

**Broken Global Explorations: Exploitation, Social Isolation and Stigma -  
The Lived experience of Korean Women Working in the Entertainment and Sex  
Industry in Sydney**

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**Abstract**

There has been limited discursive space for Korean women in the sex and entertainment industry, particularly those working overseas in countries including Australia, to narrate their experience. Bringing the voices of these women to the forefront, this paper offers a nuanced understanding of their migration trajectories and working and living conditions. Neither the abolitionist nor the decriminalization approach fully understands how women in the industry fare. The former neglects the agency of women who voluntarily choose this work, while the latter tends to silence the women trafficked into the industry. These dichotomous views fail to encompass women's complicated lived experience, often falling outside this binary. The 22 women interviewed here described their involvement in the industry as a short-lived and auxiliary part of their global exploration. Although they voluntarily chose such work, and despite its legal status, they still suffer from the stigma associated with it, while their working conditions are often deceptive, abusive and exploitative. The paper suggests that we transcend the dichotomy between the "free" and the "trafficked" assumed in both global and national policies in relation to the sex trade, in order to develop policies and programs to support and protect migrant women in this industry better.

Key words: prostitution, migrant sex work, Korean sex workers in Australia, sex trafficking, and anti-prostitution legislation

## **Introduction**

A growing number of Korean women have migrated overseas to find work in the sex and entertainment industry. Australia has been one of the key destinations for these women. According to media reports, foreigners account for about 5,750 (25%) of the 23,000 sex workers in Australia, and approximately 970 (16.9%) of them are Korean (Seage, 2011). However, there is no data that offers the exact number of Korean women in the industry, but there are some clear suggestions that there has been a substantial increase in sex workers from South Korea since 2005. In a longitudinal study, conducted with sex workers attending Sydney sexual health clinics between 1992 and 2009, South Koreans made up the third-largest group of respondents, following their Chinese and Thai counterparts (Donovan et al. 2012). This is supported by a 2005 report on non-Australian citizens working in the sex industry over a twelve-month period in 2004-05, which revealed South Koreans to comprise the largest category of migrant sex workers, with Working Holiday (WH) visas as their most common visa class (208 out of 244 cases/individuals identified) (Australian National Audit Office, 2006).

The Korean government is concerned about the entry of Korean nationals into the sex industry in Australia, and has reportedly stated its intention to take strong action against them by imposing jail terms and cancellation of passports if they are caught. It even sent the Special Ambassador for Overseas Koreans and Consular Affairs to

Australia to discuss the problem with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and law enforcement officials (Seage, 2013).

The Australian Federal Police and the Federal Government have become aware of the migration of Korean women into Australia's sex industry. In 2010, Australia's then-Minister for Home Affairs and Justice, Brendan O'Connor, indicated that South Korea was close to catching-up with Thailand as the largest source country for women trafficked into Australia's sex industry (Norma, 2011). The Australian Attorney-General's Department confirmed that between March 1 2004 and March 31 2007, 530 Korean nationals were found working lawfully and 135 Koreans were found to be working unlawfully in the sex industry in Australia (e-mail communication, 2007). There was a significant jump in the number of South Korean sex workers holding working holiday visas in Australia in the year leading up to June 30, 2005, with some 222 workers identified, compared to 63 in 2003-04.

There has been limited discursive space for Korean women in the sex and entertainment industry, particularly those working overseas in countries including Australia, to narrate their experience. Bringing the voices of 22 women into the forefront, this paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of their migration trajectories and working and living conditions, aspirations and future plans. To empower and protect women who are either lured or trafficked into the industry, it is crucial to take their experiences into account. Their lived experiences give insights into the reality of their world and the intricacies of their lives, which can serve as the basis for any policy and legislation regarding prostitution and sex trafficking.

**Researching a Clandestine Community: Migrant Korean women in the sex and**

## **entertainment industry**

In order to enable participants to narrate their stories in an unconstrained way, we conducted semi-structured interviews. We also drew on content analyses of relevant secondary source materials, including articles in the Korean and Australian media, academic publications and government and NGO reports. We conducted interviews with 22 Korean women over the age of 18 who were working or had worked, in the Australian entertainment and sex industry and with 23 informants from government/non-government organizations and the industry, who had extensive knowledge about, and experience of working with, Korean sex workers in Australia and South Korea. Most organizations and their representatives remain anonymous, in order to protect their identities. The organizations from whom other informants were drawn included sex workers associations, human trafficking victim support groups, sexual health clinics, women's groups, the police, Korean community organizations, Korean vernacular media, Australian Federal government departments, social services and other local government departments. The interviews with the Korean women and key informants in Australia were undertaken mostly between February 2007 and April 2008. Additional data with a former sex worker and other key informants, such as NGOs, journalists, policy-makers, both in Korea and Australia, were collected between January 2012 and February 2013.

