MIGRANT FILIPINA DOMESTIC WORKERS AND THE INTERNATIONAL DIVISION OF REPRODUCTIVE LABOR

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This article examines the politics of reproductive labor in globalization. Using the case of migrant Filipina domestic workers, the author presents the formation of a three-tier transfer of reproductive labor in globalization between the following groups of women: (1) middle-class women in receiving nations, (2) migrant domestic workers, and (3) Third World women who are too poor to migrate. The formation of this international division of labor suggests that reproduction activities, as they have been increasingly commodified, have to be situated in the context of the global market economy. This division of labor is a structural process that determines the migration of Filipina domestic workers. As such, this article also uses in-depth interviews to examine and enumerate the contradictions that migrant Filipina domestic workers experience in their family and work lives as a result of “being in the middle” of this division of labor.

Migrant Filipina women are employed as domestic workers in more than 130 countries (Tyner 1999). They comprise a substantial proportion of labor migrants in various nations in Europe and Asia as well as Canada (Bakan and Stasiulis 1997; Catholic Institute for International Relations [CIIR] 1987; Constable 1997). To a lesser extent, they are also employed as domestic workers in the United States (Hogeland and Rosen 1990). Even though Filipina migration is often assumed to be a middle-class professional stream (e.g., of nurses), two-thirds of female labor migrants from the Philippines are, in fact, domestic workers (Toletino 1996). Only in the United States do Filipina migrant nurses outnumber domestic workers (Tyner 1999). ¹

Looking at the migration and entrance of Filipina women into domestic work, this article documents the creation of a division of reproductive labor in the global economy. This particular division of labor occurs among working women and

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arises out of the demand for low-wage service workers in postindustrial nations. By reproductive labor, I refer to the labor needed to sustain the productive labor force. Such work includes household chores; the care of elderly, adults, and youth; the socialization of children; and the maintenance of social ties in the family (Brenner and Laslett 1991). Relegated to women more so than men, reproductive labor has long been a commodity purchased by class-privileged women. As Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1992) has observed, white class-privileged women in the United States have historically freed themselves of reproductive labor by purchasing the low-wage services of women of color. In doing so, they maintain a “racial division of reproductive labor,” which establishes a two-tier hierarchy among women (Nakano Glenn 1992).

Two analytical goals motivate my query into the structural relationship between the politics of reproductive labor and the flow of Filipina domestic worker migration. First, I return to the discussion of the commodification of reproductive labor initiated by Nakano Glenn (1992) to extend her discussion to an international terrain. In this way, my analysis of the division of reproductive labor considers issues of globalization and the feminization of wage labor (Sassen 1984, 1988). Second, I extend discussions of the international division of labor in globalization from a sole consideration of productive labor to include analyses of reproductive labor. By analyzing the structural relationship between reproductive labor and the feminization of the migrant labor force, I show another dimension by which gender shapes the economic divisions of labor in migration.

The globalization of the market economy has extended the politics of reproductive labor into an international level. As I show in this article, the migration and entrance into domestic work of Filipino women constitutes an international division of reproductive labor. This division of labor, which I name the international transfer of caretaking, refers to the three-tier transfer of reproductive labor among women in sending and receiving countries of migration. While class-privileged women purchase the low-wage services of migrant Filipina domestic workers, migrant Filipina domestic workers simultaneously purchase the even lower-wage services of poorer women left behind in the Philippines. In other words, migrant Filipina domestic workers hire poorer women in the Philippines to perform the reproductive labor that they are performing for wealthier women in receiving nations.

The international transfer of caretaking links two important but separate discourses on the status of women—Nakano Glenn’s (1992) discussion of the “racial division of reproductive labor” and Sassen’s discussion of the “international division of labor.” It demonstrates that these important formulations need to be expanded to take into account transnational issues of reproduction. To develop my argument, I begin by reviewing the two relevant bodies of literature—one on domestic work and reproductive labor and the second on female migration. Then, I describe my research methodology and the characteristics of my sample. To build my conceptual case, I first analyze the situation of Filipina domestic workers in the Philippines and the “receiving nations” of the United States and Italy. Then, I build
on this by adding the migration links that illustrate the international transfer of care-taking. This three-tier process is not merely a conceptual idea but has consequences for migrant Filipina domestic workers, which I give voice to in the final section. These consequences are particularly important to consider because they define the migratory experiences of the increasing number of migrant domestic workers from the Philippines.

REPRODUCTIVE LABOR
AND PAID DOMESTIC WORK

My discussion of reproductive labor builds from research on domestic work and female migration. As I have noted, it is grounded in Nakano Glenn’s (1992) important formulation of the “racial division of reproductive labor.” Although reproductive labor has historically been relegated to women, Nakano Glenn argues that there is a hierarchical and interdependent relationship, one that interlocks the race and class status of women, in its distribution in the formal and informal labor market. According to Nakano Glenn (1992, 30), class-privileged women free themselves of the “mental, emotional, and manual labor” needed for “the creation and recreation of people as cultural and social, as well as physical beings” by hiring low-paid women of color. This form of low-wage labor encompasses a wide array of jobs including food-service production, hotel housekeeping, and nursing aide. In the commodification of reproductive labor, women are linked by gender and differentiated by race and class. Moreover, in its commodification, the worth of reproductive labor declines in society. As Katz Rothman (1989, 43) poignantly states, “When performed by mothers, we call this mothering . . . when performed by hired hands, we call it unskilled.”

Various case studies on domestic work establish that women often use their class privilege to buy themselves out of their gender subordination (Palmer 1989; Romero 1992; Thornton Dill 1994). As Mary Romero (1992, 129-30) puts it: “The never-ending job described by housewives is transferred to workers employed by women who treat domestic service as an opportunity to ‘hire a wife.’” From discussions of the spatial segregation of paid domestic workers to the documentation of the script of “deference and paternalism” (Rollins 1985) in the workplace, numerous studies have also shown that the race and class inequalities that structure this division of labor are aggravated in the daily practices of paid household work (Romero 1992; Thornton Dill 1994). Documenting the hierarchy of womanhood in the United States during the pre–World War II period, Phyllis Palmer (1989), for example, describes the reflection of race and class hierarchies in the division of labor between “clean mistresses” and “dirty servants.” According to Palmer, the more physically strenuous labor of the servant enabled the mistress to attain the markers of ideal femininity—fragility and cleanliness. This hierarchy continues today as the most demanding physical labor in the household is still relegated to the paid domestic worker.
While scholarship on domestic work establishes the unequal relations between domestics and their employers, it has yet to interrogate substantially the consequences of paid domestic work on the families of domestic workers themselves. An exception to this is Romero’s (1997) research on the children of domestic workers. One of the questions that needs to be addressed further is, “Who cares for the domestics’ family?” Elaine Bell Kaplan (1987) notes that the oldest daughters of domestics usually take over their familial duties. David Katzman (1978) similarly observed that African American domestics in the South turned to their families, specifically grandparents, for the care of children. In their article on transnational mothering, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernistine Avila (1997) ask a similar question: “Who is taking care of the nanny’s children?” They found that transnational Latina mothers, many of whom are domestic workers, frequently rely on other female relatives as well as paid domestic workers for the care of their children left in the sending country. The observation of Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila raises questions about the new forms of structural inequalities and social consequences that are engendered by the extension of commodified reproductive labor to an international terrain. To address international relations of inequality in reproductive labor, I now situate my discussion of the politics of reproductive labor in literature of female migration and the globalization of the market economy.

WOMEN AND MIGRATION

Contemporary labor migration is situated in the globalization of the market economy. As Saskia Sassen has further indicated, globalization has sparked the feminization of migrant labor. Contributing an insightful theoretical framework on the position of women in the global economy, Sassen (1984, 1988) establishes that globalization simultaneously demands the low-wage labor of Third World women in export processing zones of developing countries and in secondary tiers of manufacturing and service sectors in advanced, capitalist countries. The case of women in the Philippines provides an exemplary illustration. While Filipina women comprised 74 percent of the labor force in export processing zones by the early 1980s (Rosca 1995), they constituted more than half of international migrants (55 percent) by the early 1990s (Asis 1992).

In globalization, the penetration of manufacturing production in developing countries creates a demand for women to migrate to advanced, capitalist countries. First of all, the manufacturing production (e.g., garment, electronics, and furniture) that remains in the latter set of countries must compete with low production costs in developing countries. This results in the decentralization and deregulation of manufacturing production (i.e., subcontracting or homework). Second, multinational corporations with production facilities across the globe, by and large, maintain central operations in new economic centers, or what Sassen (1994) refers to as “global cities,” where specialized professional services (e.g., legal, financial, accounting, and consulting tasks) are concentrated. For the most part, global cities
require low-wage service labor such as domestic work to maintain the lifestyles of their professional inhabitants. Notably, many of the low-paying jobs created in advanced, capitalist countries are considered traditional "women's work." As a result, many of the immigrants who respond to the increasing demand for low-wage workers in advanced, capitalist countries are women.

The movement of manufacturing production to newly industrialized countries of Asia also generates a demand for female migrant workers. The increase in production activities in these economies has subsumed the traditional proletariat female workforce who would otherwise perform low-paying service jobs such as domestic work. This shift in labor market concentration has consequently generated a need for the lower-wage labor of women from neighboring countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines to fill the void created in the Asian service sector (Chin 1998).

Independent female migration has correspondingly increased with the feminization of wage labor in the global economy. For example, in a study of Central American refugees in Washington, D.C., Repak (1995) establishes that gender is a structural determinant of migration by showing that the greater demand for low-wage female workers in this particular receiving community initiated the primary migration of women. In the case of the Philippines, the independent nature of female migration is shown by the different destinations of male and female labor migrants in the diaspora. As male and female migrants fill different niches in the global economy, migration from the Philippines results in two gendered flows with women initiating migration to countries with a greater demand for female workers and men migrating to countries with a greater demand for male workers (Tyner 1994). In fact, the gender composition of many Filipino migrant communities is skewed. Women compose more than 70 percent of migrant Filipinos in Asian and European cities (Constable 1997; Salazar Parreñas 1998), where labor markets have a greater demand for low-wage service workers. In contrast, men compose the majority of Filipino labor migrants in the Middle East (Tyner 1994), where there are more jobs available in construction and oil industries.

