics of Third World countries. A corollary of these domestic market disruptions is the further skewing of extant labour market conditions leaving many people unemployed or in poorly paid and insecure jobs. Foreign investment therefore plays a big role in allowing the emergence of potential large-scale emigration flows. In addition, foreign investment in production for export contributes to the

development of economic, cultural and ideological linkages with the industrialized countries which, according to Sassen, tend to promote the notion of emigration (1998).

In addition to processes like foreign investment, the internationalization of the economy or globalization has led to the emergence of new economic regimes within First World countries and cities. Globalization has all but destroyed the traditional industrial manufacturing sector within First World urban centres. The new economic regime imposed by globalization favours new growth sectors like specialized services and finance which can offer the possibility of tremendous superprofits unavailable in the more traditional sectors (Sassen 1998). The emergence of these new economic regimes has changed the domestic structure of the labour market. In First World urban centers, full-time, secure and unionized employment is being increasingly replaced with part-time, casualized, low-wage and insecure jobs in the new growth industries (Sassen 1998). In addition, the growth of the service sector has encouraged the growth of an informal "off the books" labour market where women and immigrants - particularly undocumented immigrants - can service the needs of the overvalued and highly paid professional sectors.

Feminist researchers looking at processes of immigration have pointed out that one of the major tendencies to emerge in the past twenty years has been the feminization of international migration (Kofman 1999). It is also pointed out that these gendered migratory processes are heterogeneous - that is, changes in international political economy

and in domestic legal immigration regimes have led to the emergence of diverse modes of entry, for example, refugees and asylum seekers (Kofman 1999). Women's ability to use a particular mode of entry often differs from that of men because legal regimes in place favour male-centred modes of entry. Women have migrated independently by engaging in domestic service, migrant work (in sweatshops and agriculture), and the "sex trade" (Jiwani 1999). Furthermore, women have also continued to migrate as dependent sponsored immigrants. That is, women migrate as spouses or fiancées of fellow countrymen living in the "First World" or "First World" citizens. Women become involved with men they already know, or through the "contact zones" (ie., sex tourism), or marriage agencies.

It is clear that the conduits that allow women to migrate are heavily controlled by the "First World" states that make certain the women remain in positions of financial dependency. Workers are allowed to enter Canada under specific immigration provisions as "visa workers." By providing "work visas" the Canadian State has been able to control undocumented labour and to patriarchalize the immigration processes. Bannerji has explained the process succinctly as related both to sponsored immigrant and visa workers: "[T]his patriarchal gesture of the state gave women's husbands (male or sponsors) complete control over them, while domestic workers (also, for the most part, women) were in the grip of their 'Canadian' employers. Battering, rape and general degradation could not and cannot be effectively resisted without risking the breakdown of these sponsorships, the withdrawal of work permits, and deportations" (Bannerji 1997, 27).

By definition, work permits are issued to foreigners only if Canadians cannot or will not take these jobs and there is a demand for this particular type of labour. What seems extremely interesting, however, is that in addition to issuing work permits for domestic workers and agricultural workers, the Canadian government has also been issuing visas for "exotic dancers" overseas since 1997. Canada has allowed women from Costa Rica, Venezuela and Mexico to immigrate as "exotic dancers" also called "entertainers" and "burlesque dancers."¹ For Latin American women, then, it would seem that one of the few legal options by which to enter

Canada as an independent worker has been under this program. Sex work usually places women in highly complex and oppressive situations. The combination of abuse and exploitative conditions of work that are not regulated by labour standards and precarious immigration status force women into extremely dangerous situations. In fact, the provision of "work visas" does nothing to guarantee the protection and security of these workers. It could be argued that it might actually increase their levels of vulnerability. In Toronto, the information that we have gathered about sex workers is mostly anecdotal and specific information regarding conditions of work has been obtained by personal contact (San Martin 1999). We are not sure how many Latin American women in Toronto are presently in this situation. But based on an estimate of one club where there were 150 women, we think that the numbers are very high.

The process of migration begins when workers are offered specific contracts when contacted by Canadian agents in the "contact zones." Contracts vary but they may stipulate up to \$600.00 per week plus tips (San Martin, 1999). Often, such contracts are ignored when the women arrive to Toronto. In effect, the women are expected to pay the clubs a sum of money to assure themselves that visas will be renewed. Costs rise exponentially to include their own day-to-day living, shelter, food, transportation, etc. The cost of keeping the jobs includes paying the DJs, make-up and customs, license, as well as a "fee" for either being on stage or on the "floor" - it is on the floor that one can negotiate access to the VIP rooms. Finally, the worker is likely also to be responsible for sending remittances to support family members back home. It is very possible that these remittances become the family's only financial support and that they have come to depend on this income (GAATW 1999).