Given that we had to identify the study sample from a virtually clandestine community, it was extremely difficult to recruit research respondents. We employed two strategies in order to approach potential interview participants. Firstly, we contacted organizations that were understood to have frequent contact with sex

workers in Australia and asked them to help with the recruitment of potential participants, using their established contact with Korean workers. Some organizations such as Sydney Sexual Health Clinic distributed leaflets to their Korean service users to seek participants. Korean community organizations were also used as a contact point. Secondly, advertisements on community papers and internet websites were placed in order to approach a broader group of Korean women working in Australia. As a result, a small number of women responded to the leaflets and advertisements and agreed to participate in the interviews. Therefore, it was impossible to achieve a truly random sample. Instead, this study is based on a small, convenience and snowball sample. All interviewees were based in Sydney and consented to be interviewed. Therefore, this regionally specific and self-selected sample may not be representative of the total population of Korean women working in the entertainment and sex industry in Australia. As no interviewees consented to their interviews being audio-taped, notes were taken during each interview, all of which were conducted at public locations and at a time the interviewees chose. It is important to note that the convenience sample included only willing participants in the industry and did not include trafficked victims.

We interviewed two groups: 11 *doumi* workers and 11 sex workers. In this study, *doumis* refer to those who work in entertainment businesses, in either room salons or karaoke bars (called *noraebang* in Korean) to entertain customers, but are not supposed to engage in sexual intercourse with customers. Sex workers provide sex-related services for financial reward at massage parlors and brothels. Most massage workers interviewed provide sex related services for clients just like brothel workers.

Based on this difference, *noraebangs* and room salon *doumis* differentiated themselves from sex workers.

Of the 22 women we interviewed, 11 were *doumi* workers, nine worked at *noraebangs* and two at room salons. Of 11 sex workers, 5 worked at massage parlors and 6 at brothels. Most women tended to move between workplaces within their respective industry, but rarely across entertainment and sex industries. Three women (one room salon worker and two *noraebang* workers) had left the industry by the time of the interview. Eleven women had other jobs. Four were students and worked as *doumi* or sex workers on the side. Another five worked as cleaners, sales assistants and waitresses. The women we interviewed had been employed in a range of other fields, including teaching and nursing.

As suggested by some research on migrant sex workers (Jeffreys, 2009), the Korean women in this study had fairly high educational attainments, even university level. Thirteen were university students, dropouts or graduates, another seven were high school graduates, leaving two who had only finished middle school. Most women interviewed were in their twenties, with the average age of 26. They were between 22 and 35 with the majority (67 percent) between 24 and 28 years. This rather young sample reflected their eligibility for obtaining working holiday visas and their economic position in Korea, where they may have been unemployed or in low-paid work, despite their educational qualifications. The participants were all single and had no dependent children.

The women had been in Australia for between one month to 36 months. Those who had stayed over 12 months, included those on student visas or on second working holiday visas, plus those who had gained visa transfers from a working holiday visa to a student visa. Of the 22 women, seven were only able to speak basic or no English, while 15 were capable of daily conversation, including three fluent in English. Of the 22 women, nine women had previously worked as sex workers and three had work experience as *doumis* in karaoke bars.

### **Why Australia? Discrepancy in Policies on Prostitution in Korea and Australia**

Prostitution policy in both countries reflects the two worldwide trends: criminalization in Korea and de-criminalization in Australia, in particular the state of New South Wales (NSW). Korea's new legislation on prostitution and Australia's decriminalization of sex work can be attributed in part to the movement of Korean women into the Australian sex industry. Just as squeezing a balloon in one place makes it expand in another, explained as "Push down, Pop up" (PDPU) effect" (Lim, 2104, p. 12), a Korean government crackdown on brothels and other sex businesses in 2004, following the legislation of the Anti-Prostitution Law, has seen many women move to Australia, Japan, the United States and elsewhere to evade strict legislation. In Australia, Victoria's Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee has attributed the movement of women into Australia's sex industry to Korea's anti-prostitution laws. The Committee reported that more pressure may be applied on women trafficked from countries where prostitution is a crime, and that women who do not have any work experience other than sex work may feel they have no choice but to leave their country to find work (Norma, 2011).

In Australia, legislation on sex work and prostitution varies by state and territory. After a series of major amendments in the 1970s and 1990s, current legal frameworks on sex work fall into one of three models: the decriminalization, legalization and implementation of licensing schemes for commercial sex work. In practice, each jurisdiction adopts these models uniquely, and all Australian jurisdictions implement a mixed combination (Renshaw et al, 2015). Therefore, Australia has furnished the sex industry and its customers with a comparatively less regulated operating environment since 1992. Brothels, escort prostitution businesses, strip clubs and pornography distribution businesses are run legally in Australia, and prostitution is openly advertised through local newspapers and internet websites in a number of states (Norma, 2011). In particular, the state of NSW, where the largest number of Korean migrants live and where most Korean sex workers choose to move, adopted a decriminalization model which has removed criminal sanctions on sex work, so that regular labor and occupational health and safety laws apply.

