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Female Migrant Street Prostitution during COVID-19 in Milan. A Qualitative Study on How Sex Workers Coped with the Challenges of the Pandemic

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Abstract

The article presents the outcome of a qualitative study on female migrant sex workers involved in street prostitution during the first two waves of COVID-19 in Italy, by focusing on their responses to the challenges posed by the pandemic in terms of economic strain and health hazards. The study, carried out from January 2020 to January 2021, has focused on the street sex market, given that this sector was particularly affected by mobility restrictions adopted during the pandemic, and on the city of Milan since it is one of the main hubs of human trafficking in Europe and one of the main sex markets in Italy, as well as one of the Italian cities most heavily hit by COVID-19. According to the findings of the empirical research — based on interviews and participant observation —, migrant women's experiences in the sex market during the pandemic show two concomitant elements, one referring to agency and the other to exploitation. This outcome has led us to put forward a third balanced theoretical perspective, between the two views polarizing the debate on sex trafficking — namely the "victimization approach" and the "critical approach" — that is grounded on the conceptual tool "layers of vulnerability" discussed in the bioethics debate.

Keywords: Covid-19; migrant women; sex market; exploitation; agency; layers of vulnerability.

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1 Introduction

At a global level, the spread of COVID-19 has increased health hazards related to sex work (Hillis et al., 2020; Burgos & Plaza Del Pino, 2021), while anti-pandemic measures have hindered the exchange between supply and demand of sexual services, thus further exacerbating sex workers' economic precariousness (Gbagbo, 2020; Lam, 2020a; Asongu et al., 2020; Singer et al., 2020; Platt et al., 2020). In April 2020, the International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (ICRS)[1] sent a letter to the President of the European Commission, in order to highlight that "sex workers are amongst the hardest hit by the pandemic" and at the same time the least supported (Stevenson, 2020).[2] The reason for this lack of support, observed in many countries in different geographical areas,[3] lies in the fact that sex workers are not eligible for health and economic protection provided by the State (Jozaghi & Bird 2020; Lam, 2020a; Lam, 2020b; Platt et al., 2020), due to the fact that in most countries prostitution is not regulated or is even considered illegal. During the pandemic, the condition of sex workers has worsened in particular in those areas were prostitutes are highly stigmatized and discriminated against, such as in Africa where "amid the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a spike in violence faced by sex workers, from clients, police, and even community members who blame them for spreading the disease" (Adebayo Adebisi et al. 2020, p. 1780).

Among sex workers, the most affected by the recent economic and health crisis are migrant women (Lam, 2020b; Lam & Fudge, 2020), who are the main component of the street sex market in Western countries. Their conditions became particularly vulnerable especially during the recent pandemic due to their irregular status, as a consequence of increasingly restrictive European and national migration policies (Massari, 2017), as well as their condition as being victims of trafficking and/or being inserted into highly exploitative circuits.[4]

The pandemic has exacerbated the factors that contribute to fueling human trafficking, especially the economic ones, since the living conditions of men and women in the global South have dramatically worsened, thus further enhancing their risk of becoming potential victims of trafficking (UNODC, 2020a). In addition, the new socio-economic scenario has increased the risk of re-trafficking for those who were able to exit exploitative circuits, since most of them lost their jobs due to the economic crisis caused by the pandemic. Moreover, the pandemic has made it more difficult to trace victims of sex trafficking, due to the increased condition of isolation that social distancing measures have created for trafficked people. (Todres & Diaz, 2021). Not surprisingly, since the outbreak of COVID-19, international agencies and anti-trafficking

1. ICRSE is a European network of more than 100 sex workers and allied organizations.

2. See also the initiatives launched by NSWP (Global Network of Sex Work Projects) and SWAN (Sex Workers' Rights Advocacy Network). For sex workers' communities strategies during COVID-19 all over the world, see Lam 2020a.

3. This lack of help has been observed in different geographical areas, including North America (Jozaghi & Bird, 2020), Southern America (Santos et al., 2021), Africa (Adebayo Adebisi et al., 2020; Gbagbo, 2020), India (Sarkar, 2020) and Europe (ICRSE, 2020).

4. For a global estimate on the phenomenon of human trafficking, see the global report on human trafficking issued by UNODC (UNODC, 2020a). It must be underlined, however, that it is quite unlikely to access reliable data on this phenomenon, which is hidden and difficult to detect (Weitzer, 2007b), as emphasized by several scholars who stress the limited heuristic capacity of the data and estimates currently available for reasons related to, inter alia, the difficulty in defining trafficking, the inability of law enforcement agencies to identify victims, the lack of information about traffickers, the lack of international coordination in data collection, and finally the difficulties related to the study of 'hidden populations' which are very difficult to assess in terms of size and/or turnover produced (Andrees & van der Linden, 2005; Weitzer, 2007b; Di Nicola, 2010; Kelly, 2005; IOM, 2015).

NGOs have called for action in order to sustain NGOs supporting victims, safeguard access to justice, collect data and analyze the impact of COVID-19 on trafficking of persons. (UNODC, 2020a; Global Protection Cluster Anti-Trafficking Task Team, 2020; OSCE et al., 2020).

This article presents the findings of a qualitative study on female migrant sex workers involved in street prostitution during the first two waves of COVID-19 in Italy, by focusing not only, as most of the literature on this subject-matter, on the challenges posed by the pandemic in terms of economic strain and health hazards, but also on the responses of sex workers (not as a group but as individuals).[5] Carried out from January 2020 to January 2021, this study has focused on the street sex market, because this sector was particularly affected by mobility restrictions adopted during the pandemic, and on the city of Milan (in Northern Italy), since it is one of the main hubs of human trafficking in Europe and one of the main sex markets in Italy (Abbatecola, 2010), as well as one of the Italian cities most heavily hit by COVID-19, especially from January to June 2020 (Agnoletto, 2020). The responses of sex workers to the challenges of the pandemic analyzed in this study indicate that migrant women's experiences in the sex market tend to show two concomitant elements, one referring to agency and the other to exploitation. This led us to go beyond the polarization between the "victimization approach" and the "anti-trafficking rhetoric approach" (which in this paper we refer to as "critical approach") widespread in the debate over migrant sex workers, and to put forward a third, balanced and innovative perspective, aimed at avoiding the trap of generalizing and labeling research subjects through fixed categories. In order to pursue in this objective, we borrowed the conceptual tool of "layers of vulnerability" discussed in the bioethics debate (Luna, 2009), arguing that this tool is particularly useful when attempting to grasp the variegated and multifaceted condition of vulnerability of migrant sex workers during the pandemic.

The article is organized as follows: Section 2 outlines our research's theoretical framework and briefly illustrates the research method adopted during fieldwork; Section 3 offers a description of Milan's street sex market before the outbreak of COVID-19, in order to provide the reader with the context that the pandemic impacted; Section 4 explores sex workers' reactions to the crisis provoked by COVID-19 from an economic and sanitary point of view, focusing on the lockdown measures (February-May 2020) and the following period, when some sex workers were back on the streets (June-October 2020). Finally, our concluding remarks emphasize that on the one hand the pandemic brought to the surface issues and trends that already characterized the Italian street prostitution market, especially the one involving migrant women, namely pushing them towards indoor and/or online prostitution, and that on the other hand it has made visible, to a greater extent, the different layers of vulnerability of migrant sex workers, who therefore should not be considered as a homogeneous group of people.