On one hand, the case of Filipina domestic workers fits Sassen's theoretical formulation. As low-wage service workers, they meet the rising demand for cheap labor in the global cities of Asia and Europe and, to a lesser extent, the United States. On the other hand, this theoretical formulation only concentrates on relations of production in globalization. The structural relationship between work and family is not examined in macro-level accounts of the demand for migrant laborers. In contrast, literature on female migration has turned to the institutional-level perspective to pay closer attention to the analytical principle of gender in the family. By analyzing social relations of men and women in the family, feminist scholars of migration have shown that gender organizes, shapes, and distinguishes the immigration patterns and experiences of men and women (Grasmuck and Pessar 1991; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). In my study of the politics of reproductive labor under globalization, I take note of this rich discussion in feminist migration studies.
Situating migrant Filipina domestic workers in the transnational politics of reproductive labor extends Sassen's formulation by stressing the fact that participants in the new international division of labor, from the low-wage migrant worker to the professionals whom they serve, have families. Accounting for these families allows us to give greater consideration to gender in discussions of divisions of labor in globalization and enables us to more fully describe the labor processes of migration.

METHOD

This article is based primarily on open-ended interviews that I collected with 46 female domestic workers in Rome and 26 in Los Angeles. I tape-recorded and fully transcribed each of my interviews, which were mostly conducted in Tagalog and then translated into English.

I chose the field research sites of Rome and Los Angeles because the United States and Italy have the largest populations of Filipino migrants to Western countries (Karp 1995). Both destinations also have particular colonial ties to the Philippines. While the United States maintains economic dominance in relation to the Philippines, Italy enjoys cultural dominance indirectly through the institution of the Roman Catholic Church. As a consequence of these macro-historical links, Filipinos have come to represent one of the largest migrant groups in both the United States and Italy (Caritas di Roma 1995; Portes and Rumbaut 1996). By 1990, the flow of legal migration from the Philippines was, next to Mexico, the second largest in the United States and the third largest, next to Morocco and Tunisia, in Italy (Campani 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 1996).

The interviews in Italy ranged from one and one-half to three hours in length. I also conducted tape-recorded interviews with various community leaders (e.g., elected officers of community associations). I collected an unsystematic sample of research participants by using chain and snowball referrals and began soliciting research participants by visiting numerous community sites such as churches, parks, and plazas.

In Los Angeles, I collected a smaller sample of in-depth interviews with Filipina domestic workers, also ranging from one and one-half to three hours in length. My U.S. sample is smaller because, unlike their counterparts in Rome, Filipina migrants in Los Angeles, or in the United States in general, are not concentrated in the informal service sector. Instead, they occupy a wider range of occupational sectors. Another factor contributing to the smaller sample in Los Angeles is the small representation of Filipinas among domestic workers. Filipinas are but a minority among the larger group of Latina domestics. Yet, according to the community-based organization Filipino Worker’s Center, Filipinas dominate elderly care services in Los Angeles.

In the field research site of Los Angeles, tapping into the community began with the network of my mother’s friends and relatives. To diversify my sample, I posted
flyers in various ethnic enclave businesses. Two women responded to the flyers. Using networks of domestic workers, the samples of interviewees were collected unsystematically through a snowball method, as I did in Italy. Participant observation provided a gateway to the community as I attended meetings of Filipino labor groups, the occasional Filipino town fiestas, and the more frequent Filipino family parties, and I spent time with domestic workers at their own and their employers’ homes.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

My sample of domestic workers in Rome and Los Angeles reveals women who are mostly mothers with a fairly high level of educational attainment. Contrary to the popular belief that Filipina domestic workers are usually young and single (CIIRR 1987), my study shows a larger number of married women. In Los Angeles, only 5 of 26 interviewees are never-married single women, while in Rome, less than half of the women I interviewed (19) are never married. Women with children living in the Philippines constitute the majority of my sample in both Rome and Los Angeles: 25 of 46 in Rome and 14 of 26 in Los Angeles.

Because they perform jobs that are considered unskilled, domestic workers are often assumed to lack the training needed for higher status jobs in the labor market. In the case of Filipina domestics in Italy and the United States, the prestige level of their current work does not in any way reveal their level of educational training. Most of my interviewees had acquired some years of postsecondary training in the Philippines. In Rome, my interviewees include 23 women with college degrees, 12 with some years of college or postsecondary vocational training, and 7 who completed high school. In Los Angeles, my interviewees include 11 women with college diplomas, 8 with some years of college or postsecondary vocational training, and 5 with high school degrees.

Even with a high level of educational attainment, Filipina women migrate and enter domestic work because they still earn higher wages as domestic workers in postindustrial nations than as professional workers in the Philippines. In Rome, part-time workers—as day workers are called in the Filipino migrant community—receive an average monthly wage of 1,844,000 lira (U.S.$1,229), live-in workers 1,083,000 lira (U.S.$722), and elderly caregivers 1,167,000 lira (U.S.$778).2 After taking into account the additional cost of living for part-time workers, there is just a slight difference in salary between the three types of domestic workers. In Los Angeles, Filipina domestic workers are not concentrated in day work as are other immigrant women. Instead, they are mostly live-in workers. In contrast to women in Rome, they receive a weekly instead of a monthly salary, which is an arrangement that they prefer as it results in higher earnings. Elderly caregivers receive on average a salary of U.S.$425 per week and live-in housekeepers and child caregivers receive on average U.S.$350 per week. Wages of domestic workers in Rome and Los Angeles are significantly higher than those that they had received in the
Philippines. Among my interviewees, the average monthly salary of women who had worked in the Philippines during the 1990s was only U.S.$179.

REPRODUCTIVE LABOR IN SENDING AND RECEIVING NATIONS

Migrant Filipina domestic workers depart from a system of gender stratification in the Philippines only to enter another one in the advanced capitalist and industrialized countries of the United States and Italy. In both sending and receiving nations, they confront societies with similar gender ideologies concerning the division of labor in the family; that is, reproductive labor is relegated to women. Yet, in the receiving nation of either Italy or the United States, racial, class, and citizenship inequalities aggravate the position of migrant Filipinas as women (Andall 1992; Nakano Glenn 1992). In this section, I discuss the politics of reproductive labor at both ends of the migration spectrum. My discussion gives greater consideration to those in the receiving nations, because of their greater relevance for our understanding of the labor market incorporation of migrant Filipina domestic workers in globalization.

In the Philippines, men are expected to sustain the family and women to reproduce family life. In fact, ideological constructs of feminine identity are molded from “mothering and caring roles in the domestic arena” (Israel-Sobritchea 1990). The ideology of women as care-takers constrains the productive labor activities of women in many ways, including sex segregating them into jobs resembling “wife-and-mother roles” (Chant and McIlwaine 1995; Uy Eviota 1992), such as household work on plantations and professional work in nursing and teaching. Because women are expected only to subsidize the primary income of men, women’s jobs are often less valued and far less lucrative than comparable men’s work (e.g., fieldwork as opposed to household work in plantations) (Uy Eviota 1992). Despite these constraints, women do participate in the productive labor force (Aguilar 1988) and in 1992, the female share of total employment in the Philippines reached 37.7 percent (Chant 1997). Considering that only 2 percent of all households in the Philippines can afford to hire domestic help, these working women are plagued by the double day (Aguilar 1988).

For the remainder of this section, I situate the migration of Filipina domestic workers in the politics of reproductive labor in the receiving countries of the United States and Italy. I do so to place their labor market incorporation in the context of the racial division of reproductive labor. In the United States, women represented 46.5 percent of gainfully employed workers in 1992, a considerable increase over 32.1 percent in 1960 (Reskin and Padavic 1994, 24-25). In Italy, the downward trend in the labor force participation of women from 1959 to 1972 has since reversed (Meyer 1987). In fact, Italy has witnessed an increasing number of married women in the labor force, but a surprising decline among younger single women (Goddard
1996). It has been argued that Italian women are turning away from reproducing families and concentrating on their advancement in the labor market (Specter 1998). Italy, although known to be “the traditional ‘bambini’ country,” has the lowest birthrate in the world at only 9.6 per 1,000 inhabitants (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, 102).

According to Arlie Hochschild (1989), at least in the United States, the majority of men do less housework than do their gainfully employed partners, and men who earned less than their wives were even less likely to share housework. And so today, a significantly larger number of women have to cope with the double day. Similarly in Italy, doppio lavoro (literally meaning double work) has been a recurring theme in the Italian feminist movement since the early 1970s (Chiavola Birnbaum 1986). Notably, the amount of household work expected of women has increased with advances in technology (Glazer 1993).

While a higher income does not guarantee a more gender egalitarian distribution of housework, it does give families the flexibility to afford the services of other women. To ease the double day, many overwhelmed women in the United States have turned to day care centers and family day care providers, nursing homes, after-school baby-sitters, and also privately hired domestic workers (Glazer 1993; Katz Rothman 1989; Nakano Glenn 1992; Nelson 1990; Reskin and Padavic 1994). In Italy, this same trend is reflected in the concentration of women from the Philippines, Cape Verde, and Peru in domestic services as well as the estimated 36.4 percent of illegal workers who are doing domestic work (Calavita 1994). Notably, Italian women have turned to new tactics to minimize their reproductive labor. While Italian feminists demanded “wages for housework” in the 1970s (Chiavola Birnbaum 1986, 135), it can be said that Italian women have since taken to refusing to reproduce the family altogether. Without doubt, this is a unique means by which many Italian women minimize their reproductive labor directly.

The labor market incorporation of migrant Filipina domestic workers into the United States and Italy fits into Nakano Glenn’s schema. In both countries, they join the ranks of other groups of subordinated women who have historically performed the reproductive labor of more privileged women. In making this assertion, I do not claim that Filipinas in the United States are defined racially as domestic workers like Latina migrants. They are more so categorized and identified as nurses, because of their concentration in health care services. Yet, in the Filipino migrant community, it is known that recent migrants frequently turn to domestic work.3

Reflecting the observations of Nakano Glenn, Andall (1992, 43) associates the entrance of migrant women into Italy—as they are concentrated in domestic work—with the entrance of Italian women into the labor force:

The migration of women into Italy began at the same time as a number of changes were taking place in the role and position of Italian women within society . . . in the 1970s, an increased number of Italian women began to assert themselves outside the domestic sphere. . . . This change in Italian women’s activity became a pull factor in the migration of women from developing countries.
Nakano Glenn’s (1992) formulation of the racial division of reproductive labor suggests that the demand for low-wage service workers, particularly domestic workers, arises not solely from the concentration of highly specialized professional services in global cities, as Sassen has argued correctly, but also from persisting gender inequalities in the families of these professionals. To fully consider the politics of reproductive labor in the migration of Filipina domestic workers, I now expand and reformulate the concept of the racial division of reproductive labor by placing it in a transnational setting. In doing so, I situate the increasing demand for paid reproductive labor in receiving nations in the context of the globalization of the market economy.