South Korea introduced two anti-prostitution laws in 2004, the Punishment Act (Act on the Punishment of Procuring Prostitution and Associated Acts) and the Protection Act (Act on the Prevention and Protections of Victims Thereof). South Korea had criminalized prostitution in 1961 but the new laws for the first time confirmed that the buying and selling of sex was a crime against women's rights. The Punishment Act also regards pimps, intermediaries and buyers as criminals, while protecting women who are forced to sell sex by coercion or threat (Cho, 2005). The Protection Act also offers women who leave the sex industry a range of welfare and rehabilitation services such as fully subsidized accommodation and board, free legal and medical

assistance, counseling, and specialized secondary school level education, as well as ongoing programs to facilitate their integration back into society (Norma, 2011).

Some argue that this has increased control over workplaces and the sexual interactions of sex workers, leading to safer sex practices (Daniel, 2010). The relatively liberal visa arrangements for South Koreans travelling to Australia on working holiday visas, student and tourist visas, along with legality of sex work in Australia, has led young Korean women to move to work in legalized brothels in Australia.

### **Sexual Politics of Prostitution: Beyond “Out of Free will” versus “Trafficked”**

Ironically, the new legislation in Korea enabled sex workers to speak up for themselves for the first time in Korea’s history. Their groups appeared in 2005 after mass protests by prostitutes in 2004 against the anti-prostitution laws. Their demonstrations, hunger strikes, and suicides, brought on by economic difficulties, were frequently publicized by the media. The protesters demanded that the government recognize their dignity, value and right to pursue happiness (*Hangyure Sinmun* October 1 2004, as cited in Cheng, 2011). By situating prostitution in the context of “work,” “making a living,” and “the right to live,” they wanted to keep their distance from sexual politics that regards prostitution as sexual violence (Cho, 2005) while arguing that the Anti Prostitution Law violates women’s rights by outlawing their work.

As prostitution has recently become “the definitive women’s human rights issue in South Korea” (Cheng, 2011, p. 1634), this has also caused friction in the Korean women’s movement. The two Acts were the result of the combined efforts by the MOGE and the Korean Women’s Association United, an alliance of progressive

women's organizations, along with two leading organizations that fight prostitution and work with women in the sex industry for the past 20 years (Cho, 2005). These groups have argued that by changing the legal term for prostitution from *yullak-yeoseong* (fallen women) to *seongmaemae-pihae-yeoseong* (women victims in the sex trade) the context involving buyers and sellers of sex, mediating agents and the sex industry can be scrutinized rather than solely stigmatizing women morally. By introducing the concept of "victims of sex trafficking" the legislation has allowed women who are forced into sex work to be exempted from prosecution (Cho, 2005).

Sex workers and their advocates, however, claim that the mainstream women's movement emphasizes victimhood in prostitution and fails to distinguish between prostitution and sex trafficking, viewing the former as a violation of women's human rights (Cheng, 2011). Cheng (2011, p. 1637) criticized the Korean mainstream women's movement for positioning women's human rights as a "negative right of removal from harm (protection), rather than a positive right of self-assertion (autonomy)." Some research has also questioned if the right of sexual self-determination, a concept adopted by the Korean women's movement against domestic and sexual violence, has been echoed by the anti-prostitution movement (Cheng, 2011). In response to demonstrations by sex workers, some women's organizations and the MOGE commented that the prostitutes "must be confidantes and cronies of pimps or simply so ignorant as to misinterpret the new Acts" (Morae, 2005, as cited in Cho, 2005, p. 104). Under this new legislation, state protection is only for victims of prostitution "who are deemed innocent, while it prosecutes, criminalises, or ignores those who are seen as complicit in their victimization" (Soderlund, 2005, as cited in Cheng, 2011, p. 1643). Some advocates of decriminalization have argued that criminalization pushes the sex industry underground and sex workers have less

control over the conditions in their workplace. Also, it increases the stigma, isolation, discrimination, violence and exploitation experienced by sex workers (Daniel, 2010; Mai, 2012). A view that considers sex workers to be objects of rescue and rehabilitation tends to neglect the agency of women in the sex industry (Ko, 2006). This approach can reduce rights for sex workers and therefore increase their vulnerability to trafficking (Jeffreys, 2009). There is no evidence that criminalization has reduced the size of the sex industry or the number of people working in it in South Korea (Daniel, 2010).<sup>1</sup> The sex industry within Korea continues to thrive and operate in more clandestine forms, via barbershops, karaoke parlors, private residences, and even cyberspace (Lim, 2014). It diminishes opportunities for peer education, and regulation by the police means that sex workers are less likely to seek its assistance in emergency situations. Criminalization actually increases the potential for the transmission of HIV and STIs, and fails to reduce the size of the sex industry (Daniel, 2010).