2 Theoretical Framework and Method

In order to avoid a stereotypical understanding of migrant street prostitution and emphasize the complexity and variety of female experiences in this sector, we have collocated our analysis within a wider theoretical framework, built upon two areas of studies. The first looks into prostitution in terms of markets. In particular, we drew inspiration from studies focusing on the "quality of work" in the sex sector (Weitzer, 2007a; Adriaenssens et al., 2016), and thus on issues such as income and job security, that in commercial sex circuits usually imply violence, psychological distress and health hazards (Adrianessens et al., 2016; Kempadoo, 2003;

5. The literature has looked mainly at the responses of sex worker communities (Lam, 2020a).

Hermondhalgh & Baker, 2015; Kempadoo & Doezema, 2018). This approach is particularly interesting in the study of prostitution during COVID-19, since the pandemic has influenced the quality of street sex labor, heightening risks for women. Moreover, in line with this view we have used the expression "sex work," despite the ethical dilemma that this "umbrella term" gives rise to, since it

> conveys the diversity of behaviors, beliefs and activities, both legal and illegal, that it encompasses, and consequently presents a risk of the experiences of one particular group of sex workers being generalized to others who have a very different set of norms, behaviors, and beliefs. (Dewey & Zheng, 2013, p. 23; see also Abbatecola, 2018).[6]

Regardless of these limits, employing the expression "sex work" allowed us to put at the core of our representation the self-narrations of the women we met during our fieldwork. Indeed, during the conversations they tended to refer to their activities in terms of labor, even when they carried them out within exploitative circuits.

The second field of studies, which provides the theoretical underpinning of this work, focuses on the phenomenon of trafficking for sexual exploitation (Ruggiero, 1997; Chuang, 1998; Bertone 2000; Derks, 2000; Salt & Hogarth 2000; Truong, 2001; Aronowitz, 2001; Monzini, 2005; Massari, 2009; Abbatecola, 2010, 2018). Within this area, we took into consideration the two perspectives polarizing the debate on women trafficking, i.e. the "victimization approach" and the "critical approach."[7] The first tends to insert, by default, migrant sex work within the category of sexual slavery.[8] It is a perspective in line with the position of radical feminists who consider prostitution, whether free or forced, only as a form of female subjugation (Pateman, 1988; Miriam 2005) and focuses more on the violence of this practice rather than on labor (Dworkin, 1987; Jeffreys, 1990). Radical feminists tend to critically discuss the use of "terms such as"agency," "entrepreneurship" and "rational choice" to describe the experience of "prostituted women" (Jeffreys, 2009, p. 15).

The "critical approach" questions the "trafficking paradigm" (Weitzer, 2007b; Doezema 2009; Jones, 2010; Uy, 2011; Shoaps, 2013; Mai, 2016, Fehrenbacher et al. 2020), since the latter carries the risk of overlooking other significant aspects and nuances of the phenomenon, for example violence coming not only from exploiters, but also from police officers, a lack of work protection and welfare benefits, and most importantly migrant women's space of agency and autonomy; also, it is popular among anti-trafficking coalitions, governments and media (Agustin, 2007, p. 25) and it seems to contribute to justifying abolitionist and criminalizing legislation (Agustin, 2001; Massari, 2009). Finally, the analysis of sexual service labor, produced by the critical approach to human trafficking, has found many similarities between sex work and other unfree forms of industrial labor in terms of control and exploitation (Andrijasevic, 2021).

The analysis of the empirical material presented in this paper suggests it is necessary to formalize a *third and balanced perspective* that — in a similar vein to the work that looks at sex

6. Dewey and Zheng (2013) effectively sum up the extensive debate on the use of the expression "sex work." Abbatecola (2018) provides readers with a deep analysis on this issue, underlining the complexity of a phenomenon which cannot be read through dichotomic categories (pp. 18–33).

7. These two positions correspond to the two traditional outlooks in the feminist debate over prostitution, including radical feminism and sex radicalism (for a discussion of these two approaches, see Sutherland (2004).

8. For a critical appraisal of this approach see Agustin (2006), and Cojocauru, (2015).

workers both as victims and as agents (Dewey & Zheng, 2013, Abbatecola 2018; Massari, 2007) — stands between the "victimization approach" and the "critical approach." The aim of this perspective is to avoid a generalization of the experiences of migrant sex workers and to offer a more dynamic interpretation able to include factors relating to both agency and exploitation. This perspective, therefore, suggests that we adopt an analytical framework based on the conceptualization of vulnerability proposed by Florencia Luna, who introduced the "metaphor of layers" in the bioethics debate (Luna, 2009). According to Luna, "vulnerability should not be understood as a permanent and categorical condition, a label that is attached to someone given certain conditions (such as lack of power or incapability) that persists throughout its existence" (Luna, 2009, p.129). She warns us that vulnerability "is not a black or white concept, that is, a fixed label that includes or excludes a particular group. Rather it should be seen as layered and inessential" (Luna, 2009, p. 129). As vulnerability status might change, even agency can see in a dynamic perspective.

Moreover, in putting forward a *third perspective*, our study proposes to employ a balanced approach in relation to the category of ethnicity, which inevitably comes up when dealing with migrant prostitution. Indeed, it suggests that, on the one hand, it is pivotal to avoid categorizing migrant sex workers only according to their nationality and ethnicity, because emphasizing women's foreign origins leads us to perceive them as "other" and thus distant (Massari, 2009). Eventually, this process, which ignores female hardship and thus prevents us from caring about them, might end up fueling anti-prostitution and anti-immigration discourses. On the other hand, women's ethnical belongings are a factor that an analysis cannot neglect, since this factor contributes, among others, to characterize sex workers' experiences. As emerges from the main literature and from our analysis (see Section 3), in the street sex market, in Milan as much as in other Italian and European cities, women coming from the same country and speaking the same language tend to be controlled by compatriots. Sharing the same national origins, language and cultural belonging creates bonds between prostitutes and exploiters, as much as among prostitutes. Observing these dynamics does not mean using ethnicity as an indistinct category in which to insert women's experiences, thus making them a homogeneous group, nor considering ethnicity as the only factor influencing the individual experience of selling sex and building relationships with pimps, traffickers and punters. Rather, it means considering it as one of the elements composing the homophile (McPherson et al., 2001) which links the various networks of people populating the street prostitution environment. Indeed, this study aims at avoiding "groupism," namely "the tendency to treat ethnic groups, nations and races as substantial entities to which interests and agency can be attributed" (Brubaker, 2003).

Studying the sex industry is challenging (Shaver, 2005; Dewey, Zheng, 2013), especially because it stands between legality and illegality. In Italy prostitution is not a criminal activity but, at the same time, it is not recognized as a job and is thus not regulated by the State. This hybrid status makes street commercial sex on the one hand visible — women can work on the streets, since they do not commit any crime — and on the other hand invisible — since the relationships behind the sexual-economic exchange are hidden, given that the job is not formally regulated and often implies criminal activities, such as exploitation.