THE INTERNATIONAL DIVISION OF REPRODUCTIVE LABOR

Globalization has triggered the formation of a singular market economy. As such, production activities in one area can no longer be understood solely from a local perspective. Likewise, I argue that reproduction activities, especially as they have been increasingly commodified, have to be situated in the context of this singular market economy. In this sense, I insist that reproduction activities in one area have concrete ties to reproduction activities in another area. With the feminization of wage labor, global capitalism is forging the creation of links among distinct systems of gender inequality. Moreover, the migration of women connects systems of gender inequality in both sending and receiving nations to global capitalism. All of these processes occur in the formation of the international division of reproductive labor.

This division of labor places Nakano Glenn’s (1992) “racial division of reproductive labor” in an international context under the auspices of Saskia Sassen’s discussion of the incorporation of women from developing countries into the global economy. It is a transnational division of labor that is shaped simultaneously by global capitalism, gender inequality in the sending country, and gender inequality in the receiving country. This division of labor determines the migration and entrance into domestic service of women from the Philippines.

The international transfer of caretaking is a distinct form of the international division of labor in which Filipina domestic workers perform the reproductive labor or the “private sphere” responsibilities of class-privileged women in industrialized countries as they leave other women in the Philippines to perform their own. This international division of labor refers to a three-tier transfer of reproductive labor among women in two nation-states. These groups of women are (1) middle-class women in receiving countries, (2) migrant Filipina domestic workers, and (3) Filipina domestic workers in the Philippines who are too poor to migrate.

Under the international transfer of caretaking, women’s migration from the Philippines is embedded in the process of global capitalism. At the same time, gender is
also a central factor of their migration. The process of migration for women involves escaping their gender roles in the Philippines, easing the gender constraints of the women who employ them in industrialized countries, and finally relegating their gender roles to women left in the Philippines.4

The international transfer of caretaking refers to a social, political, and economic relationship between women in the global labor market. This division of labor is a structural relationship based on the class, race, gender, and (nation-based) citizenship of women. In the international transfer of caretaking, Filipina domestic workers do not just ease the entrance of other women into the paid labor force but also assist in the economic growth of receiving countries. Patricia Licuanan (1994, 109), in reference to households in Hong Kong and Singapore, explains,

Households are said to have benefited greatly by the import of domestic workers. Family income has increased because the wife and other women members of working age are freed from domestic chores and are able to join the labour force. This higher income would normally result in the enlargement of the consumer market and greater demand on production and consequently a growth in the economy.

In the article “Economy Menders,” Linda Layosa (1995, 7), the editor of the transnational monthly magazine Tinig Filipino, describes the international transfer of caretaking:

Indeed, our women have partially been liberated from the anguish of their day-to-day existence with their families and from economic problems, only to be enslaved again in the confines of another home, most of the time trampling their rights as human beings . . . we have to face the reality that many of our women will be compelled to leave the confines of their own tidy bedrooms and their spotless kitchens only to clean another household, to mend other’s torn clothes at the same time mend our tattered economy.

In her description, she falls short of mentioning who takes up the household work that migrant Filipina domestic workers abandon upon migration. Most likely, they are other female relatives, but also less privileged Filipina women, women unable to afford the high costs of seeking employment outside of the Philippines. Thus, migrant Filipina domestic workers are in the middle of the three-tier hierarchy of the international transfer of caretaking.

The case of Carmen Ronquillo provides a good illustration of the international transfer of caretaking.5 Carmen is simultaneously a domestic worker of a professional woman in Rome and an employer of a domestic worker in the Philippines. Carmen describes her relationship to each of these two women:

When coming here, I mentally surrendered myself and forced my pride away from me to prepare myself. But I lost a lot of weight. I was not used to the work. You see, I had maids in the Philippines. I have a maid in the Philippines that has worked for me since my daughter was born twenty-four years ago. She is still with me. I paid her three hundred pesos before and now I pay her one thousand pesos.6
I am a little bit luckier than others because I run the entire household. My employer is a divorced woman who is an architect. She does not have time to run her household so I do all the shopping. I am the one budgeting. I am the one cooking. [Laughs.] And I am the one cleaning too. She has a 24 and 26 year old. The older one graduated already and is an electrical engineer. The other one is taking up philosophy. They still live with her. . . . She has been my only employer. I stayed with her because I feel at home with her. She never commands. She never orders me to do this and to do that.

The hierarchical and interdependent relationship between Carmen, her employer in Italy, and her domestic worker in the Philippines forms from the unequal development of industrialized and developing countries in transnational capitalism, class differences in the Philippines, and the relegation of reproductive labor to women. The case of Carmen Ronquillo clearly exemplifies how three distinct groups of women participate in the international transfer of caretaking. While Carmen frees her employer (the architect) of domestic responsibilities, a lower paid domestic worker does the household work for Carmen and her family.

Wage differences of domestic workers illuminate the economic disparity among nations in transnational capitalism. A domestic worker in Italy such as Carmen could receive U.S.$1,000 per month for her labor:

I earn 1,500,000 lira (U.S.$1,000) and she pays for my benefits (e.g., medical coverage). On Sundays, I have a part-time (job), I clean her office in the morning and she pays me 300,000 lira (U.S.$200). I am very fortunate because she always gives me my holiday pay (August) and my thirteenth month pay in December. Plus, she gives me my liquidation pay at the end of the year. Employers here are required to give you a liquidation pay—equivalent to your monthly salary for every year you worked for them, but they usually give it to you when you leave but she insists on paying me at the end of the year. So, on December, I always receive 5,400,000 lira (U.S.$3,600).

The wages of Carmen easily afford her a domestic worker in the Philippines, who, on average, only earns the below-poverty wage of U.S.$40 per month. Moreover, the domestic worker in the Philippines, in exchange for her labor, does not receive the additional work benefits Carmen receives for the same labor, for example, medical coverage. Not surprisingly, migrant Filipina domestic workers, as shown by their high level of educational attainment, tend to have more resources and belong in a more comfortable class strata than do domestic workers in the Philippines. Such resources often enable Carmen and other migrant Filipina women to afford the option of working outside of the country.

**THE OVERLOOKED PARTICIPANTS: CHILDREN AND WOMEN IN THE PHILIPPINES**

The private world remains devalued, as poor people become the wives and mothers of the world, cleaning the toilets and raising the children. The devaluing of certain work,
of nurturance, of private “domestic” work, remains: rearing children is roughly on a par—certainly in terms of salary—with cleaning the toilet. (Katz Rothman 1989, 252)

While the devaluation of “rearing children” could be lamented as a tragedy for children, the experiences of the different groups of children (and elderly) in the international transfer of caretaking should be distinguished between those who remain cared for and those who are not and those who regularly see their parents/children and those who cannot. The fact that “rearing children is roughly on a par . . . with cleaning the toilet” means that migrant Filipina domestic workers usually cannot afford the higher costs of maintaining a family in industrialized countries due to their meager wages. In the United States, where people of color have traditionally been caregivers and domestic workers for white families, mothering is diverted away from people of color families. Sau-ling Wong (1994, 69) defines diverted mothering to be the process in which the “time and energy available for mothering are diverted from those who, by kinship or communal ties, are their more rightful recipients.” Historically, a married Black domestic worker in the United States “typically saw her children once every two weeks, leaving them in the care of the husband or older siblings, while remaining on call around the clock for the employer’s children” (Wong 1994, 71). Now, in an international context, the same pattern of diverted mothering could be described for Filipina, Latina, and Caribbean domestic workers as many are forced to leave their children behind in the country of origin (Colen 1995; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997).7 The question then is, Who cares for these “other” children?

In the Philippines, it is unusual for fathers to nurture and care for their children, but, considering that not all migrant Filipina domestic workers hire domestic workers, some are forced to give in to the renegotiations of household division of labor led by the migration of their wives. Other female relatives often take over the household work of migrant Filipinas. In these cases, nonegalitarian relations among family members should be acknowledged considering that for female family members left in the Philippines, “the mobility they might achieve through migration is severely curtailed” (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994, 241). However, hired domestic workers—a live-in housekeeper or labandera (laundry woman who hand washes clothes)—also free migrant Filipina domestics of their household labor. Almost all of my interviewees in both Rome and Los Angeles hire domestic workers in the Philippines. This should not be surprising considering that the average wage of domestics in the Philippines is considerably less than the average wage of migrant domestics.

In discussions of the international division of (productive) labor, women who cannot afford to work as domestic workers in other countries are equated with those who do so. For example, migrant Filipina domestic workers and female low-wage workers in the Philippines are considered to be equally displaced in global capitalism. Maya Areza, who dreams of retiring in the Philippines after a few more years
in the United States, reminds us of the structural inequalities characterizing relations among women in developing countries when she states,

When I retire I plan to go home for good. I plan to stay at my parents’ house... I would just lounge and smoke. I will get a domestic helper who I can ask to get my cigarettes for me... My children and my cousins all have domestic workers. You can hire one if you have money. It’s cheap, only one thousand pesos ($40). Here, you earn $1,000 doing the same kind of work you would do for one thousand pesos there! I won’t have a problem with hiring one.

Because migrant Filipina domestic workers are usually in the middle of the hierarchical chain of caretaking, they maintain unequal relations with less privileged women in the Philippines. Under the international transfer of caretaking, the unequal economic standing of nation-states and discrepancies in monetary currencies are prominent factors that distinguish the position of female low-wage workers in advanced, capitalist, and developing countries. They differentiate, for example, the position of domestic workers in the United States and Italy from domestic workers in the Philippines. Migrant Filipina domestic workers surely take advantage of these differences in wages and maintain a direct hierarchical relationship with the domestic workers whom they hire in the Philippines. In the international transfer of caretaking, domestic workers (e.g., housekeepers and laundry women) hired by families of domestic workers abroad are the truly subaltern women.

**THE SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF “BEING IN THE MIDDLE”**

So far, I have established the formation of the international division of reproductive labor. As a structural process that determines the migration of Filipina domestic workers, this division of labor also results in particular social consequences that are embodied in the lived experience of its participants. In this section, I illuminate the social consequences of “being in the middle” of this division of labor. The process in which reproductive labor is transferred to migrant Filipinas is not as smooth as it sounds. For many, the process involves multiple contradictions in their positions in the family and the labor market.