In reality, it is almost impossible to establish whether a person is a victim of trafficking or not, although she may have initiated her migration. Migrant women in the sex industry are often regarded as trafficked victims, abused and in need of rescue and protection. This is so despite the considerable research that shows that such presumption by many international bodies and governments is incorrect (Jeffrey, 2009; Mai, 2009 & 2012). It is hard to determine whether each woman's case within the sex industry involves elements of trafficking. Although limited, there has been

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<sup>1</sup> Despite the passage of a tough anti-prostitution-legislation the Ministry for Gender Equality estimates that about 500,000 women work in the sex industry in Korea. The Korean Institute of Criminology indicates that one-fifth of men in their twenties purchase sex at least four times a month (Ghosh, 2013).

research on non-trafficked transnational sex work. Chin (2013) argues that neo-liberal global economic restructuring processes have created new pathways for the movement of people, services and goods. Migration for sex work offers women the means to earn money for themselves or their families. Further, transnational sex work provides the women the opportunity to experience cosmopolitan life styles, such as travelling the world and learning new languages (Chin, 2013). Despite voluntarily working in the entertainment and/or sex industry, the women are at times deceived, extorted or abused. Complexity and ambivalence were most common among migrant sex workers' understanding regarding their involvement in the sex industry (Mai, 2012, p. 117).

In particular, Korean women who worked in the overseas sex industry were perceived to bring national shame and dishonor. For instance, in response to the media coverage and concern expressed by the South Korean government, Korean community members in Sydney protested against the sex trade and requested the criminalization of sex work in Australia. They called for a crackdown on Korean sex workers who enter the country. Further, the community also said Korea was being seen as an exporter of prostitutes and its reputation tarnished (Na, 2012).

It is not easy to assess which approach would best empower women in the sex industry and protect them from being lured or trafficked. What is certain is that the best way to assess the effectiveness of anti-prostitution legislation and programs would be to reflect women's experience and opinions in the sex industry, which often make it harder to discern whether or not they are trafficked. Although the women are beginning to make their voices heard, there is little research on transnational sex work, including Korean migrant women working in the Australian sex industry. This

paper aims to fill this void.

### **Motivation behind the migration: Economic necessity**

For all 22 women interviewed their migration to Australia was basically legitimate and self-directed. Seventeen came with the intention to work as hostesses or sex workers. For the remaining five, their work was an activity secondary to their primary purpose for coming to Australia such as study or travel. Eighteen women came to Australia with one-year working holiday (WH) visas and four had student or tourist visas. None of them suggested that their migration to, and employment in, Australia had links with a criminal network, and there was no sign of their involvement with organized crime, such as false documentation, drugs or money laundering within their industry. Economic necessity was the major motivation for them to enter and remain in this line of work. As one hostess put it:

My initial intention was to work just for two weeks in order to earn money for my enrolment in college. But the money that I could earn from this job made me continue to work for more than a year. I'd like to advise anyone who wishes to start this work, to think twice (C, 25, room salon worker).

Better pay than many other jobs available to them, as well as comparatively flexible working hours have lured the women into this industry:

My friend was the one who got me into this business. One day I went to her workplace and joined her work for fun. What I could earn that

night was more than what I could make from doing the job I had then in a whole week (S, 25, *noraebang doumi*).

Sex workers, in particular, often believed that this was the only way to improve their material position. One brothel worker said that growing up in a poor family would make a woman more economically and emotionally needy and attracted by the luxurious life style that sex work could offer. She explained:

Except for some, most working girls are from relatively poor families. They do this work only for money. For all that, there're some girls who'd rather spend their money on luxury shopping. But I understand them. They may be trying to get what they were never able to get (M, 29, brothel worker).

The reality that hostess or sex work could earn them more money than other work available to them influenced their choice of work in Australia. One *naraebang doumi* worker who had been living in Australia for three years and had worked at 12 different *noraebangs* and room salons in Sydney, told the researcher how she had become involved in this industry in Australia:

I was working at a big department store, the work was physically demanding but paid much less. After one month, I only earned 750,000 won, which greatly disappointed me. It was when I learnt about overseas working opportunities from my former colleagues. .... I came to Australia after being introduced by a friend who was already working at a Korean *noraebang* in Sydney. I wanted to experience a new environment and came on a tourist visa. At that time,

entertainment businesses were booming within the Korean community in Sydney and I earned very good money for a few months while working at a *noraebang*. I then returned to Korea and came back on a student visa. I wished to start a new life in Australia and enrolled in an English language course, but I later started to work as a *doumi* again (S, 25, *noraebang doumi*).