Our study has adopted a qualitative method, mainly based on interviews and participant observation. Through this approach the study intends to provide an original contribution to the debate on COVID-19 and prostitution, since most of the work on this topic is based on quantitative methods and online data sources (Azam et al., 2021; Callander et al., 2020).

In order to facilitate our access to the field, we established contact with the four main NGOs

working on sex trafficking and street prostitution in the city of Milan.[9] Their outreach activities covered a large area of the city of Milan, including both the city centre and the hinterland. The selection of people to be interviewed was made through snowball sampling.[10] In particular, we collected relevant information from interviews with four social workers — one for each organization — who have accumulated roughly fifteen years of working experience in the field of support services for sex workers. This long experience has allowed them to develop a unique and diachronic view on Milan's street prostitution and the various forms of exploitation in this sector. Indeed, they could observe both changes and continuity over time and thus highlight the transformations brought about by the pandemic. Moreover, we interviewed a lawyer, a Nigerian woman who has committed herself to protecting her co-nationals' human rights, and a representative of the section of Milan police in charge of investigations related to the so-called "foreign organized crime" phenomenon. The latter's perspective was helpful in understanding the organization of migrant prostitution rackets in Milan, which is managed mainly by Albanian clans, Nigerian criminal networks and Romanian criminal groups.

The participant observation, carried out from February to October 2020, consisted in participating in the work of the so-called "*unità di strada*" (street units).[11] The ethnographic activity was discontinuous, because social workers had to suspend their front-line services during the lockdown. Despite this limitation, we were able to join 6 outreach activities — conducted both in Northern and Southern zones of the city where prostitution is particularly widespread — during which we met 33 women.[12] Our presence was not perceived negatively, and women did not show mistrust towards us. The turnover of various volunteers who accompanied social workers in the outreach activities contributed to normalizing our presence, which was not experienced by women as an intrusion. During the encounters we approached women without asking direct questions and limited our activity to listening or joining the conversations among social workers/volunteers and sex workers, who not surprisingly dealt with COVID-19 related issues in this period of the fieldwork.

Our participation in the work of the street units provided a great opportunity to collect biographical material not easily accessible by means of other research techniques. In gathering and analyzing this material we employed the methodological tools developed by the ethnosociological approach. In particular, we analyzed the narratives of sex workers by focusing both on the so-called "practices in situation" (Bertaux, 1997, 2000) — providing us with *factual* information and the women's *perceptions*,

Listening to the women's accounts, we observed that they tended to deny the racket side of their activity, controlled by exploiters. This attitude — also recorded by a study on sex workers

9. These four NGOs are part of the network developed by the Municipality of Milan within the "Project of support and protection of victims of trafficking," which is financially supported by the National Department of Equal Opportunities.

10. We interviewed ten key informers and the interviews with them were anonymized using a code that indicates the interviewee's job qualification (SW indicates "social worker," PO "police officer," and LM "lawyer of migrants") and the date the interview was conducted.

11. "Street units" are outreach services offered in the streets where sex workers engage in prostitution. Social workers and volunteers drive through the streets used as locations for sex workers and make contact with them, in order to offer them information about legal support and the possibility to book health checkups. Usually, these women do not give social workers their real names and ages. However, the names of the women met during the street units and mentioned in the ethnographic diary quoted in the article are pseudonyms.

12. Each outing was documented with notes collected during the outreach activities conducted by car and organized into four different sections: 1. Observation notes; 2. Methodological notes; 3. Theoretical notes (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973, pp. 99–101, Corsaro, 1985, p. 295); 4. Personal notes (Corsaro, 1985, p. 295).

in Spain during COVID-19 (Burgos & Plaza Del Pino, 2021) — might be driven by various factors. As underlined by social workers, it might be caused either by their fear of retaliation on the part of exploiters, or by their willingness to protect their exploiters, as their "income" depends on them; also, it may be caused by a tendency to represent their reality as more bearable and acceptable. Finally, it must be considered that the tendency to deny the exploitive aspect of their work might result from not perceiving themselves as victims.

3 Pre-pandemic Context: Street Sex Market in the City of Milan

In the last few decades, the Italian sex market has undergone major changes, especially in relation to street prostitution. Until the end of the 1980s, *outdoor* prostitution was mainly carried out by Italian women, who often had to cope with problems of marginalization and drug addiction (Danna, 2002; Abbatecola, 2006, 2018; Bimbi, 2001; Becucci & Garosi, 2008). Since the early 1990s, their presence started to decrease, while the number of foreign women from different nationalities increased. The latter were often trafficked from their countries and forced to experience significant forms of exploitation (Becucci & Garosi 2008; Abbatecola, 2006; Massari, 2017).

The first migrants working on Milan's streets were women (cisgender and transgender) from Latin America, mainly from Brazil and Peru, and women from Eastern Europe — especially Slovenia and Bosnia (Massari, 2017). In the early 1990s, Albanian and Nigerian women also arrived in Milan, and in a short time became the most conspicuous presence in the outdoor sex market (Interview with SW, 21 January, 2021). Albanian women were harshly exploited by fellow countrymen, who — often their boyfriends — brought them to Italy deceiving them and then forced them into prostitution (Becucci & Garosi, 2008, p. 23). They were mostly young women, without regular documents. Over the years, however, some women managed to gain a few "benefits," such as, for example, the possibility of not working in case of sickness or negotiating forms of sharing the profits coming from the sale of sex services (Abbatecola, 2018, p. 37). Also, women from Romania, for example, began to work as prostitutes with more freedom, going back and forth from their country of origin after Romania joined the European Union in 2007. Since then, the bargaining system between women and their pimps, mostly related to criminal organizations, has partially changed (Interview with SW, 21 January, 2021). Nevertheless, women trafficking from Eastern Europe is still mostly characterized by male domination (Campani, 2000; Monzini, 2002; Ambrosini, 2002; Carchedi & Orfano, 2007; Abbatecola, 2006, 2014, 2018). Their experience shed light on the concomitant elements of self-determination — the ability to conquer larger spaces of freedom, also facilitated by the possibility of acquiring regular status — and unchanged conditions of subjugation. The observation of this duality led us to advance a third theoretical perspective on migrant sex workers aimed at keeping together all of these elements so as to convey a multifaceted reality.

In the case of Nigerian women, they are mostly managed and exploited by other women linked to wider networks, i.e. the so-called "madams." The first to arrive in Milan had a tourist visa, lasting six months. Once their visas expired, they remained in Italy as irregular migrants (Ambrosini, 2002). According to investigative sources, each *madam* usually exploits the work of five or six women, while in the case of Albanian prostitutes each exploiter controls only one or two women at a time (Interview with PO, 11 December, 2020). In the Nigerian racket, the presence of men has become increasingly frequent over the years (Abbatecola et al., 2014). Nowadays, there are also male exploiters, although *madams* remain the central figures in the

exploitation system. This was well explained by a Nigerian lawyer and activist, interviewed during our research:

> "At the beginning, let's say until ten years ago, there were few men directly involved in the last part of the exploitation, but for almost ten years now we have seen more and more men who have girls they exploit directly... they are no longer facilitators of trafficking, like torturers they are at the forefront of managing the exploitation of women [...]" (Interview with Nigerian Lawyer, 20 October, 2020)

Unlike men, *madams* often have to go through a period of exploitation before acquiring power in the management of the exploitation system. Thus, *madams*' power is uncertain, limited and entails high emotional costs for the women involved (Abbatecola et al., 2014; Cabras, 2015; Abbatecola, 2018).