Although prostitution is usually never made verbally explicit, it is encouraged by various means - not the least being that money from tips is insufficient to pay all the debts incurred along with living expenses. Options to earn more money include inviting the "customers" to touch, lap dancing, and adding sessions in the VIP cubicles, where customers can ask for all sorts of sexual servicing including intercourse. Throughout these activities, managers turn a blind eye to what is

going on while constantly harassing the women to find "customers." Women also have the responsibility of ensuring they get paid, dealing with the violence and making sure not to leave any evidence behind.

If women decide to leave this exploitative situation, or they are raided by police, there is absolutely no guarantee that they will be permitted to stay in Canada. Arguably, immediate deportation may be more life-threatening to these women than being sex workers in Toronto. A sex worker cannot apply for refugee status and in order to apply for status on "Compassion and Humanitarian" grounds, she has to wait three years. One can also safely assume, based on the experiences of people working with immigrants, that "sex workers" hardly fit the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) definition of a productive member of society. Moral issues are often at the forefront in the immigration hearings and are considered in the decisions to grant status. In terms of labour rights, if complaints are made to the Ministry of Labour for breach of contract and they are successful, the government has no power to enforce its decisions. It is also not inconceivable to assume that workers fear retaliation from the club owners. Sex workers become an invisible and disempowered labour force contending with male-run criminal organizations, the criminal legal system, the immigration system and their own communities.

What role do sex workers play in the new globalizing economy? One can speculate that there are far more complicated reasons why Canada allows women from Latin America to come as "exotic dancers." These may be rooted in complex ideological and economic processes that are racialized and gendered. The view that "Third World" women are more "sexed," or more eager to be sexually submissive and emotionally predisposed to accept abuse, are still widely preconceived notions. As the economic gap widens conservative ideas become more entrenched, and patriarchal values have begun to resurface. The resurgence of the nuclear family ideal is becoming increasingly more popular and once again women are being portrayed as mainly caregivers and mothers.²

Razack, in fact, contends that prostitution is central to the making of the white bourgeois subject since hegemonic masculinity has been premised on the binary of the "good woman" versus

the "bad woman." Moreover, the construction of the "bad woman" has been classed and raced. Historically, white, bourgeois women have been "de-sexed" in order to become the "pure" mothers of the race. Conversely, working-class women, black women, and women of colour have had to bear the brunt of sexual violence because of the perception that their "savagery" or "primitiveness" made them more "sexed" (Razack 1998). Latin American sex workers would definitely fall into this category. Finally, because the situation of these women is unsustainable due to violence, bad working conditions and precarious immigration status, they will be forced either to become undocumented workers or be forcibly deported. As undocumented workers, they become part of the essential segmented labour market that upholds the cosmopolitan nature of the global city of Toronto.

Another legal form of entry that has allowed Latin American women to migrate to the North has been the sponsorship program. In May 2000, the Latin American Coalition to End Violence Against Women and Children (LACEV) produced a report, "No (Wo)Man's Land Research Project" based on a research project whose principal aim was to "investigate and document the experiences of Latin American women who come to Canada sponsored, or expecting to be sponsored, by their male partners" (LACEV 2000, 2). The broader aim of the study was to study the link between the male-centred sponsorship process and violence. Through interviews and focus groups with recently arrived Latin American women who entered Canada under the sponsorship process, LACEV was able to put together some of the most salient features of this process as experienced by the women. In essence, the report's findings show that due to the male-centredness of the sponsorship process, women are placed in an extremely vulnerable position vis-à-vis their male sponsors as well as in terms of their relationship to the Canadian state. This vulnerability is created by an extreme dependence on the male sponsor in economic and social terms and aided by a sponsorship system which encourages the primacy of the male in making decisions about the legal status of their partner. LACEV found, for example, that in many cases male sponsors utilized the threat of deportation as one means to threaten the woman into silence, subservience and obedience. There is a clear connection established in this report between

the sponsorship system which in many cases leaves Latin American women without legal status, and the potential for violence against immigrant women in situations of extreme vulnerability and dependence. In addition, the report makes clear that existent guidelines on how immigration officers tend to deal with situations of sponsorship breakdown do very little to help women come forth to speak against their abusers simply because the onus is placed on the woman - a task particularly difficult for immigrant women - to provide proof of their abuse.