Individual financial circumstances varied greatly as did the way they spent their money. Some said that the money they earned only covered daily living costs, while others were able to earn enough money to support their own study, to take home, or to spend lavishly on buying goods and travelling. Some had to support their families back home, while others needed to earn large sums of money to take home or to finance particular goals, such as more study, repayment of debts, or gathering capital for starting their own businesses or for the lease/purchase of an apartment. Five of the 11 sex workers interviewed were financing or had financed their study in Australia through their work. However they spent it, money was a significant incentive for why they entered and remained in their work:

This job allows you to earn big money, not easily but very quickly. Once, I earned \$700 for two-hours' work. But saving is not easy. As you can make money quickly, you spend it quickly too. It's because you know you can make \$1,000 in the next few days (C, 25, former room salon worker).

Four of the 22 women interviewees said that debt was a push factor in their decision to come to Australia. The amounts of their debts (on credit cards and personal loans)

were not necessarily substantial, ranging from 2,000,000 won (USD 2,100) to 10,000,000 won (USD 10,600). It has been reported that Korean networks use recruiters to find women with debts and promise to save them from going to prison (Parliamentary Joint Committee on the Australian Crime Commission, 2004).

While economic necessity was often the primary motivation, social and other individual factors were also at play. With the world's highest unemployment rate of young college-educated people (Bae & Song, 2006), Korea possibly offers limited employment opportunities for young women. Regardless of their educational qualifications, many respondents of this study were earlier engaged in low-paid work and often found it difficult to support themselves in Korea, as suggested in the interview below:

I grew up in a rural area and graduated from high school there. My parents got divorced when I was little and I lived with my mother and an older brother. When my brother started his army service, I began to live alone with my mother and sometime later I moved to Seoul hoping for a better job opportunity. What I could find, however, was only poorly paid, hard work. Living in a tiny "*gosiwon*" unit<sup>2</sup>, I worked seven days a week, at two different jobs as waitress and shop assistant, but always had to worry about rent and bills. I managed to send some money to my mother and brother, but never had money for myself (S, 25, *noraebang doumi*).

Some struggled to find work elsewhere before entering the sex and hostess industry. It was under such circumstances, that many women in this study sought jobs overseas

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<sup>2</sup> *Gosiwon* is a kind of dormitory privately operated originally for use as studying and sleeping spaces by people preparing for *gosi* or the Higher Civil Service Examination in Korea. It is now widely used as a cheap alternative accommodation for many others.

and found them in the Australian hostess and sex industry.

The globalization trends in Korea have also pushed women towards Australia. The processes of internationalization have led to more Koreans venturing overseas to travel, study, and in particular to learn English (Shin, 2003). In the era of globalization, English has become an essential skill for upward social mobility and employment and enables Koreans to survive fierce competition both in their country and the global market. From the mid-1990s middle and upper class parents in rapidly expanding numbers began to give their children an edge by sending them to primarily English-speaking countries such as the US, Australia, Canada and New Zealand to study English at an early age, and to offer them better and more cosmopolitan education (Lee & Koo, 2006). Many women indicated that they came to Australia to avail of opportunities to experience a cosmopolitan life style, such as exploring a new country and learning English. One brothel worker spoke about her vision when she headed off overseas:

While continuing in a brothel, I was able to finish college and was admitted into a four-year university degree. Before starting my university study, I wished to have the opportunity to learn English as my major was English literature. I first went to the Philippines to enroll in a short-term English course and then learnt about English courses in Australia. With a Working Holiday visa, I went to Queensland with my friend, where we attended a full-time English course. With little money left, it was hard for me to survive without working. With limited employment opportunities and limited English competence, I chose to move to Sydney and continued my former

occupation amongst the few ways in which I could earn a living (C, 24, brothel worker).

Of the 22 interviewees, seven women came to Australia to study, with six enrolled in an educational institution (e.g. university, English language school) here. Six had previous work experience in countries other than Australia. Among them, three women had been involved in sex work in other foreign countries such as Japan and England, while the remaining four had been involved in other activities such as waitressing and translating work in Guam, New Zealand, China and Spain.

Of the 22 women, more than nine had previously worked as sex workers and another three had work experience as *doumis* in karaoke bars. A small percentage did not have experience of sex work back in Korea, but willingly chose to become prostitutes in Australia. Fueled by a spirit of adventure, they often perceived and described their involvement in the Australian hostess or sex industries as a short-lived and auxiliary part of their global exploration. Doing this work abroad also helped reduce the risk of shame and detection by family and friends.

Their move to Australia corresponds with a fast-growing global trend since the 1980s, that of feminized transnational labor migration, especially in the sex industry (Gallin, 2003). This trend has often thrived on a structural process of chain migration in which individuals who had already found employment in the overseas market, arranged for friends or colleagues in their home country to follow (Kempadoo & Doezema, 1998, p. 247). For the majority of the women interviewed for this study, friends with experience of working in Australia were an important source of information regarding

jobs and were a motivating force in their coming to, and undertaking employment here. Of the 14 women assisted by others, ten mentioned a friend or a former colleague who was working in Australia as an important person in their decision to move. Hence, their decision to work in the sex and entertainment industry here has been shaped by a myriad of factors, such as women's own agency, economic globalization, state policies and networks and friends facilitating their transnational movement.