Social workers told us that in the first decade, at least until the early 2000s, Nigerian women risked more than others being detained in the "identification and expulsion centre" (CIE), located in via Corelli.[13] They were terrified of police controls, because they feared they would be expelled from Italy or locked up in the centre. Indeed, controls by the police significantly intensified in those years (Danna, 2002). The increasing number of policemen patrolling the city, defined as the "Milan model," was aimed at preventing petty crimes, capturing migrants without a visa or residence permit and combating street prostitution. This policy was adopted also as a response to the numerous complaints addressed by citizens and their committees to the police in the areas where street prostitution was most concentrated (Danna, 2002). In 2008, further restrictive measures were introduced at the local level. Mayors had the power of issuing decrees with the alleged purpose of ensuring urban security.[14] In just one year 788 decrees were issued. 13% aimed at fighting prostitution through sanctions directed against both clients and sex workers (Giovannetti & Zorzella, 2010, p. 63). The anti-prostitution decree issued by the municipality of Milan stated that "the phenomenon of street prostitution represents a miseducating public message because it offers an altered image of personal relationships and the denial of the dignity and freedom of human beings, which generates in the community a sense of unease and a decline in moral values" (Giovannetti & Zorzella, 2010, p. 67). Despite the declared purposes, scholars and experts underlined the instrumental use of these decrees, which rather seemed to have the perverse effect of moving prostitution from the downtown streets to more peripheral areas or indoors, making sex workers more vulnerable (Palidda, 2008; Giovannetti & Zorzella, 2010; Mazzarella & Stradella, 2010; Galantino & Giovannetti; 2012). This is a clear example of how anti-trafficking discourse can be strategically exploited in order to eliminate street prostitution. According to some scholars, it can be considered as a means to mask moral and political reasons with human rights rhetoric (Mai, 2012; Giordano, 2008).

Between 2000 and 2007 street prostitution went through a second phase, during which there was a consistent decline in the presence of Albanian sex workers, who gradually disappeared from the streets and were replaced by Romanian women. The latter's presence has increased significantly since 2007 — after Romania became a member state of the European Union — because Romanian women could enter Italy with regular documents. As mentioned

13. This centre was opened in January 1999 during a repressive phase that took place at national level (Danna, 2002). It detained foreigners with expulsion orders, on the grounds of Immigration Law 40/1998.

14. Some scholars underline the instrumental use of anti-prostitution decrees whose issuance seems to have been driven purely by political needs. These decrees were issued above all in early 2008 and decreased dramatically over the following year. In this regard, see Palidda (2008), Mazzarella & Stradella (2010), Giovannetti & Zorzella (2010), and Galantino & Giovannetti (2012).

above, they often go back and forth from Milan and their country. They work as prostitutes both on the street and indoors, including private clubs and apartments. The same pattern applies to some Latin American women (cisgender and transgender) who maintained a constant presence in both the outdoor and indoor segments of the sex industry. In this second phase, Nigerian women were the majority in the street. Often, they were forced by their exploiters (*madams*) to apply for international protection. This procedure allowed them to be hosted in the so-called Extraordinary Reception Centres (CAS)[15] and simultaneously enter the sex market as regular migrants.

Between 2007 and 2017 a third phase began. It was marked by the massive presence of Romanian women and a significant increase of Nigerian women, who arrived in great number between 2015 to 2017. They reached Italy by sea, following exhausting and increasingly dangerous journeys mostly along the Central-Mediterranean route. In this phase, prostitution involved a majority of foreign women regularly residing in Italy — Romanian as Community citizens and Nigerian women as political asylum seekers — and there was also a gradual return of Albanian women. The latter were either former prostitutes, who had lost their regular jobs, and thus had to return working on the sex market, or Albanian Roma women.

The latest phase then started, and since 2018 the sex market in Milan has seen two main changes. The first regards the significant decrease of Nigerian women, who thus became a minority. According to some of the social workers interviewed, Nigerian women almost disappeared from the streets because of restrictive immigration policies which blocked migrants' landings. Other social workers reported that some Nigerian women have started to work as prostitutes in isolated areas out of town, indoors, or are using dating sites on the Internet; others explained the absence of Nigerian prostitutes in the streets saying they have moved from Italy to France or Germany. All of these explanations, however, are still hypotheses, as the reasons behind Nigerian sex workers' "disappearance" from the city of Milan are not yet clear.[16] It is interesting to note that such trend was quite prominent even during the pandemic, when the mobility restrictions at international level may have blocked possible new arrivals of women from Nigeria.

The second novelty of the latest phase concerns the unprecedented presence of Chinese women in outdoor prostitution. These women traditionally used to work as prostitutes exclusively in massage rooms owned by fellow countrymen. According to the profile reconstructed on the grounds of social workers' observations, those who have started to work on the street tend to be adult women excluded from the Chinese informal labor market: some have health problems caused by incessant work, or were considered too old, and so are no longer competitive in traditional Chinese business sectors, such as textile or food services.

In conclusion, when COVID-19 began to spread, the migrant street prostitution market in Milan was quite diversified: the streets were populated by women, coming from different

15. The 'Extraordinary Reception Centers' (CAS) were introduced in 2015 through the promulgation of Legislative Decree no. 142/45. These centers are established by Prefects, following specific calls for tenders (*ex* art. 11 D. Lgs. n. 142/15). Currently, more than 5,000 structures are active nationwide, with a capacity of over 80,000 people. These reception centers were conceived in order to make up for the lack of space in ordinary reception structures or in the services provided by local authorities, in the event of large and intensive arrivals of applicants. Today, they constitute the "ordinary" mode of reception.

16. This is in line with the general trend concerning Nigerian migration flows. According to official Italian data, the entry of Nigerian community members has decreased progressively since 2017, from 18.000 in that year to 1.200 in 2018. During 2019, Nigerian arrivals further reduced, and at the end of last year Nigeria disappeared from the top 10 nationalities in terms of number of arrivals by sea (Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, 2020).

countries and with different statuses (some were regularly resident in Italy, others were not). As regards the criminal groups operating in the sex market, Albanian clans still dominated the sex racket. Well organized, they have a monopolistic control over sex workers' locations. Indeed, Romanian pimps and sometimes also Nigerian *madams* have to pay a fee to Albanian criminals for using part of the street, where they want to place "their" sex workers (Interview with PO, 11 December, 2020).

To conclude, the heterogeneous condition of migrant sex workers illustrated above is evident even when analyzing the different responses to the COVID-19 challenges. However, the impact of the pandemic was quite dramatic for all of these women, undoubtedly adding layers of vulnerability to their previous status.