To illuminate the consequences of “being in the middle,” I return to the story of Carmen Ronquillo. Before migrating to Rome, Carmen, who is in her mid-40s, had worked for 15 years as a project manager of the military food services at Clark Air Force Base. With the closure of this U.S. military base in 1992, Carmen thought that she could not find a job that offered a comparably lucrative income in the Philippines. Therefore, Carmen decided to follow her sister to Rome, where she could earn much more as a domestic worker than as a professional in the Philippines. Seeking employment in Italy was a huge investment for her family. Carmen paid an agency U.S.$5,000 to enter Italy without a visa. The high costs of migration from the Philippines suggest that this option is usually limited to those with financial
means. Consequently, labor migration for Carmen and the many other middle-class women who can afford to leave the Philippines usually entails the emotional strains brought by their downward mobility to the lower status job of domestic work. As Carmen describes,

My life is difficult here. Would you believe that here I am a “physical laborer”? When I was working in the Philippines, I was the one supervising the supervisors. [Laughs.] So, when I came here, especially when I cleaned the bathrooms, I would talk to myself. [Laughs hysterically.] I would commend and praise myself, telling myself, “Oh, you clean the corners very well.” [Laughs.] You see, in my old job, I would always check the corners first, that was how I checked if my workers had cleaned the place well. So, sometimes I would just cry. I felt like I was slapped in the face. I resent the fact that we cannot use our skills especially because most of us Filipinos here are professionals. We should be able to do other kinds of work because if you only do housework, your brain deteriorates. Your knowledge deteriorates. Your whole being is that of a maid.

As reflected in the bitter attitude of Carmen toward domestic work, a central contradiction of being in the middle of the international transfer of caretaking is the experience of conflicting class mobility. For migrant Filipinas, domestic work simultaneously involves an increase and decrease in class status. They earn more than they ever would have if they had stayed as professional women in the Philippines. Yet, at the same time, they experience a sharp decline in occupational status and face a discrepancy between their current occupation and actual training. For the women “in the middle,” this discrepancy highlights the low status of domestic work.

Vanessa Dulang, an office worker in the Philippines and domestic worker in Rome since 1990, describes the gains and losses that migrant women such as herself incur from the limited labor market option of either staying in the Philippines or working as a domestic outside of the country:

Life is hard in the Philippines. You don’t earn enough. Nothing will happen to you if you stay there. Even though you are a maid here, at least you are earning money. What I couldn’t buy in the Philippines, I could buy here. . . . But work is difficult. You bend your back scrubbing. You experience what you would never experience in the Philippines. In the Philippines, your work is light but you don’t have any money. Here you make money, but your body is exhausted.

In the spatial politics of globalization—unequal development of regions—the achievement of material security in the Philippines entails the experience of downward mobility in other countries. According to Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc (1994, 234), this decline in social status in migration generally pushes migrants to build “deterritorialized national identities.” They cope with their marginal status in the receiving country by basing their identities on the increase in their class status in the country of origin. In the same vein, migrant Filipina domestic workers resolve their conflicting class mobility by stressing their higher social and class status in the Philippines.
They do just that by hiring their very own domestic workers or perceiving themselves as rightful beneficiaries of servitude. In this way, they are able to mitigate their loss of status in migration. As Joy Manlapit of Los Angeles tells me,

When I go back, I want to experience being able to be my own boss in the house. I want to be able to order someone to make me coffee, to serve me food. That is good. That is how you can take back all the hardships you experienced before. That is something you struggled for.

Gloria Yogore, her counterpart in Rome, finds similar comfort in the knowledge of the higher social status she occupies and will occupy once she returns to the Philippines:

In the Philippines, I have maids. When I came here, I kept on thinking that in the Philippines, I have maids and here I am one. I thought to myself that once I go back to the Philippines, I will not lift my finger and I will be the signora. [Laughs.] My hands will be rested and manicured and I will wake up at 12 o’clock noon.

Ironically, migrant Filipina domestic workers find comfort from the contradiction of the simultaneous decline and increase in their class background by stressing the greater privilege that they have and will have in relation to poorer women in the Philippines.

Another consequence of being in the middle is the experience of the pain of family separation. Being in the middle is contingent on being part of a transnational household, meaning a household whose members are located in two or more nation-states. Among my interviewees, 41 of 46 women in Rome and 20 of 26 women in Los Angeles maintain such households. I placed my interviewees categorically under this type of household structure on the basis that their remittances sustain the day-to-day living expenses of their immediate and extended families in the Philippines. Almost all of the never-married single women without children in my sample (14 in Rome and 6 in Los Angeles) are, in fact, part of transnational households. Notably, only 1 single woman does not send remittances to the Philippines regularly.

Emotional strains of transnational family life include feelings of loss, guilt, and loneliness for the mothers and daughters working as domestics in other countries. Plagued by the pain of family separation, women like Carmen struggle with the emotional strains of family separation in their daily lives:

My son, whenever he writes me, he always draws the head of Fido the dog with tears on the eyes. Whenever he goes to mass on Sundays, he tells me that he misses me more because he sees his friends with their mothers. Then, he comes home and cries. He says that he does not want his father to see him crying so he locks himself in his room. When I think of them [her children] is when I feel worst about being here. I was very very close to my two children. . . . Whenever I think of my children, I am struck with this terrible loneliness.
Being in the middle of the international division of reproductive labor entails geographical distance in families and consequently emotional strains for “lonely” mothers and “miserable” children in the Philippines.

Another contradiction of being in the middle of the international division of reproductive labor or the international transfer of caretaking is the fact that women in the middle must care for someone else’s grandchildren, children, or parents while unable to care for their own. In contrast to the two other social consequences that I have previously described, this is not unique to the transnational situation of migrant domestic workers. It has been observed in the United States with nonmigrant domestics (Katzman 1978). However, it does reflect one of the structural constraints faced by Filipina domestic workers in the process of globalization: The choice of maximizing their earnings as transnational low-wage workers denies them the intimacy of the family. Thus, caregiving is made a more painful experience. As Christina Manansala, a domestic worker in Rome since 1990, states, “Of course it is hard to take care of other children. Why should I be taking care of other children when I cannot take care of my own child myself?” Another domestic worker in Rome adds,

Sometimes when I look at the children that I care for, I feel like crying. I always think about how if we did not need the money, we would all be together and I would be raising my children myself. (Analin Mahusay, children are three and five years old)

The pain of caregiving leads to another contradiction and that is the experience of displaced mothering or more generally, displaced caretaking, which is also a social consequence that is not unique to the international division of reproductive labor.

Unable to take care of their own families, migrant Filipina domestic workers, like the nonmigrant domestics forced into “diverted mothering” in the United States, find themselves needing to “pour [their] love” to their wards. As Vicky Diaz, a mother in Los Angeles who left five children between the ages of 2 and 10 years old in the Philippines 10 years ago, describes her relationship to her ward, “The only thing you can do is give all your love to the child. In my absence from my children, the most I could do with my situation is give all my love to that child.” Trinidad Borromeo of Rome finds similar comfort from “pouring her love” to her elderly ward, “When I take care of an elderly, I treat her like she is my own mother.” Notably, some women develop an aversion to caregiving, like Ruby Mercado of Rome, who states, “I do not like taking care of children when I could not take care of my own children. It hurt too much.” However, most of my interviewees do indeed feel less guilt for leaving behind their families in the Philippines when caring for and “pouring [their] love” to another family. Ironically, as mothering is transferred to domestic workers, those without children, such as Jerrisa Lim of Los Angeles, begin to feel that they know what it is like to mother: “After doing child care, I feel like I experienced what it is like to be a mother. It is hard to have children. There are pleasures that go with it. That is true. But it is hard.” The idea that domestic work
involves the act of "pouring love" suggests that a certain degree of emotional bonds to dependents in the family, including children and elderly persons, are passed down in the transfer of caretaking. By operating in the realm of emotion, the commodification of caretaking is further heightened in globalization.

CONCLUSION

The hierarchy of womanhood—based on race, class, and nation—establishes a work transfer system of reproductive labor among women—the international transfer of caretaking. It is a distinct form of transnational division of labor that links women in an interdependent relationship. Filipina domestic workers perform the reproductive labor of more privileged women in industrialized countries as they relegate their reproductive labor to poorer women left in the Philippines. The international division of reproductive labor shows us that production is not the sole means by which international divisions of labor operate in the global economy. Local economies are not solely linked by the manufacturing production of goods. In globalization, the transfer of reproductive labor moves beyond territorial borders to connect separate nation-states. The extension of reproductive labor to a transnational terrain is embedded in the operation of transnational families and the constant flow of resources from migrant domestic workers to the families that they continue to support in the Philippines. While acting as the primary income earners of their families, migrant Filipina domestic workers hire poorer domestic workers to perform the household duties that are traditionally relegated to them as women. In this way, they continue to remain responsible for the reproductive labor in their families but at the same time, as migrant workers, take on the responsibility of productive labor.

The formulation of the international division of reproductive labor treats gender as a central analytical lens for understanding the migration of Filipina domestic workers. It shows that the movement of Filipina domestic workers is embedded in a gendered system of transnational capitalism. While forces of global capitalism spur the labor migration of Filipina domestic workers, the demand for their labor also results from gender inequities in receiving nations, specifically the relegation of reproductive labor to women. This transfer of labor strongly suggests that despite their increasing rate of labor market participation, women continue to remain responsible for reproductive labor in both sending and receiving countries. At both ends of the migratory stream, they have not been able to negotiate directly with male counterparts for a fairer division of household work but instead have had to rely on their race and/or class privilege by participating in the transnational transfer of gender constraints to less-privileged women.

Ironically, women in industrialized (Western) countries are often assumed to be more liberated than women are in developing countries. Yet, many women are able to pursue careers as their male counterparts do because disadvantaged migrant
women and other women of color are stepping into their old shoes and doing their household work for them. As women transfer their reproductive labor to less and less privileged women, we can see that the traditional division of labor in the patriarchal nuclear household has not been significantly renegotiated in various countries in the world. This is one of the central reasons why there is a need for Filipina domestic workers in more than 100 countries today.

NOTES

1. Responding to the shortage of medical personnel in the U.S. labor market, Filipina nurses entered the United States through the third preference category of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act with the assistance of recruitment agencies in both the Philippines and the United States. See Ong and Azores (1994) for an extensive discussion of the migration of Filipina nurses.

2. One thousand five hundred lira is approximately one U.S. dollar.

3. This is caused by a combination of their undocumented status, inability to use their training and work experience from the Philippines, and/or the ethnic niche in caregiving that has developed in the Filipino migrant community. In a study of undocumented women in the United States, Hogeland and Rosen (1990, 43) found that 64 percent of 57 survey participants from the Philippines are employed as domestic workers.