### **Working Conditions: Victims of potential exploitation, deception and control**

The women interviewed were rarely trafficked but often tricked or lured into the job via exaggerated or misleading advertisements, readily available on the internet for *doumi* or sex workers. To lure "better girls" who could maximize profits, employers and brokers assured the women about better income or working conditions, which often involved some sort of fraud, deception and/or false promise. The Australian Crime Commission (2005) also reported that deceptive practices in contract terms and conditions seemed to be rising by taking advantage of migrant women who have limited knowledge about their rights and entitlement as legal sex workers in Australia

The women interviewed worked in a range of workplaces including karaoke bars, hostess bars, massage parlors and brothels. Each establishment had its own set of working hours and conditions. Many women experienced exploitative and deceptive practices whilst working in the businesses, which commonly included issues like being forced to make or give up a deposit; not getting paid on time or not at all; being

fined for being late or absent; not being allowed to leave the premises; or not being able to choose clients. They were also verbally abused and subjected to other controlling behavior by their brothel owners, managers, and/or madams. Confronted with these onerous conditions, many women felt they had been purposely deceived, but could not do anything. One said:

When employed, I wasn't given any information about the house rules like penalties and making a deposit. As I protested later, the owner insisted that it was standard practice in the industry (O, 24, former room salon *doumi* and currently a *noraegang doumi*).

None of the women signed written contracts of employment and were under a slavery or bondage agreement. With no written contract, most considered their verbal contracts that were usually vague to be practical agreements about their working conditions. The amounts of pay, the pay system, working conditions and sometimes the living arrangements were usually settled through verbal contracts.

Most of the women interviewed worked relatively long hours, the average being 8.7 hours a day. They were often forced to remain at work for longer periods of time:

Not as promised, I was required by the manager to be on the premises for up to 13 hours a day whether or not with a customer. Even when I did not get a customer, I still had to work, sometimes greeting customers at the reception, cleaning the room or doing the laundry. At the end of the day, I was given no money because I did not see any customers (J, 28, massage worker).

The women often were not allowed any sick leave. One *doumi* worker said: “One day I was very sick and I called the owner to ask for a day off. But he told me to show up no matter what” (O, 24, *doumi*).

Daily payment was the most common for *noraebang* and brothel workers. Some women, however, indicated that the payment was not necessarily made as promised. One explained:

Some employers often postpone daily payment with an excuse that they don't have cash on that day. They often say, 'because your customers have paid with credit card, you have to wait until the credit card company pays me.' This makes you continue to work even though you're not on any work contract (L, 26, former *noraebang* worker).

In a few cases, their earnings were often withheld – euphemistically described as “managed” by employers. The women in this study had changed their workplaces frequently, on average four times, although remaining within the same industry. Frequent movement was closely related to dissatisfaction with their pay as well as exploitative and controlling practices at the workplace. Hard work was also a common reason for changing employers.

Facing abuse, exploitation and deception, these women seldom reported their situation to police or sought any kind of external assistance due to concerns about their legal status and partly because they accepted that their treatment was unexceptional in the

industry. Most women were unaware of their rights as workers in Australia. Interestingly, not every sex worker was aware of the legality of the sex industry in Australia. Of the 13 women who said they were engaged in sex-related work (11 sex workers and two hostesses), the two hostesses thought prostitution was illegal in Australia. Despite working in Australia, most Korean women were still guided by their experience of Korea, with little understanding of their rights and options in Australia. Perceiving their involvement in such work as temporary, many did not want to “make a fuss” about working conditions or “make trouble” for themselves. They often feared losing their job, or being punished or deported for doing *doumi* or sex work. There seemed to be little they could do about exploitative and abusive working conditions, other than repeatedly changing workplaces until they found better conditions.

### **Social Isolation and Stigma: Needs, Network of Help and Future Plan**

The women reported social isolation and a relatively poor quality of life. It was clear from the interviews that some of them needed emotional support due to work-related stresses, health issues, language problems, loneliness or insufficient income, and they often suffered in silence. In particular, some Korean-owned room salons and brothels often offered the workers accommodation where they paid a certain amount of rent (usually not necessarily cheaper than market rent) to reside with madams and other workers. The living arrangements were not forced, but strongly recommended by the employer, but with little information or knowledge about working and living in Australia, the women often agreed to come to Australia with these conditions. This type of accommodation allowed the co-resident madam<sup>3</sup> to control the movements of

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<sup>3</sup> Madams, although usually former workers, were more like the organisers as they recruited and controlled the workers on behalf of the owners.

the women and made them available to customers at anytime. Women were driven from accommodation to work and then back again. In some cases, the women were not given any information about where they were and how they should move around and therefore were easily confined to their homes. One brothel worker said:

My employer tried to keep me inside the accommodation. I was picked up by him at the airport and taken to the workplace where we were supposed to live as well. He told me that it was extremely dangerous to hang around and take taxis in Sydney. Then I couldn't venture out onto the Sydney streets for the first whole month. I in fact had no idea where I was and where I could go to. All other girls were just like me. They knew nothing (P, 28, brothel worker).