4 Sex Workers and the Challenges Posed by COVID-19

4.1 The government's anti-pandemic measures

In order to understand the impact of the pandemic on street prostitution, it may help to briefly reconstruct the phases of the COVID-19 outbreak in Italy and the respective countermeasures implemented by its government, since these had numerous effects on various markets, both legal and illegal.[17]

In January 2020 the World Health Organization stated that the COVID-19 epidemic was an international health emergency. Immediately after, the Italian government declared a state of emergency and launched its first interventions.[18] In Italy, the virus appeared officially in February and spread quickly in the following months. Therefore, from January to October 2020 the Italian government adopted a series of countermeasures to contain infection based on epidemiological trends.[19] During the first wave of COVID-19 — from February to May 2020 — the government issued a legislative decree aimed at establishing social distancing and lockdown measures: universities and schools were closed, as were some industries and businesses (with the exception of those considered strictly necessary, such as shops selling food, and pharmacies); transportation was limited; mobility from one municipality to another was prohibited; and citizens were compelled to stay at home (barring specific and serious reasons related to work and health). At the beginning, these measures concerned only some regions where the infections were mainly concentrated, such as Lombardy. Later, they were extended to the entire country.[20] To ensure that people complied with the emergency measures, the Ministry of Home Affairs adopted a directive in which it asked prefects to increase patrolling activities in the streets.[21]

17. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, Europol has issued reports on the opportunities and challenges that the pandemic has posed to criminal organizations. For the list of Europol's reports see https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/staying-safe-during-Covid-19-what-you-need-to-know.

18. Delibera del Consiglio dei Ministri del 31 gennaio 2020. Dichiarazione dello stato di emergenza in conseguenza del rischio sanitario connesso all'insorgenza di patologie derivanti da agenti virali trasmissibili, 31 gennaio 2020, *Gazzetta Ufficiale n. 26 del 1-2-2020*

19. For the list of measures and relative normative reference see: http://www.governo.it/it/coronavirus-misure-del-governo.

20. Decreto del Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri 9 marzo 2020, Ulteriori disposizioni attuative del decreto-legge 23 febbraio 2020, n. 6, recante misure urgenti in materia di contenimento e gestione dell'emergenza epidemiologica da COVID-19, applicabili sull'intero territorio nazionale. (20A01558) (GU Serie Generale n. 62, 9 March, 2020).

21. N_15350/117(2)/Uff lII-Prot.Civ.

At the end of the first wave of infections, in May, the government decided to reduce restrictions on movement and reopen activities related to the industrial, commercial, sport and cultural sectors; from June 2020 people could circulate freely in the country and also travel abroad.[22]

The downward trend of infections started to change in September, and in October 2020 a second wave of infections was underway. As a consequence, the national government and the regions introduced measures to guarantee social distancing among people. Although these measures were less strict than the ones implemented during the first wave, since the restrictions on movement only regarded specific hours of the day and services, they affected people's mobility.

The measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 had significant economic effects as well, both internationally and nationally (European Comission, 2020; ISTAT, 2020; CENSIS, 2020).[23] An economic downturn particularly affected the most vulnerable individuals, including migrants (IOM, 2020; Migrant Rights Network, 2020) and sex workers (ICRSE, 2020). Moreover, the pandemic and the countermeasures based on restrictions of freedom brought about an increase in stigma, racism and discrimination worldwide (Lam & Fudge, 2020; Amnesty International 2020; SWAN 2020; UNAIDS 2020).

The next two sections address the reactions to the economic and health crises by sex workers with the spread of COVID-19 and the implementation of countermeasures.

4.2 Lockdown: sex workers' response to the lack of income

During the first wave of infections — between February and May 2020 — the reduced mobility introduced by government decrees hindered the interaction between supply and demand in the street sex market. In Milan, as in other cities, the streets were deserted and sex workers could not work as usual. As Julia affirmed, "[...] [a]ll women respect the curfew, not least because there are no clients around and it is useless to risk getting a fine. In this situation you do not earn money even when you work." (Ethnographic diary, 27 October, 2020)

As emerged from our field research as well as in other studies (Gbagbo, 2020; Lam, 2020a; Asongu et al., 2020; Singer et al., 2020; Platt et al., 2020), the impossibility of working in the street, and the consequent lack of income created serious economic difficulties for sex workers who could not access the socio-economic protection measures implemented by the government. In Italy, as already anticipated, prostitutes are not considered workers by the State and, moreover, many of them are undocumented migrants and thus are compelled to live in hiding. In addition, an unknown number of migrant sex workers are victims of trafficking and/or are severely exploited, as mentioned before.

In this context characterized by a lack of aid, women responded differently to the difficulties posed by the emergency, according to the picture offered by women's narrations during the participant observation carried out in the post-lockdown period. A minority of them, es-

22. Decreto-legge 16 maggio 2020, n. 33 Ulteriori misure urgenti per fronteggiare l'emergenza epidemiologica da COVID-19. (20G00051) (GU Serie Generale n. 125, 16 May 2020, Entrata in vigore del provvedimento: 16/05/2020, https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/05/16/20G00051/sg); Decreto del presidente del consiglio dei ministri 11 giugno 2020, Ulteriori disposizioni attuative del decreto-legge 25 marzo 2020, n. 19, recante misure urgenti per fronteggiare l'emergenza epidemiologica da COVID-19, e del decreto-legge 16 maggio 2020, n. 33, recante ulteriori misure urgenti per fronteggiare l'emergenza epidemiologica da COVID-19. (20A03194) (GU Serie Generale n. 147, 11 June, 2020, https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/06/11/20A03194/sg.

23. In Italy there was a 9% drop in GDP (European Commission, 2020).

pecially those coming from Southern America, asked for support from NGOs or social services bodies; others, most of all from Eastern Europe — namely those coming from countries not far from Italy, such as Albania, Romania, Hungary or Greece — returned to their home countries, while others remained in Italy. The latter were forced to consolidate their ambiguous and abusive relationships with their fiancés/pimps or with the exploiting criminal groups which had trafficked them to Italy.

4.2.1 Returning to the home country

Those who went back to their home country, because they were worried about staying in Italy without working, and also for family reasons, were clearly *able* to decide to leave. Our fieldnotes record various "practices in situation" related to the *capacity* to decide to leave. In one field note we wrote:

> Cristina told us that, given the situation, she had decided to return to her home country to be close to her son who was no longer in school because of distance learning. She had already bought her plane ticket and asked us if she could travel by plane without restrictions. She said that she was very worried. In her country too, masks had become mandatory and there was a curfew from midnight. She talked to us about her son who for days had been indoors, due to lockdown measures implemented in her home country, and about her desire to spend some time with him. (Ethnographic diary, 27 October, 2020)

Mobility is not a rare event in the biography of prostitutes. Women's frequent movement from one place to another is one of the characteristics of Milan's migrant sex market. This might be the result of personal choice, i.e. part of how their migration projects unfold (Interview with SW, 2 December, 2020). Yet most of the time this mobility is the result of the system of exploitation. In other words, it is linked to forced prostitution, which follows the rationale according to which turnover in the "product" is crucial for the market's development. Exploiters, who consider women as mere goods, tend to move them from one city to another one, or even from one country to another. Their aim is — as put by one social operator interviewed — "not only to have"fresh goods" (as exploiters think of the women), but also to prevent these young women from developing roots that could lead them either to cling to clients, or develop networks with social services that could be a "channel for freedom" (Interview with SW, 2 December, 2020).