4. Notably, in the Philippines, older (female) children, not fathers, are more likely to look after younger siblings while their mothers work (Chant and McIlwaine 1995). In addition, daughters are traditionally expected to care for aging parents.

5. I use pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of my informants.

6. One thousand pesos amount to approximately U.S.$40.

7. In most other receiving nations, migrant Filipinos are deterred from family migration by their relegation to the status of temporary migrants or their ineligibility for family reunification (Constable 1997).

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‘Reproachable Victims’? Representations and Self-representations of Russian Women Involved in Transnational Prostitution

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‘Reproachable Victims’? Representations and Self-representations of Russian Women Involved in Transnational Prostitution

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ABSTRACT The article investigates how the concept of victimhood is constructed within debates on transnational prostitution and trafficking, and how representations of victimhood intersect with representations of the person/self, class, ethnicity, gender and nationality. Using research findings based on observation and interviews with women from post-Soviet societies involved in prostitution in Norway, we discuss how the women embrace, resist or rework dominant representations of migrant prostitution and attendant notions of victimhood, as well as how they relate to multiple notions of the person/self, femininity and nation through their handling of the stigma of prostitution.

KEYWORDS Transnational prostitution, female migration, trafficking, victimhood, person/self

Introduction

Transnational prostitution is high on the political agenda in Western countries. Central to the issue is a preoccupation with migrant women involved in prostitution being possible victims of trafficking or of other forms of exploitation related to prostitution and migration. Our aim is to address how the concept of victimhood is constructed within debates on transnational prostitution and trafficking, and to examine how migrant women involved in prostitution relate to dominant representations of themselves and attendant notions of victimhood.

The representation of migrant women involved in prostitution as victims underpins current policies designed to counter trafficking. The criminalization
of prostitution has repeatedly been challenged by scholars and sex-work activists, who argue that these women should be seen as active subjects rather than passive victims. In this article, we attempt to take this debate one step further by investigating the conceptions of self that animate the struggle surrounding the representation of migrant women involved in prostitution as victims and by exploring how representations of victimhood intersect with representations of class, ethnicity, gender and nationality.

Transnational prostitution is an issue well suited to the exploration of notions of the self, victimhood and agency, since the relationship between choice and force is at the core of both scholarly and political debates concerning prostitution and migration. Using research findings based on interviews with women from post-Soviet societies who are involved in prostitution in Norway, we discuss how they embrace, resist or rework such representations, as well as how they relate to multiple notions of the person/self, femininity and nation in their personal negotiations with the stigma surrounding prostitution.

Transnational Prostitution in Norway

The Norwegian prostitution market has been international for 20 years. Women from Thailand set up massage parlours in the late 1980s and women from the Dominican Republic started to appear on the streets at the beginning of the 1990s. In the late 1990s, women from former Soviet states also began to appear. The dissolution of the Soviet Union enabled new transborder flows of people, money and goods. Russian women, in particular, crossed the border into Norway and began to enter into various types of romantic, social and economic cross-border relationships. One effect of these new flows was the establishment of new local prostitution markets on both sides of the border. The presence of Russian migrant women involved in prostitution in the northernmost parts of Norway attracted considerable media attention, with concern being voiced both about how local communities were being affected and about the welfare of the women themselves (Stenvoll 2002).

Later, women from Russia, the Baltic States and the Balkans also appeared on the prostitution scene in Oslo. Concerns that the women could have been subjected to exploitation during their migration and/or prostitution were increasingly raised in the media and in public debates. Well before the first case of ‘trafficking’ was identified in the courts, the phenomenon of migrant prostitution from post-Soviet societies came to be termed ‘trafficking’ in public discussions. This post-2000 development can be linked to the emerging
international discourse concerning trafficking, which altered the way in which foreign women’s prostitution was represented. This shift in representation was also related to the fact that the prostitution had moved from the periphery of northern Norway and local communities with long-standing border relations with Russia where it had previously been embedded to the capital city.

Since ‘trafficking’ first appeared on the public agenda in Norway, it has received massive attention from the media, politicians and activists. Three governmental action plans were produced within four years and numerous meetings and seminars were organized by governmental bodies and NGOs every year. Concerns about migrant women being trafficked into prostitution served as a powerful argument in the debates leading up to a new law prohibiting the buying of sexual services, which came into effect in 2009. Contemporary concerns about trafficking in Norway represent both continuities and discontinuities with earlier concerns and interventions vis-à-vis women engaged in prostitution. Prostitution as such in Norway has been regulated in the penal code for more than 200 years, with concerns, objects and modes of intervention varying according to shifting societal norms. From the late 1970s onwards, there had been an increased focus on prostitution as a social problem with attendant notions of victimhood (Skilbrei & Renland 2008). With the juridicalization of the prostitution field in the last decade and the increased focus on trafficking, a formal victim position with accompanying rights has been established in the legal system. All non-Norwegian women involved in prostitution are now targeted as possible victims. To a considerable extent, then, ‘migrant women involved in prostitution’ and ‘victims of trafficking’ are conflated. Even though all foreign women involved in prostitution are considered possible victims, post-Soviet women in particular seem to occupy a special position in Norwegian discourses concerning trafficking as they have come to personify the victim in popular and political representations.

**Self-representation and the Problems of ‘Giving Voice’**

This article is based on interviews conducted during 2005 with women from the former Soviet Union who identified themselves as ethnic Russians working in prostitution in Oslo. The women interviewed had been involved in situations that fit the legal definition of human trafficking, as defined in Article 224 of the Norwegian Penal code. (This was introduced in 2003 in order to fulfil the obligations outlined by the UN Palermo Protocol on trafficking). The women’s experiences lie along a continuum ranging from deceit through threats of violence and actual acts of violence. The women who figure here
were chosen to represent the variation in how they were recruited into prostitution and in how their migration had been undertaken. The interviews were carried out in the context of a larger research project that included observations on the streets, in ‘apartment prostitution’ and other locations, such as bars and strip venues in the prostitution district of Oslo. Accompanying the women in their homes and places of work made it possible to understand the relationships between their involvement in prostitution and other aspects of their lives. This material was complemented by interviews and discussions with professions including social and health work, with the police, as well as analyses of media, policy and legal discourses on transnational prostitution to Norway.

The women were between 20 and 51 years old. Some had been involved in prostitution for many years, while others had just begun. Some were married with children, while others had only recently left their parental home. At the time of the interviews, the women lived their lives largely as ‘transmigrants’ (Glick-Schiller et al. 1992), in the sense that the frequency and length of their stays in Norway, as well as their stays in other countries, varied considerably. Their mobility was structured both by legal considerations relating to migration and by the informal organization of transnational prostitution markets (involving factors such as transportation, the provision of papers and the setting up process for working in prostitution). Most maintained significant social and cultural ties to the place from which they had migrated. Relationships to ‘back home’ tended to become increasingly problematic over time, however, not least because of the multiple demands involved in meeting the economic and other expectations of kin and because they had to hide their involvement in prostitution. Most women initially thought of migration as something temporary. After some years as transmigrants, however, some women could envisage living in Norway permanently.

In this article, we have chosen to present some excerpts from the interview material to highlight issues that emerged as central to this and previous studies. The excerpts are not intended to be ‘representative’, but to bring out some of the breadth of experiences of post-Soviet women involved in prostitution in Norway. A reliance on interview data in some ways fits well with feminist methodological strategies aimed at ‘giving voice’ to otherwise muted groups (Ardener 1978). It also helps in developing conceptual and theoretical categories on the basis of women’s experience, as described in feminist standpoint epistemologies (Harding 1991). Although ‘giving voice’ and taking women’s lived experiences as a starting point may be important strategies, there are several
problems associated with this approach (O’Connell Davidson 1998). One is that, since migrant women involved in prostitution do not speak with one voice, one might be inclined to give authority to accounts that support one’s own preconceptions, a tendency demonstrated by contemporary debates over victimhood in migrant prostitution. The accounts of the same person may also be ambivalent and unsettled, containing ‘several voices’ that speak differently in different contexts (Kimura 2008). In addition, the attempt to draw a conceptual framework and conceptual understandings from the experiences of women involved in prostitution is problematic because their experiences, and the way they account for them, are (as with all people) informed by particular notions of the self, of freedom or lack thereof, and of tradition and modernity, that are taken from dominant popular representations and can be traced in various attempts to theorize the experiences of women involved in prostitution (Bernstein 2007; O’Connell Davidson 1998). The self-representations of women involved in prostitution are not unmediated by or independent of existing regimes of representation, thus rendering the idea of ‘giving voice’ problematic. Instead of identifying one unitary voice, then, we want to show how various voices arise out of the particular positionings adopted by these Russian women.

**Formation of the Self**

Representations (including self-representations) of migrant women involved in prostitution, as well as attendant notions and contestations of victimhood, draw on cultural models of the person/self. The dominant model of the person/self in contemporary Western Europe is arguably ‘one which characterizes the individual as rational, autonomous and unitary. According to this model, individuals are the authors of their own experience and knowledge of the world, and their existence is enshrined in post-Enlightenment philosophy, in political theory and in legislation’ (Moore 1994:35). Moore importantly notes that this dominant model of the person/self is a generalized model that stands in a complex relationship to the everyday experiences and practices of women and men in Europe. The model is subject to specific and changing emphasis according to particular social and cultural contexts and exists along with alternative discourses of the person/self found in particular societies (Moore 1994). Nevertheless, we would argue that the model is effective in shaping some important aspects of contemporary representations and self-representations of migrant women involved in prostitution. More precisely, the model constitutes a norm in relation to which people are differently positioned along the lines of
class, ethnicity, gender and nationality (Skeggs 2004). In order to investigate the (self-)representations that figure here, we therefore investigate how dominant notions of the person/self intersect with discourses of class, ethnicity, gender and nationality, in the self-representations of the women.

The notion of agency is crucial to the dominant Western European model of the person/self outlined above. Agency is particularly important when it comes to investigating contestations of victimhood because notions of agency are central to attributing responsibility and accountability (Asad 2003:74). Guilt and innocence, and therefore punishment or exoneration, are based upon the attribution of agency. Within this matrix, ‘agents’ (representing and asserting themselves as responsible and intentional) and ‘victims’ (the passive objects of chance or cruelty) are construed as opposites (Asad 2003:79).