Such living arrangements, little knowledge about Australian society and typically poor command of English language contributes to their social isolation. Most women interviewed indicated that they had no one to talk to about their problems. The fact that they had to lie about their identities usually had a negative impact on their personal relationships. Many found it very difficult to maintain intimate relationships. One *noraebang doumi* talked about her experience with her ex-boyfriend: "when he found out the work I was doing, he got furious with me and then our relationship was brought to an ugly end." Another room salon *doumi*, said that although she managed to keep her work secret, she constantly felt guilty about her boyfriend until she finally quit the job. One brothel worker said she found it difficult to become close friends even with other sex workers, although they were the only people who could understand the kinds of issues that she was dealing with:

We may share the same problems and worries and we sometimes talk about them but nothing more than that. What can we do to help each other? You never let them know what your real name is, what you've been doing and where you've come from. There's always lying and deceiving. They wouldn't trust me and I wouldn't trust them 100 percent because we're deceiving each other in the first place. We are all here to make money. We move around different places like every three months. Being so preoccupied with your own affairs, you simply cannot afford to pay any real attention to others. It's hard to become close enough to be fully open to each other in such a short time (F, 24, brothel worker).

#### *Stigma and Shame attached to Sex Work*

Many of the women had experienced work-related stresses not only because of customers, employers and/or colleagues, but also due to social stigma, shame and fear of exposure. With internalized social stigma and moral judgment attached to the work they did, most women had kept their work secret from family and friends. Many said they found it easier to work in Australia because it was easier to hide the work they did, given the long distance from friends and family. At work, they all used pseudonyms that were typically common English names. Most women said that the work they chose was more profitable but not necessarily easier than others. Many were experiencing mental anguish because of it. As one woman put it:

I used to have dreams when younger. Looking at myself now being in the situation that I have to have sex for money with a man older than

my father, I often think I have gone too far, which saddens me (S, 25, *noraebang doumi*).

They also frequently experienced discrimination and rude behavior by business operators and clients, who were mostly Korean:

When they [Korean customers] come, they are always drunk as in Korea. They say no one would come to such a place unless he's not in his right mind. Then they taunt me saying: 'with such a pretty face, doing such dirty work, you're so pathetic' (M, 29, brothel worker).

Another explained that sex workers were always at the bottom of the hierarchy in the workplace. She said:

Amongst all staff members working in the massage parlor, we were last in a descending hierarchy of receptionist, cleaners, foot masseurs and the massage girls. We were treated less favorably than foot masseurs working in a waiting room (F, 24, brothel worker).

Disappointed because of such a situation and/or experiencing inner conflict and moral dilemma about the work, some women found themselves feeling lonely and/or experiencing low levels of self-esteem, which often led to long term depression. The women interviewed were fearful of their identity being disclosed. This constant anxiety about exposure have had an isolating effect on these women by complicating their social engagement with and access to formal and informal sources of support in Australia.

In dealing with such problems, the women had little information about the support they could draw upon and only received or expected to receive very limited support from informal sources such as friends in the industry, customers or family in Korea. Of the 22 interviewees, nine had one or more individuals they could ask to help. They were reluctant or felt unable to ask their families for help because they had not talked to them about their work in Australia. Some women said they would have welcomed assistance from recognized welfare service providers (e.g. NGOs, social workers, Korean churches, or the Korean community in Sydney), but were not able to make the right connection. One had seen a psychologist in Korea, but it was a negative and fruitless experience due to the psychologist's prejudice about prostitution (D, 28, massage worker) and another said she found only sleeping pills helpful (S, 25, *doumi*). One said: "I'm just confined to my room and have a sleep" (F, 24, brothel worker).

These women therefore remained socially isolated and their needs were often left unfulfilled or aggravated. This economic necessity discourse allowed the women to live with the moral stains associated with sex work. Most of them said their work in the sex industry was nothing more than the money it earned them. They just wanted to work as hard as they could to maximize their earning as quickly as possible. One said:

I felt shame to do this work at first. But now I just try to work hard for my own sake, for my future. I only hope that my future child does not have to experience the financial difficulties that I had to. I wanted to make a lot of money. What could I do? I can't steal it from others, can I? (D, 29, brothel worker).

### *Future Plans*

Of the 22 interviewees 14 wished to settle either in Australia, or a third country, and seven wished to return home. Some hoped to find husbands or establish independent lives in Australia. Those who wanted to move to a new country cited unsatisfactory working/living conditions in Korea and the desire to make a fresh start in a new place where no one would know what they had done. The women who wished to stay in Australia mentioned their desire to make more money and find contentment with the living conditions. They wished to study, rear families and find better occupational prospects. Close family relationships were another pull factor. Those who were supporting families back in Korea wished to go home and keep providing such support. Some wanted to go back to Korea because of health problems, to finish their studies, escape the hard work, or simply because they had made enough money.