This isolation, caused by the difficulty of building a relational network in the new places where they are transferred, increases the layers of vulnerability during a period of crisis, because they are less likely to benefit from the solidarity of civil society. This was the case during the pandemic, since anti-COVID-19 social distancing measures ended up rendering prostitutes twice as isolated.

4.2.2 Enhancing bonds with exploiters

The women who, during the lockdown, could not go back to their country, or decided themselves to remain in Italy, had to cope with the consequences of the lack of work by turning to solutions that apparently worsened their situation. Since their earnings dropped and they could not afford essential goods, some of them tended to run up debts with their exploiters and/or clients.

In some instances, however, women received food packages from NGOs, after being granted permission by their cohabitant fiancés/pimps in order to cope with the lack of economic resources during the lockdown — given the interruption of their criminal businesses as well, including not only exploitation of prostitution but also illegal goods trafficking (Interview with SW, 25 November, 2020). As explained by a social worker of the NGO that adopted the policy of offering prostitutes food packages, due to the logistical problems experienced by exploiters, which prevented them from obtaining new assets, food packages were an important resource for all the people living in the prostitutes' houses, including their exploiters. This shows how women during COVID-19 times also played a role that can be defined through the oxymoron of an "exploited breadwinner," providing further proof of the complexity of paths taken by migrant women involved in sex market and their capacity to negotiate small forms of self-determination in very specific situations. The complex and ambiguous process in which these women are engaged seems to recall practices of "bargaining with patriarchy" (Kandiyoti, 1988), which also characterized women's attitudes inside mafia-type organized crime (Ingrascì, 2021). In a male dominated and violent context, such as the sex market and organized crime, women attempt to find strategies not only for enduring conditions of subordination and abuse, but also for affirming themselves. However, this affirmation is problematic, because it is a concession granted by the men to whom they are bonded rather than the results of their ability to take charge of the own life (Meyers, 2002, p. 4).

Social workers expressed their worries to us especially concerning women trafficked by Nigerian clans whose exploitation system is already grounded on a debt-bondage system, which requires women to pay back the debt they incurred when they left Nigeria. The COVID-19 pandemic and related difficulties in providing sexual services may have increased the economic fragility of these women, with a negative counter-effect on the amount of debt already accumulated, especially if one considers that some Nigerian women were forced to ask for support from their exploiters to pay the rent and buy other essential goods during the lockdowns. One of the interviewed social workers explained to us that "the first workers who asked us for help were transgender prostitutes — mostly from Southern America — who enjoyed greater 'freedom' and were more able to react and adapt to the huge changes caused by the pandemic; while the last to ask for support were Nigerian women, since they had an internal network 'helping' them. In other words, the criminal organizations themselves decided to offer a response to the problem, by offering women some money in advance and thus pushing them further into debt" (Interview with SW, 25 November, 2020). It is not correct to establish a rank of exploitation, and it is important to avoid underestimating the degree to which transgender women involved in sex market are subject to forms of exploitation (Abbatecola et al., 2014, 2018). However, the biographical data collected during our research pointed to the fact that the pandemic affected migrant sex workers differently, since it added layers of vulnerability, generated by the new difficult context, to their specific situations, which differed on the basis of variables, such as legal status, nationality, and the structure and methods of the exploiters' criminal groups.

4.2.3 Relying on clients

Another "solution" adopted by women working in the sex market, which emerged from our research, was to rely on clients. Essentially, they tried to find clients able to meet them in their apartment or in hotels (Interview with PO, 11 December, 2020; Interview with SW, 11 January, 2021). Cristina, for example, told us she received clients at home to earn the money needed to pay her rent (Ethnographic diary, 16 September, 2020). In other instances, some women even

moved into their clients' houses. This was especially the case for those women who were no longer able to pay their own rent and could not rely on a network of relations through which they could find support. These cases clearly show that the lack of social capital increases the difficulties faced in an emergency, such as the pandemic.

As a social worker explained us,

> "A minority of women, the most desperate, namely those who do not have a home and do not know where to go, ask clients for hospitality, who give them a place to stay and food in exchange for sexual services. These cases concern exclusively women of Albanian origin in the event that their compatriot boyfriends are in Albania and therefore cannot have direct control over them. Clients available to provide hospitality to girls are often men in love with them and therefore willing to pay large sums of money for sexual services." (Interview with SW, 25 November, 2020)

Other women asked their clients for money, falling into debt with them (Interview with SW, 25 November, 2020). Generally speaking, however, it should be emphasized that the relationship between clients and sex workers is often ambiguous. Even if women take advantage of their clients' willingness to help them, the power relationship existing between sex workers and clients is unbalanced. For radical feminists, this relationship provides clear evidence that prostitution "is one of those most graphic examples of men's domination over women" (Pateman, 1983, p. 56). According to social workers, the pandemic has accentuated this unequal relation. This has also emerged in research carried out in other national contexts (Kimani et al., 2020, Burgos & Plaza Del Pino, 2021).

4.2.4 Moving to other sectors of the sex industry

Another method for obtaining income, adopted by both free and exploited women, consisted in moving to the virtual market where anti-COVID-19 mobility restrictions were not a barrier for linking supply and demand, as they were for the street sex market. According to social workers, some women, both from East European countries and from Nigeria, moved to the sector of online prostitution (Interview with SC, 25 November, 2020). One operator told us that by surfing sex websites they found some of the women they had previously met on the streets, who sold live sex services via webcams (Interview with SC, 25 November, 2020). For the street sex market, just as for legal markets and social activities during the pandemic the Internet became a profitable means for mitigating the consequences of the impossibility of establishing in-person contact.[24]

Moreover, as underlined by both social workers and the police, just as happened with the anti-prostitution decrees implemented in the first decade of the 2000s, these new restrictions on movement resulted in a shift from outdoor to indoor activity.

This increased risks for sex workers, because in the streets they have greater control over who they choose as clients, as well as greater visibility and more effective controls by the police.

> Laura told us that in 2006 she started working in night clubs, which she believes are much more dangerous than the street. Her job was to get the clients to drink and then perform a sexual act. To endure these evenings, she was forced to drink

24. As regards the Internet and the sex market, see Weitzer (2005, 2009), Chin Phua & Caras (2008), Lee-Gonyea et al. (2009), Cunningham & Kendall (2011), Minichiello et al. (2013).

> in turn. She told us that paradoxically the street is a safer place than clubs and also internet dating. On the street you understand who you are dealing with and you get to a point where your impressions are practically always correct, so when you don't like someone, you just send them away. In clubs, instead, you can't do this, and also with the internet what happens is that you find a complete stranger in your home... you can't do anything about it... maybe three of them show up, they may be violent or have taken drugs and who knows what their intentions are! She told us that she too was in Switzerland to see how clubs worked there. For her it was a bad experience, there was no control and it was very dangerous (Ethnographic diary, 27 October, 2020).