Skeggs (2004) argues that discourses of choice are central to the Western production of ideas of ‘individuality’. Making a ‘choice’ (often through acts of consumption) is read as the primary indicator of agency in late-capitalist societies. Individuality is partly produced by consuming particular lifestyles and by attaching particular objects to oneself. Access to making choices through consumption is unevenly distributed. It is thus a particularly ‘classed’ way of operating in the world (Skeggs 2004:139). In a similar vein, feminist and post-colonial critics have convincingly argued that the self of modernity, although presumably universal and neutral, is arguably constructed on a naturalized version of the middle-class, white, heterosexual, Western male, in relation to whom those who are differently marked by their class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and national belonging appear as ‘others’. With respect to discourses on migrant women in prostitution and trafficking, such post-colonial criticism (Agústín 2007; Doezema 2001; Kapur 2001; Kempadoo 1998; Sullivan 2003) raises important questions about power relationships related to the positioning of the modern ‘self’ as knowledgeable and civilized and as in a position to rescue the ignorant, tradition-bound and victimized ‘other’. How do dominant discourses of the person/self in Western modernity inform representations of migrant women in prostitution, and how does this model, together with post-Soviet transformations of notions of the person/self, relate to the self-representations, experiences and practices of women from post-Soviet space?

**Victimhood in Discourses of Trafficking and Prostitution**

The acknowledgement of women as victims of domestic and sexualized violence has been central to the feminist movement in the sense that being
recognized as a victim is supposed to grant rights to those who have been harmed. Feminist scholarship has consequently debated whether such a rights-based approach, despite its universalistic idiom, actually contributes to the production of ‘victim’ as an identity category in addition to a legal one (Brown 1995; Walklate 2000). Through objectification and individualization (Foucault 1977), the ‘victim’ identity that can be mobilized as a basis for political claims also simultaneously attaches the particular characteristics and attributes associated with victimhood to classed, ethnicized and gendered subjects.8

In particular, it has been argued that women-as-victims are often construed as weak, childlike and lacking in agency (Walklate 2000). In legal terms, the victim of trafficking is like a child, since the victim’s consent is irrelevant.9 In the context of non-trafficking-related prostitution, women are also often represented as having inevitably fallen into prostitution because of, for example, childhood trauma, exposure to violence, drug use and poverty or structural reasons (see, e.g. Høigaard & Finstad 1992; Farley & Kelly 2000).

Radical feminists have made a point of not separating the ‘innocent’ victims of trafficking from ‘worldly-wise’ women involved in prostitution, arguing instead that they are all victims of patriarchy and of men’s violence (Scoular 2004). In opposition to this argument, those whom Outshoorn (2005) terms pro-rights feminists emphasize differences in access to choice and the need to make a distinction between various conditions of prostitution. The structure of these debates often tends to result in a polarization of arguments, thereby reinforcing instead of challenging the dichotomy between passive victims and actively choosing agents (Doezema 1998). In these debates, the biographies and testimonies provided by migrant women involved in prostitution as elicited in courtrooms, activist meetings, the media, by clients and by researchers provide the material for competing claims about the morality and politics of prostitution.

It has been argued that self-representations that do not draw on the victim category are eclipsed by the power of the latter (Kimura 2008). This has consequences for the ability of women to define and be defined as choosing subjects. Because of the bifurcating structure of the debate, women have to exclude most traces of agency from their self-representations in order to be recognized as victims and most traces of victimhood to be recognized as agents. Pheterson (1996) argues, along similar lines, that women’s self-representations of their experiences of prostitution are pushed towards one or the other of two polar opposites: they either have completely free choice or no choice at all.

There is, however, another discourse at play in representations of women involved in prostitution, that which revolves around the figure of the ‘whore’. It
has been argued that discourses on prostitution and trafficking have a binary structure that opposes the victim to the ‘whore’ (Stenvoll 2002), and that by embracing the victim category, women in transnational prostitution may attempt to distance themselves from the ‘whore’ stigma (Andrijasevic 2004). According to Pheterson (1996), however, women who occupy the position of the ‘victim’ do not seem to escape the stigma of the ‘whore’ or ‘prostitute’. What interests us here is not to investigate in detail how this stigma is configured in the context of post-Soviet transnational prostitution to Norway, but to point out that the ‘whore’ stigma associated with prostitution implies certain ideas about immorality and responsibility, distributing both shame and blame to the women. While Pheterson focuses on how the ‘whore’ stigma associated with prostitution inflicts shame and blame on individual women, or even women as a category, we will show how the prostitution stigma distributes shame and blame not only to individuals and along gendered lines, but also along the lines of ethnicity and national identity. The construction of Russian women as ‘victims’ and their simultaneous stigmatization as ‘whores’ positions them as ‘reproachable victims’. In the following, we will explore how migrant women involved in prostitution negotiate the categories of ‘victim’ and ‘whore’ in their self-representations and how these categories are given meaning in the setting of contemporary Norway.

**Accountable Individuals**

Vera was brought up in Soviet Russia and Estonia in a family that experienced considerable status loss with the fall of the Soviet Union. She had to provide for herself financially from an early age. She emphasizes that she was coerced into prostitution in Estonia by her first boyfriend but that she has since travelled for the purposes of prostitution to several other European countries, both on an organized and an individual basis. When speaking about her life as a transmigrant involved in prostitution, Vera conveys considerable ambivalence:

> Everything I have achieved, I have achieved through my own efforts... I can’t say I regret anything. I can say that I regret having spent so many years on nothing; on the other hand, I have gotten experiences. I feel sorry for others, but I will not feel sorry for myself. I have always been able to quit. The time I was forced to do it, I was just unlucky. Probably I have gotten the strength to move on through what I’ve learned. The experiences I have gotten, you cannot get elsewhere.

In the interview, on the one hand, Vera argued that prostitution had enabled her to pursue her desire for a type of life that she would otherwise have been unable
to realize given her economic situation. Vera lives in a newly built apartment complex in central Oslo and takes pride in objects that point to her economic achievement. Her efforts, as she sees it, have secured not only a comfortable life here and now, but also prospects for future economic and personal self-realization. Seeing her involvement in prostitution as temporary, Vera strived to keep hidden the source of her income, which was easier when engaging in prostitution abroad than at home. On the other hand, Vera worried that it would be difficult to ‘move on in life’ and that her experiences in prostitution would make it difficult to live the stable life of an adult, to take up her studies and to get a ‘regular’ job and lead a ‘normal family life’. Notwithstanding this, Vera did not speak about her experiences of prostitution in entirely negative terms. Rather, she ascribed value to the experiences that a life involving migration and prostitution had taught her and to how these experiences had strengthened her. Vera’s account thus confirms the centrality of ‘experience’ to dominant notions of personhood/self, where experiences are related to personal growth and to knowledge of the world.

Vera does not relate to her experiences of prostitution as something she has passively suffered, but rather in terms of the obstacles she has overcome and with reference to her achievements in life. Despite the ambivalence in her account, she presents herself as responsible for her actions and their consequences. Having been ‘unlucky’ has not changed Vera’s feeling of being a successful migrant, but it has taught her how to ‘take care of herself’ (e.g. by avoiding abusive pimps, having the correct papers for migration and knowing her rights). Bad luck and individual success do not appear mutually exclusive. Rather, they are both centred on the individual instead of on structural opportunities and constraints related to class, ethnicity, gender and nationality. Vera excluded traces of violence and unfreedom from her narrative and through this she represented herself as a choosing, responsible and accountable person (Kimura 2008; Pheterson 1996; Skeggs 2004).

In line with scholarship on migration and prostitution (Agustín 2007; Andrijasevic 2004), the wish to improve the financial status of oneself and one’s family emerged as a central theme in the interviews we conducted. The women acknowledged relationships entered into (with clients, pimps, boyfriends, police and authorities) through the migration process and prostitution as potential sources of control, exploitation and violence, and developed various techniques for protecting themselves. However, this acknowledgement did not entail positioning themselves as ‘victims’ when talking about their experiences of migration and prostitution. In their self-representations, responsibility and
individualized experiences came to the fore, and in this way the women dis-
tanced themselves from the stereotype of the passive victim. Through a
variety of means, they inscribed their own experiences into the dominant
notions of the self, notions which tend to view the self as rational, able to
choose, responsible and accountable, and able to make the best of all sorts of
experiences. This type of self was also constructed by distinguishing between
Soviet and post-Soviet society. The dominant Western model of the self res-
onates with post-Soviet transformations of notions of the person/self. With
the dismantling of the Soviet Union and the introduction of capitalism and
increased contact with the West, understandings of the individual–collective
nexus have been significantly transformed.\textsuperscript{10} Along with this development,
the individual takes centre stage and questions of accountability, responsibility
and entrepreneurship come to the fore (cf. Oushakine 2001). Assuming and
ascribing individual responsibility is part of a wider construction of the social
in post-Soviet Russia, and individualized explanations tend to be privileged
over structural ones (Højdestrand 2005). Self-realization as a responsible and
choosing individual becomes the marker of the modern non-Soviet self.
Within the framework of the Soviet/post-Soviet divide, taking responsibility
for both failure and success is ascribed additional importance as a marker of
the post-Soviet individualized self. Economic responsibility and the consump-
tion of particular lifestyles are central to the production of such individualities.

Alma is originally from the Baltic States and left home 5 years previously to
sell sexual services in Scandinavia. During the interview, Alma focused on her
teenage desire for economic independence from her parents and for money
to spend. She also described herself as adventurous and as someone who
wanted to go abroad to experience new things in life. When asked why she
ended up following a friend’s advice to sell sex abroad, Alma answered:

Why I did it? Because in my country being a teenager, now, but even worse before,
means you don’t have much money. Maybe just 1,000 NOK [110 Euros] a month.
You have to live with your parents and to live off them, Even if you work as a
waitress and get some tips. Okay, you are able to buy food, but what about money
for the hairdresser, manicure, disco, clothes and travel? You always end up in a
situation where you don’t have money, for joining a gym and buying sports gear.
Not all people have rich parents.

Migrant women’s participation in prostitution is often explained in terms of
material survival (Kapur 2001). The women we interviewed, however, described
it less as a matter of survival than of taking part in particular patterns of
consumption and leading lifestyles associated with ‘modernity’ and ‘the West’. This was evident during observations when we were given tours of wardrobes filled with designer clothes. In Alma’s case, access to certain consumption patterns was also linked to becoming a ‘grown up’. What she sought to achieve was both the freedom to consume and the possibility of making her own choices. This does not mean that the women were able to avoid economic hardships related to the obligation to provide for a family. Indeed, many stressed the importance of sending money back home for this purpose. For mothers in particular, assuming the responsibility of securing a better economic future for their children was important. Lina is from rural Russia, and she used the income from prostitution to provide for her son who lives with his grandmother back home: ‘He attends a nice school, has a computer, plays chess and has a private teacher for English. He is very clever and gets good grades . . . If I can support him, I will, and when he is 18, he can take out the money I’ve saved’.