They listed their expected needs on returning as follows: 1) job training, 2) medical care, 3) counseling, and 4) shelter/residence. Job training was most commonly cited, suggesting that many of these women wanted to find other jobs back home. They wanted to be self-employed, private sector-employed, teachers/tutors, nurses, state-employed, social workers, and so on. Self-employment was the most desirable kind of work. However, for most of these women, their job prospects in Korea were more wish than reality. Many were worried about what to do when they got back. Many hostess workers said that they would be totally different people when they returned and many sex-related workers said that they would quit such work when they had saved some money. For some women, however, the reality may prove to be different than what they wished for. As one of them put it:

If I'm honest, I don't know whether I'm going to keep doing this job or not when back in Korea. I wish to quit but the money makes it hard. I don't know what other job can earn me as much money as I earn from this job (F, 24, brothel worker).

Many of the interviewees entered the industry for money and appreciated it. This very attraction, however, seemed to make their work hard to abandon. Only one woman, a 24-year-old hostess worker, said that if necessary, she would visit women's NGOs when back in Korea. Most others said that they were reluctant to seek help, while some were uncertain. Some did not trust these women's services to provide practical help, while others said that they were not prepared for counseling or that they did not have any information about such institutions. In the case of the sex workers, the illegal nature of their work and the social stigma attached to it have contributed to their reluctance to seek institutional help. The anti-prostitution legislation in South Korea does not yet provide blanket protection to victims of forced prostitution. Instead, the protection has been only for victims identified by police and public prosecutors. This has deterred women in the sex industry from reporting to law enforcement (Norma, 2012). Women in the industry, whether they were forced into it or were they voluntarily, should not be punished, but supported and protected (Hinton, 2012). The anti-prostitution legislation in Korea needs to be revised in line with this approach.

## **Conclusion**

Despite a very small sample of data, this study is the first of its kind on Korean women working in the Australian sex and entertainment industry, offering us a

glimpse into the rarely researched topic of transnational sex work. All the women interviewed decided to enter the Australian entertainment and/or sex industry of their own volition, having weighed it up against jobs that were less attractive in terms of time commitment and pay. They were “opportunists” as suggested in research on migrant sex workers (Mai, 2012). These women decided to migrate as “a way to (re)start a project of social mobility that became unviable at home because of individual reasons and circumstances” (Mai, 2012, p. 112). Korean women’s migration into the sex and entertainment industry is seen as a temporary survival strategy to move out of poverty, or a medium term strategy for global exploration. Their decisions were often justified as ways to make money and afford a normal life for themselves and their families. This economic necessity discourse allowed the women to survive hardship and exploitation and endure the moral stigma.

The findings of this research provide insights into how Australian and Korean policy makers and community service organizations can best design and target services to support the women. To prove effective, legislation and policies should take the voices and experiences of the women who are in the sex industry into consideration. The Australian government offers a variety of support to victims of trafficking. However, most of these also require the participation of victims in the criminal justice process or cooperation with authorities. More support is needed for those trafficking victims who are reluctant or unable to speak to police (Hinton, 2012). Given that the majority of Korean women in this study came to Australia on working holiday visas, reappraisal of the visa scheme, or prohibition of working holiday visa holders and student visa holders from employment in the sex industry, have been suggested. This, however, elicits some opposition. The Sex Workers Association has argued that banning

foreigners on temporary visas from working in the sex and entertainment industries in Australia could encourage illegal brothels and an underground sex trade. Even without the working holiday visa scheme, many women would come and work illegally in Australia (Han, 2007).

This paper has suggested that neither the abolitionist nor the decriminalization approach fully understands how women in the industry fare. The abolitionist approach neglects the agency of women who voluntarily choose this work, while the decriminalization approach tends to silence the women trafficked into the industry. These dichotomous views fail to encompass women's complicated lived experience, often falling outside this binary. In this paper we argue that we need to transcend the dichotomy between the "free" and the "trafficked" assumed by both global and national policies regarding the sex trade, in order to develop policies and programs to support and protect migrant women better in this industry. Related legislation should be redressed to echo the lived experiences of the women involved in the sex industry. Community services and women's NGOs, regardless of their view on prostitution or sex work, should provide victim-centered and non-judgmental services for women in the industry. As a society we should focus on how best we can protect these women from trafficking, abuse and exploitation and ensure their basic human rights and welfare.

### **Acknowledgements**

Part of data collection has been supported by the Bombit Foundation (Seoul, South Korea), which offered a research grant on Korean women victims of sex trafficking in

in Australia, South Korea, Japan and the United States. In particular, we would like to express our gratitude to the late Haewon Jung, director of the Foundation, who was passionate about this issue and offered generous support to conduct this research.

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