Furthermore, online commercial sex, while in some cases entailing an increase in safety, has proved to be riskier compared to the street environment (Campbell et al., 2019, p. 1556). Ultimately, the COVID-19 crisis, by accelerating certain tendencies in the sex industry, such as the shift from the street towards online and indoor prostitution (Azam et al., 2021), has on the one hand opened up new opportunities of work, and on the other has increased risks for sex workers.

The shift indoors, already experienced following the anti-prostitution decrees mentioned above, was therefore significant during the pandemic. However, a comparison between the two restrictive measures — the anti-prostitution decrees and the most recent anti-COVID-19 regulations — highlights their different effects, especially with respect to the dimension of "quality of work." If the former (anti-prostitution decrees) led to the displacement of women to the more peripheral areas of the cities and to a shift indoors, (following enhanced police patrolling) without however eliminating the demand for sexual services (Danna, 2002), the anti-COVID-19 measures conversely caused a drop in demand for outdoor prostitution. Clients were discouraged by the fines introduced by the State and frightened by possible infections. Their almost total disappearance from the streets therefore discouraged women from working outdoors, in one of the multiple effects linked to the COVID-19 crisis.

Exploring the various responses of women to the challenges posed by the pandemic context, while also observing that women have a migratory project when deciding to come to Europe, despite this potentially meaning becoming involved in exploitive circuits, led us to stress that both agentic and exploitive factors concur — in different proportions — in determining the experiences of migrant sex workers. Therefore, we concluded that it would be reductive to analyze their life stories through the lens of either the "victimization approach" or the "critical approach."

4.3 Post-lockdown: back to the street and increased health risks

In the post-lockdown period (from June to October 2020), some women went back to working on the street. However, their presence was lesser compared to the numbers seen during the year before the COVID-19 pandemic. This is due to the fact that some of those who left at the beginning of the pandemic did not come back. One must also consider the prohibition of crossing borders during the lockdown, which had an impact on the movement of trafficked women (Giammarinaro, 2020), affecting women's turnover in the streets.

The women who returned to work had to face an environment in which the virus circulated, even if less extensively compared to the previous phase. At that time, therefore, women had to face problems related to the quality of their work, since health risks had increased. The

pandemic has in this sense caused the labor dimension of migrant prostitution to emerge clearly.

From what social workers noted while working in the street units, these women's perception of its risks was mixed, as can be said also of other national contexts. Some were quite worried about the virus and used safety measures, which included wearing masks, avoiding sexual intercourse inside cars and sexual positions that in their view might be riskier, because they expose them to the client's breath.

> Marika told us she doesn't usually wear a mask because certain things can't be done with a mask, but she also told us she forced clients to wear one during sexual intercourse (Ethnographic diary, 27 October, 2020).

> Melany told us she is very careful and uses gloves with clients for fear of being infected. She says people are afraid, including some customers who use the right precautions not only regarding sex but also COVID-19 (Ethnographic diary, 9 September, 2020).

Other women did not care about risks. Among the latter there were both women with a denialist attitude — denying the seriousness of the disease's spread — and women who, although aware of the dangers of COVID-19, accepted this risk as one of the many hazards implied by their job.

> Elena told us that her clients do not care about COVID-19 and that she cannot imagine working with a mask because some positions would not be possible. She said she was fine, although she had a little cough due to cigarettes. She does not believe in COVID-19 and cannot believe COVID-19 actually exists, since she continued to work as a prostitute during the lockdown without ever getting sick (Ethnographic diary, 29 September, 2020).

In any case, as one operator underlined, "believing that COVID-19 is not dangerous helps women to cope. Denying the risk is a sort of psychological and emotional protection" (Interview with SW, 25 November, 2020). Neglecting risk can be interpreted as a way to guarantee psychological shelter.

In relation to the health hazards, Nigerian women are the most vulnerable, according to social workers, because of their debt-bondage with traffickers. The latter entails not only economic factors, but also cultural and religious ones, since these women believe they are going to die if they are not able to repay it (Carling, 2006; Aghatise, 2011; Mancuso, 2014; Cabras, 2015, 2017; Baarda, 2016; Campana, 2016; Taliani, 2019). This fear leads them to accept any kind of client, even those who do not want to take protection measures, since they need to work a lot in order to reduce their debt. In their view, between the certainty of dying — if their debt is not canceled — and the risk of diseases, they opt for the latter. All the above perspectives suggest that the perception of risk experienced by sex workers is multifaceted and changes according to personal character, culture and also position of subjugation. The pandemic weakens those who are already culturally and economically unequipped for dealing with forms of blackmails. As a result, their layers of vulnerability increase.

At this time it is important to recall that in September 2020, when infections started to grow again and rumors about a new lockdown circulated, women working in the streets proved to be well informed about physical distancing regulations and worried about measures involving

restrictions on mobility, since this would have affected their work and thus their earnings. One operator told us, "[t]hey were much more informed than us" (Interview with SW, 2 December, 2020). This attitude confirms that migrants working in the streets consider themselves workers earning money from a job, despite being compelled to give most of their profit to their exploiters and despite the abuses they suffer. Social operators also recognize the labor element of the complex phenomenon of prostitution, along with its aspects involving exploitation. In their view, this leads them to see women as agentic persons and not merely as passive victims and, as a consequence, it allows them to establish a relationship based on trust and respect.

Underling the agentic dimension of women's experience does not mean denying the mistreatment practices that strongly affect migrant street prostitution circuits. Actually, it is crucial to remember that migrants working in the streets constantly experience violence, whether psychological or physical, exercised by people controlling and exploiting them (Massari, 2009; Abbatecola 2018). During the pandemic the constant risk of abuse was exacerbated by the isolation produced by the government's obligation to stay at home. This forced sex workers to stay off the streets, the place where they earn a living for themselves in Italy and for their family living in their home country. Observing all of the dimensions that simultaneously characterized the experience of sex workers during COVID-19, led us to adopt a third theoretical viewpoint, one in between the "victimization approach" and the "critical approach," as explained in Section 2.

The situation of sex workers during the second phase of the pandemic became more complex in October 2020, when — following an increase in the rate of infections — the government introduced limits on how much time could be spent outdoors. Women thus were forced to anticipate their working hours, following the curfew initially imposed at 11 p.m. and then brought to 10 p.m. Women started working around 6.30 or 7 p.m. and had to face a drastic reduction in the number of clients. In downtown Milan, daytime prostitution is almost nonexistent, and therefore the evening shift is the only one available. Before the lockdown, women used to go to the street at around 9 p.m. and would sometimes stay out all night with clients. The curfews led to a drop in demand, as we observed during our participant observation and as was underlined by the social workers we interviewed. Some sex workers provided us with very clear information and told us about their impressions about this period.

> Cristina told us she cannot work in those conditions. She left at half past seven, well in advance, but there were few clients and hardly anyone around. She told us that she basically did not work the previous evening and that she was stopped by the police, who asked her to leave the street, telling her that she could no longer stop along the sidewalk due to the situation caused by COVID-19 (Ethnographic field note, 27 October, 2020).