Taking economic responsibility for family members is not only a matter of securing their livelihoods, it is also about investing in their capability to choose to become a particular kind of person/self. Having the resources necessary for ‘choice’ and for being able to realize particular patterns of consumption and particular lifestyles for themselves or their families allowed the women to represent themselves as modern individuals who make rational investments and take responsibility for their futures.

As a transmigrant, Alma makes sense of her own life situation and experiences through a differentiation of and comparison between the two different national and social contexts in which she lives. Alma insisted that having security, enough money and the opportunity to travel makes Norwegians smarter and more confident and enabled Alma herself to transcend the economic and social restraints that being from ‘the East’ entailed, and to conceive of herself as an equal in her interactions with Norwegians:

Then [after entering into prostitution] I had money for travel. I could do things I wanted to do and experience. I had money for the shoes I liked, to pay for my dance classes, to go swimming. Even though I had a Norwegian boyfriend, I didn’t start up that relationship to get out of prostitution. I paid my own way. I could join my Norwegian boyfriend when he did things. I could experience Norwegian culture and buy skis and ice-skates, and I bought myself a nice dress.

Alma’s income from prostitution allowed her to perceive of the relationship to her boyfriend as one between two (economically) independent individuals. It
also gave her a sense of cultural equality with Norwegians because of the access it gave her to their consumption patterns. In the interviews, Alma and the other women did not present prostitution as something that had victimized them. They represented it as something that provided both economic and experiential resources that helped them to grow as individuals, to act responsibly towards themselves and others, and as a means to ensure independence and equality in their social relationships. Their self-representations involved assuming responsibility for what they had done and had not done. They talked about their actions in terms of intentions, choices and desires. This does not mean that they did not simultaneously, as Vera did, acknowledge that certain experiences related to prostitution could include being forced or tricked into doing something, or being subjected to violence. They refused, however, the attribution of a victim identity derived from their engagement in prostitution, as well as other attributions like innocence, passivity, naivety and childlikeness also associated with the victim position.

**Speaking as a Victim**

As a non-Schengen citizen, Lina depended on ‘brokers’ in order to migrate to Norway and enter into prostitution. When a court case was brought against some of these brokers, Lina was asked to appear as a witness and she agreed.

I was a witness. The Norwegian police didn’t give me any money, and I was exposed to risk when testifying. They didn’t take care of my safety. I took a risk, spent my own money, but didn’t get anything in return for filing charges. At that time, the police asked me to help them, but after getting all I had they forgot about me.

MLS: What would you have liked from the Norwegian authorities?

They could have been more polite, and they could have given me a lawyer, more security. And they could have thanked me fair and square … They never asked if I needed help. Maybe I had gotten ill because of the trial or from the work itself.

It is interesting to note how Lina negotiated the formal position of ‘victim’ that she occupied as a court witness. As Lina saw it, she had stepped forward as a victim of trafficking in order to assist the Norwegian authorities to prosecute traffickers while setting aside her own need for security and money. Her choice of words indicates an expectation that the active ‘help’ she had offered (based on her personal knowledge and experiences) ought to have been acknowledged by the police as a contribution to the case. Her expectations
of ‘getting something in return’ and of being thanked and ‘treated politely’ also
served to negotiate her position as a ‘victim’, insofar as they draw on a discursive
register different from those prevailing in this discourse. Although being an
agent and a victim are often construed as being mutually exclusive within the
trafficking discourse (Andrijasevic 2004; Doezema 1998), Lina asserted her
agency precisely by speaking from within the subject position of the victim,
but without this agency being acknowledged by the police.

Lina also appeared to expect that cooperating as a victim would grant her
some benefits and was disappointed when the police did not show any interest
in providing the kind of rights and help that she herself felt she was entitled to
and needed. She was, and remains, in Norway illegally. A primary concern for
Lina was, thus, how to legalize her stay in Norway so that she could continue
moving back and forth in order to secure an income from prostitution and/or
other forms of paid labour in Norway. What the police offered instead was a
return to Russia without the possibility of coming back to Norway, thus
disrupting Lina’s plans for herself and her son and without providing her
with an alternative.

Lina’s case points to the kind of ‘help’ deemed appropriate for the victims of
trafficking who are constructed as passive and weak, almost childlike. The UN
Trafficking Protocol 2000 and the Council of Europe Convention on Action
against Trafficking in Human Beings of 2005 afford victims of trafficking the
right to access help for repatriation to their ‘country of origin’ and their rehabi-
litation and reintegration there. Women’s ‘consent’ is not sought with regard to
the processes of repatriation and not always for rehabilitation and reintegration
either. Victims are not accorded the right to choose appropriate assistance but
are, rather, offered help tailored to the assumed needs of ‘a victim of trafficking’
(Demleiter 2001).

The goals of assistance schemes to repatriate, rehabilitate and reintegrate
victims of trafficking reflect and reproduce a particular set of understandings.
The assumption is that the victims will be re-trafficked if they do not change,
thus loading the victim category with blame. From the point of view of inter-
national conventions, the repatriation and rehabilitation of victims of trafficking
is supposed to develop in victims a wish to stay ‘at home’ as well as the
capacities deemed necessary to be reintroduced into society (Skilbrei & Tveit
2008). This includes both conforming to particular ideals of femininity, such
as not exhibiting what is seen as an overly sexualized appearance, and develop-
ing an ability to make ‘the right choices’ through being taught self-governance
(Brunovskis & Surtees 2008). The concept of reintegration further assumes that
women similar to the ones we interviewed are ‘outside’ society, not taking into account their experiences as transmigrants and their efforts to invest continually in life back home.

As described above, being identified as a victim does not necessarily secure women rights that address what the women themselves perceive as their needs, and in ‘choosing’ to appropriate the victim category it is difficult simultaneously to represent oneself and be recognized as an active, modern person/self. We will discuss below what seems to be at stake here.

Reworking Gender
Vera had started going to Norway to earn money through prostitution four years before the interview. In talking about her own and other post-Soviet women’s involvement in prostitution in Norway, she drew heavily on cultural models and stereotypes of femininity and masculinity. Femininity appeared to be a marker distinguishing Norwegian and ethnic Russian women and served as a way of explaining and legitimizing Russian women’s involvement in prostitution in Norway:

Russian women are interested in being women. In Norway you can’t tell men and women apart from behind. I can understand why Scandinavian men prefer women from Eastern Europe. There are Russian women who get up two hours before their husbands to get ready. Show me a Norwegian woman who would do something as heroic as that!

According to Vera, the problem with Norwegian women and (their lack of) femininity also relates to gender equality ideals:

Your [Norwegian] feminist ideas are not all bad, but the ideas can be taken to the extreme. Women might forget that they are women. There are women that pump iron while their husbands are at home taking care of the children! I don’t understand such women. I support women’s participation in politics . . . [but] I can’t work in a factory just to prove that I can. That’s not feminism, that’s ‘foolism’! Our grandmothers [in the Soviet Union] had to work in factories; women today do it voluntarily. When I see Western feminist women, I think they are unhappy inside. What do you get from a career? . . . We in the East will not destroy ourselves to satisfy Western ideas.

The construction of feminism as something potentially entailing a loss of ‘authentic femininity’, and of feminists as unhappy career women reproduces a popular opposition to feminist ideals widespread in Norway (Skilbrei 2004).
In this particular context, Russian femininity is constructed in opposition to a caricature of Norwegian or Western femininity, but it is also described in relation to ideas about gender as they were negotiated in the post-Soviet years when the women were growing up. The ideal of the ‘working mother’ in the Soviet Union, although existing in tension with other gender constructions and containing considerable ambivalence within itself, was glorified by state ideology and supported by social policy (Temkina & Rotkirch 1997). In post-Soviet times, there has been a reconfiguration of the Soviet gender regime and its efforts to assimilate women into the androgynous but implicitly male Soviet citizen (Temkina & Rotkirch 1997).

The women often presented gender complementarity as an ideal and as something ‘natural’, and they thus construed Soviet and Western gender relations as ‘unnatural’. Norwegian women’s lack of femininity is proffered as an explanation not only for the claim that Norwegian men prefer women from Eastern Europe but also for prostitution itself. This also entails a negotiation of the ‘blame’ and ‘guilt’ associated with the stigma of prostitution. In the self-representations of the women, it was not women selling sex who were to blame for prostitution, it was the lack of femininity and appropriate gender relations that created a demand for sexual services in Norway. This positions the women as individuals capitalizing on Western shortcomings and as active participants in a market, rather than as victims of gender relations, poverty and crime, or as unrespectable ‘prostitutes’.

Their perceptions of Norwegian femininity as something less ‘authentic’ than Russian femininity are partly shaped by how the women interact with their Norwegian male clients. The women discussed the reasons why they started selling sex with their clients and stressed the failing of Norwegian women and Norwegian gender relations. Clients too engaged in similar discussions in the closed web forums we accessed together with the women. A reason for this subject recurring in these meetings is perhaps a need on the part of the Norwegian men to distance themselves from the role allotted to them as the main driving force behind the prostitution market in Norwegian public debate at a time when policies increasingly target ‘the demand side’ of prostitution.

The construction of Norwegian and Russian, Western and post-Soviet femininity has a counterpart in ideas about masculinity. Just as Western women were represented as manly, men were represented as womanish and ‘soft’ and were explicitly contrasted with post-Soviet masculinities and gender relations. Several of the women interviewed referred to this ‘softness’ to explain why Norwegian men were ‘hesitant clients’. The hesitance of clients was described...
as ‘tiresome’ and ‘a hassle’ because it entailed clients asking whether the women were victims of trafficking or whether they were poor and uneducated and therefore obliged to sell sex. This inquisitiveness about the women’s welfare can be understood in several ways, including curiosity, guilt or empathy. Several of the women claimed that they preferred clients who were uninterested in their lives since this meant less need for lies and less time wasted. It also meant that they were not positioned as the victims by their clients. Yet another example of how they preferred to position themselves as freely choosing and active individuals rather than as passive victims.