How are women who exist outside formal labour market categories and who gain entry to Canada via modes of entry like the sponsorship program linked to processes of globalization? Some work has been done on the systemic links that bring female migrants from Southern countries as waged labourers into Northern ones (Sassen 1998). This important work is concerned with examining the systemic links that join processes of globalization with the re-colonization of the immigrant woman as an exploited and exploitable labour market category in the North. In the case of women who are sponsored, however, and who by virtue of their constructed dependency are not supposed to have ties to the market, systemic linkages which tie these alternative migration processes to processes of globalization become harder to point out.

Again, given the paucity of research either at the community level or in the academy on the particular situation of sponsored Latin American women, we have to rely on anecdotal data to begin to understand some of the transnational articulations which play a role in fomenting migration as well as alternative modes of entry like the sponsorship program. Processes of globalization promote transnational capital expansion and penetration of Third World markets in the form of foreign investment and the creation of other linkages (cultural and ideological) that contribute to the initiation of labour migration flows to the North (Sassen 1998). Imperial processes of expansion have created "contact zones" where people who are geographically and historically separated "come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (Pratt 1992, 6). Some of these "contact zones" include the tourism industry and the *maquiladoras*, or export processing zones, that use the cheap local labour.

It is in these kinds of spaces that Latin American women make first contact with Northern males in pursuit of a wife or a companion. Given the already structured inequality present in these women's lives many of them decide to try their luck in a new arrangement which promises at least on the surface to offer social and economic advantages. But as we've said, these new encounters are also already structured in gendered ways which continue women's social and economic disadvantage and which favour male supremacy. Once in Canada, these women are relegated to the domestic sphere where their situation of complete dependency, ignorance of the language, ignorance of the system, and social and economic isolation make it almost impossible for them to escape to a better life (LACEV 2000).

It can, therefore, be said that the sponsorship process is favoured by a racialized sexual division of labour that brings Third World women to Northern households to perform activities that are needed for the reproduction of male labour power. That is, the racialized division of labour is ensured in order to maintain a particular kind of household, one that can confine women in the domestic sphere under the institution of marriage (or eventual marriage in the case of some sponsored situations) to perform reproductive tasks which would otherwise have to be provided for by the state (Kojima 2001). As Faye Harrison points out, intrinsic to capitalism is the existence of a reserve resulting from the exclusion of considerable segments of the working population from a secure position in the labour market. Under capitalist social conditions, a large proportion of women, particularly housewives who have been displaced from what are socially defined as productive economic roles, constitute a reserve labour force whose surplus labour power is absorbed into the domestic domain of the social economy. In this sense then, the sponsorship program as a state program is tied to larger racialized capitalist patriarchal processes which form an integral part to processes of globalization (1991).

In addition, when sponsored women do manage to enter the labour market one of the few ways they can do so is by entering the informal labour market where their labour is underpaid and generally exploited. That is, changes in domestic labour market dynamics within First World cities

caused by globalization have encouraged the growth of an informal labour market and a downgraded manufacturing sector where low paid and insecure jobs occupied by immigrant and female workers labour predominate (Sassen 1998). Women in the sponsorship program then enter the socio-economic regime created by globalization because it requires the use of cheap labour to reproduce male power in the domestic sphere as well as the use of cheap female labour in the informal "off the books" labour market where, as Sassen points out, they can service the needs of the overvalued and highly paid professional sectors. Immigration, then, is not a matter of individual will nor caused only by the inability of Third World countries to manage their political and economic affairs effectively. It is a process that is embedded within the changes that are brought about by the internationalization of the economy, a process which has been led by developed countries like Canada.

We will end by saying that both alternative modes of entry we have spoken of here - that is, the sponsorship program and the sex worker - in addition to being tied to racialized patriarchal capitalist processes of globalization, are also the result of particular projects of nation building. As we have seen, both these processes position Latin American women in hidden and inferior relationships to the nation. That is, as sponsored companions or wives, Latin American women serve to uphold a particular version of household structure which relies on the subordination, oftentimes violent, of immigrant women to the domestic sphere. And, sex workers serve to uphold the moral purity of Anglo-Saxon and other European women which in turn makes them suitable to play their role of being "mothers of the race" and nation (Dua 2000). Latin American migrant women perform a critical and vital role, that of maintaining hegemonic masculinities intact and in the process, creating enormous profits for the state and business.

ENDNOTES

1. We will refer to this type of work as sex work.

2. For instance, in the midst of reductions to Employment Insurance, the fact that maternity leave benefits will be extended for a year becomes highly suspect.

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