> Marta told us she is very worried about this situation, but she tries to keep working. She told us she thought of going back to her country of origin with her boyfriend, but then she changed her mind. She believes that it is better to hold on and continue to work for a while and maybe go back at Christmas or in the summer, depending on how the situation evolves [...]. She said she finds these partial closings senseless. She would prefer a lockdown, closing everything instead of keeping restaurants open until six and imposing a curfew that doesn't allow her to make money. She hopes for a short lockdown, that would be able to fix things (Ethnographic diary, 27 October, 2020).

Social workers also attributed the reduced demand for sexual services to the fact that many clients, especially married ones, prefer going out during the night, in order to avoid being seen

by acquaintances. (Interview with SW, 25 November, 2020). That is why most of the demand tended to be composed of single men and, in some cases, foreigners. Interestingly, the women we met during our fieldwork complained about the fact that the decrease of clients during the pandemic has compromised their security, because it has compelled them to accept any kind of clients. In other words, they cannot choose as they could do in the past and this, in their view, makes a difference with regard to safety. They told us that usually they try not to accept foreign clients, since they think they are less trustworthy. However, during the pandemic they ended up accepting them too, because there were no other clients around. Joanna stated, "[w]e keep away from men from Morocco, Albania and Arab countries because they are the most violent, the ones we're afraid of" (Ethnographic diary, 27 October, 2020). They depicted foreign men found on the street as often drunk, prone to harassment and without a car, and maintained that the sexual intercourse with them is less safe. The presence of foreigners among clients does not indicate a general greater risk for prostitutes. However, it is important to note women's perception — especially Eastern Europe women who mentioned this trend — according to which the decrease in clients on the street due to the pandemic meant a greater risks since it eliminated the possibility of choosing clients. As a consequence, they felt less save in the pandemic context, namely more vulnerable.

During the second wave of infections, police controls increased. Just as in the first wave, it seems that the police's attention was almost exclusively directed towards the demand rather than the supply. The police who checked women tended to warn them and not to fine them, unlike clients. Elena, from Romania, told us that she was never stopped by the police, despite the fact that there were so many policemen around (Ethnographic diary, 29 September, 2020).

This trend, which emerged during our fieldwork, cannot be generalized. More information would be necessary to further investigate this pivotal aspect related to the quality of work. However, it is worth mentioning it because it seems to indicate a different output compared to the results of other research on prostitution in times of COVID-19. In research carried out in Canada, for example, researchers stressed that "instead of receiving various types of support, migrant sex workers are continuing to be targeted by law enforcement officers" (Lam, 2020b, p. 482). In some regions of Africa, it seems that during the pandemic sex workers were subject to more checks and experienced violence from the police (Adebayo Adebisi, 2020). For the Milan case, it is necessary to point out that migrant prostitutes, although less controlled than their clients, as above specified, were particularly worried about the increased surveillance caused by the anti-COVID-19 measures, since most of them do not have regular documents. As emerged during our fieldwork and was emphasized by the social workers we interviewed, the sustained fear of being checked caused mental stress, thus worsening the quality of their work.

5 Concluding Remarks

This paper has focused on the impact of COVID-19 on the migrant street prostitution market in the city of Milan, providing an original contribution to the literature on sex work during the pandemic. Indeed, the work presented here is the first empirical research on migrant sex workers during COVID-19 that deals with the Italian situation. Moreover, this work not only has concentrated on the challenges posed by the economic and health hardships generated by the reduced demand for sexual services on the street, as most of the studies did, but also has analyzed women's reactions to these challenges.

In line with other studies (Gbagbo, 2020; Lam, 2020a; Asongu et al., 2020; Singer et al., 2020; Platt et al., 2020), this research's output shows that anti-pandemic emergency legislation

and the spread of the infection exacerbated the difficulties already affecting sex workers' experiences. During the health and socio-economic crises, the impossibility of working on the street and the simultaneous drop in clients brought about a significant loss of income, which forced sex workers to face serious challenges. The negative economic impact, which affected many Italian citizens (CENSIS, 2020), was worse for migrant sex workers because — due to their irregular status, the informality of their job and/or their exploitive condition — they were not eligible for the financial benefits provided by the state and could not rely on a supportive relational network, given their lack of social capital. The pandemic worsened the conditions of those women whose rights were abused by traffickers and exploiters (UNODC, 2020a) and, generally speaking, highlighted the prostitutes' "social death" (O'Connell Davidson 1999, quoted in Massari 2009),[25] already underlined by operators and scholars and sex workers associations who sustain the necessity of regulating prostitute's job positions (see for example the call launched by *Gruppo di ricerca italiano su prostituzione e lavoro sessuale*).

According to the results of our research, migrant sex workers suffered economically especially during the government's implementation of lockdown measures. Due to their loss of income and the lack of state support, these women could not afford essential goods. This hardship brought about profound distress, anxiety and fear. In addition, they had to stop sending money to their families in their home countries, which had reputational repercussions and thus led to psychological suffering.

Women attempted to find solutions to cope with this difficult situation in various ways, as emerges from the experiences of women detailed both in the narratives provided by social operators and in accounts provided directly by migrant street sex workers. Only some, who were already in contact with NGOs providing front-line services, decided to ask them for help, receiving food packs and assistance; others returned to their home countries; others were compelled to reinforce their bonds with traffickers and pimps or with regular clients.

Given the lack of welfare support, sex workers in Italy, much as in other countries, were ostensibly compelled to choose between health and income (Callander, et al., 2020). In most cases they had no choice but to work, because they were under their exploiters' control and were forced to work as prostitutes even in situations that posed risks to their health. Moreover, during COVID-19 the drop in clients obliged women to select their clients to a lesser extent and this, in their perception, increased the risk of being victims of violence.

The pandemic and the ensuing crisis accelerated some tendencies already characterizing the sex industry, shrinking the street sex market and enlarging the online sector. This might have resulted in a decrease in safety for women, since staying indoors means more isolation and less opportunity to meet harm-reduction NGOs.

The analysis of women's responses to the challenges posed by the pandemic in terms of income and quality of work has shown that the pandemic has added layers of vulnerability, but also stimulated women to find solutions and thus, in some circumstances, to negotiate small spaces of freedom. Observing such dynamics has led us to argue that when exploring the condition of migrant sex workers the perspective adopted must be able to acknowledges that agentic capacities may coexist with subjugation and exploitation. Indeed, when dealing with migrant prostitution it is necessary to construct a theoretical perspective that stands between the "victimization approach" and the "critical approach" as underlined throughout this paper.

In conclusion, it is important to restate the importance of carrying out research on the sex market and sex trafficking during the pandemic, as recommended by UNODC (UNODC,

25. A condition of "social death" also regards those who were able to exit prostitution (Månsson & Hedin, 1999, p. 129; Scoular & O'Neill, 2007).

2020a), since the health crisis is not over and measures involving restricted mobility can be implemented at any time, affecting the economy and having a negative impact on the most vulnerable individuals, including migrant sex workers.

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