As described by Pheterson (1996) above, the stigma of prostitution encompasses both the victim and the ‘prostitute’. In an attempt to avoid this stigma, women attempt to avoid both sides of the equation. Providing alternative explanations for transnational prostitution that downplay underdevelopment outside the West and criminal activities such as trafficking not only removes blame from the women, it also shifts the focus away from ways in which they are made victims of circumstances. For ethnic Russian women involved in prostitution in Norway, ‘Russian femininity’ could be redefined as an asset to be exploited in Norway and used to gain access to resources needed to reclaim selfhood and individuality without having to submit to the types of hard work they associated, perhaps paradoxically, with the Western ‘career woman’, as well as with women under the Soviet regime.

**Embracing and Resisting National Stereotypes**

While transnational prostitution does involve migratory movements across nation-state borders, it is also a site for the (re)production of national boundaries, identities and stereotypes. In debates on transnational prostitution, the countries from which transnational prostitution originates, the so-called sending countries, are commonly differentiated from the so-called receiving countries where it ends up. Representations that link transnational prostitution to organized crime, in the form of ‘trafficking’, attribute blame to the sending countries because of their purported exploitation of women and because they are thought to be ‘breeding grounds’ for organized crime and mafia activities. In the particular context dealt with here, post-Soviet ‘sending countries’ are marked as ‘others’ in relation to Norway, a ‘receiving country’, because of the former’s association with underdevelopment, poverty and organized crime and the latter’s association with development, welfare and peacefulness (Stenvoll 2002:158).
In contrast to the (post-)colonial imaginaries that frame the perception of migrants from Third World countries, Russian migration emerges from a country that represents itself as an empire and as a (former and now re-emerging) superpower. Identification as ‘ethnic Russians’ appeared to be a source of pride and self-esteem for the women. However, in the Norwegian context, since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russianness has been associated with international organized crime and prostitution. This association has an impact on Russian women’s sense of being the ‘other’ and their opportunities within Norwegian society (Sverdljuk 2009). These concerns are reflected in the interviews. Katja, for instance, worried that the association between Russianness and prostitution would limit her chances of making a life in Norway:

I wanted to find a job. But it’s hard. If you tell a Norwegian person that you are from my home country, they think that you are a prostitute, have been one or will become one sooner or later. And that makes it difficult for me to build a future here.

Vera was also trying to establish herself in Norway but, like Katja, saw Norwegian associations between Russianness, prostitution and criminal activities as limiting her options in Norway. She reworked negative stereotypes of the East by insisting on the capabilities and ‘culturedness’ of Russians:

Those of us who are from Russia and the Baltic states have an education and the ability to work. We’re not all bad and mean, but you get mixed up with filth ... Not all of us are involved in drug-trafficking or prostitution and the ones of us that are weren’t left with many choices. Because of the collapse of the East, you in the West are free to pick the best brains.

Vera here draws on three interrelated techniques in order to counter what she perceives to be the dominant representations of people from Russia and the Baltic states. First, she counters negative attributions by pointing to certain of the positive capabilities of people from Russia and the Baltic states. Secondly, she seeks to differentiate homogenizing negative representations of post-Soviet people (‘we are not all...’). Thirdly, Vera redistributes blame by invoking the structural conditions underpinning people’s opportunity to choose – the collapse of the East and the ensuing power relationship between East and West. It is clear from these examples that the stigma of prostitution affects not only representations of self but also representations of nations.

Even though the women contested prevalent representations of Russianness as something signifying backwardness and underdevelopment, the situation
back home nonetheless informed their explanations of why they had migrated and entered prostitution. Lina, and others with her, felt that they had to explain why they had given up on their country: 'It’s natural that people move but I’m very patriotic. I had to take a chance myself; my country does not have the opportunity to help me’. Lina had bought a false passport of an EU member state in order to be able to travel more easily in Europe. Once again, she negotiated the relationship between national belonging and what Russia could ‘offer’ her: 'It’s not nice saying something like this about your motherland, but Russian passports are only good for wiping one’s ass’. In the women’s narratives ‘Russianness’, even though in some senses valued for its ‘culturedness’ and considered a justifiable source of ‘pride’, was nevertheless seen to stand in the way of some choices: to cross borders and travel the world, to experience new things, to get a good education and to access the particular patterns of consumption associated with living ‘modern’ lives.

The women handle the negative characteristic attributed to Russianness in the dominant discourse through two major strategies. On the one hand, they attempt to revaluate the stigma of Russianness by focusing on particular capacities associated with the ‘national character’ (i.e. Russians as hard working, entrepreneurial and independent). On the other hand, they represent themselves as ‘special’ in the sense that they position and represent themselves as people more capable than many others (from both post-Soviet societies and the West) of realizing themselves as modern and free selves, being able, as they are, to shape their future through migration and to capitalize on their ‘natural’ femininity through prostitution. Understating individual non-economic hardship, such as that related to trafficking, and instead emphasising economic and structural reasons for their migration and prostitution forms part of this strategy and allows them to present themselves as active agents (Andrijasevic 2004:53).

Russian women involved in prostitution in many ways appear to counter the ideals of the ‘emancipated Norwegian woman’ (Sverdljuk 2009), as their migration and involvement in prostitution are linked to lack of economic stability and lack of gender equality back in their home country, as well as to international organized crime (Stenvoll 2002). Being a Russian woman and being cast as a victim are, thus, strongly linked to one another. As Stenvoll (2002) has argued, however, although the ‘victim’ remains the major figure in newspaper coverage of Russian women involved in prostitution, a less common characterization that portrays the women as individual entrepreneurs or as seekers of happiness looking for a Norwegian man to marry or for money and Western luxury does exist. The quality of ‘Russianness’, when applied to
women, seems able to signify both the passive victim and the ‘prostitute’ choosing to travel to the West to cash in on existing demands. ‘Russian women’ thus come to be constituted, through their association with trafficking and prostitution, as ‘reproachable victims’ in the sense that being a victim contrasts with the ideals of femininity found in the Norwegian context (and probably in the new Russian context as well although in a different way) and in the sense that the victim status does not relieve them of the shame and blame of prostitution. As we have argued, women negotiate these representations through discourses of femininity and masculinity and the nation, and these, in part together, with the discourses of Norwegian clients, produce alternative representations of Russian women involved in prostitution.

**Concluding Remarks**

Dominant conceptions of the person/self in Western modernity structure the self-representations of post-Soviet women in transnational prostitution as they make sense of their experiences of migration and prostitution both in interaction with us as researchers and with various other people including social workers, police and clients. In their self-representations, Russian women involved in prostitution in Norway must deal with the fact that, as migrants and as women selling sex, they are represented both as ‘victims’ and as ‘prostitutes’. As ‘victims’ they are believed to lack the qualities of an active choosing self, while as ‘prostitutes’ they are singled out as different from other women and deserving of the shame and blame attached to prostitution. In this article, we have argued, somewhat paradoxically, that the victim category does not exclude the stigma of prostitution and thus positions these women as reproachable victims. As Pheterson (1993:59) sums up: ‘Being a prostitute is a female role for which there is a mixture of radical contempt, compassion, support and opposition’.

Constructing women in prostitution as victims ought to relieve them of the stigma associated with prostitution, or at least to redistribute the responsibility for prostitution between the seller and the buyer of sex. The women interviewed here, however, did not make use of the strategy of speaking from the victim position, but instead redistributed responsibility for the existence of prostitution in their accounts through ethnicized discourses on femininity and masculinity. They negotiated representations of Russian migrant women involved in prostitution as victims and/or ‘prostitutes’ through their self-representations. They attributed a different meaning to their involvement in migration and prostitution from that which is dominant in Norway and they
challenged the category of the ‘trafficking victim’ by inscribing their self-representations into dominant notions of the responsible, choosing and self-authoring person/self, as well as positioning themselves not as proud sex workers but as, ‘real women’ and ‘proud Russians’.

Notes
1. Among a number of contested concepts, we have chosen ‘women involved in prostitution’. This term is more precise and less politicized than ‘sex worker’, and in contrast to the term ‘prostitute’ avoids links with the act of selling sex to the person. We do however make use of this latter term when referring to ‘a prostitute’ as an identity category. We also use the term ‘whore’ when referring to the stigma attached to the category of the ‘prostitute’.
2. If we had explored women’s narratives of the self in relation to other areas of their lives, we would presumably have found alternative discourses of the person/self less.
3. Our use of ‘women from post-Soviet societies’ should not be read as a denial of the differences that exist among the states of the former Soviet Union, in terms of history, gender and power relations, but rather as a category useful for the analytical purposes of this article.
4. Policy efforts up to now have been limited to trafficking for prostitution.
5. Fifteen women were interviewed by May-Len Skilbrei and/or research assistant Irina Polyakova in Russian and/or English. Polyakova has written an MA thesis on the same material. Skilbrei has done empirical work on post-Soviet women in prostitution in Norway since 2005, and this material provides an important backdrop for the present study (see e.g. Skilbrei 2007; Skilbrei & Polyakova 2006).
6. The women were selected for interviews on the basis of having experienced lack of information and control during parts of the migration process or in their involvement in prostitution. Some of the women identified themselves or were identified (NGOs, the government or the courts in cases involving pimping/procuring and/or trafficking) as victims of trafficking.
7. Section 224 of the Penal Code criminalized anyone: ‘who by force, threats, or underhand conduct unlawfully brings anyone into his own or another person’s power with the intention of reducing him to a state of helplessness, enlisting him in foreign military service, or taking him into captivity or other state of dependence in a foreign country, or transporting him to a foreign country for indecent purposes’.
8. Scholars from various disciplines have critically examined the relationship of the concept of victimhood to colonial and post-colonial Western dominance (Mohanty 2003), contemporary humanitarian efforts (Väyrynen 2005), global politics (Sjoberg & Gentry 2007) and neoliberal modes of governing (Brown 1995; Bumiller 2008).
9. Article 3 of the Palermo Protocol states that the consent of the victim (i.e. to migrate and work in prostitution) is irrelevant as long as one of the methods in the definition (ranging from violence to deceit) has been used.
10. The macro socio-economic and political changes associated with the fall of the Soviet Union do not automatically translate into people’s daily lives, experiences and self-representations. However, the Soviet/post-Soviet distinction is, as will be
argued further on in the article, a central frame through which the women we interviewed interpret their own lives.


12. In addition, there are countries listed as ‘transit’ countries and ‘sending’ and ‘receiving’ countries can also function as ‘transit’ countries.


14. The collapse of the Soviet Union was not followed by a public ‘settling of accounts’ like those that occurred with other colonial powers that had to deal with recognizing past atrocities (Carey & Raciborski 2004). For a discussion of whether the Soviet Union can be seen as a colonial power, see Carey and Raciborski (2004).

References


