

**“CHOICE” IN THE GLOBALIZED SEX MARKET:  
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DECISION-MAKING  
IN GLOBAL SEX WORKER COMMUNITIES**

by

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## Introduction

There is much contemporary literature and policy development surrounding the experience of women<sup>1</sup> coerced into the sex industry and trafficked.<sup>2</sup> Human rights organizations and non-profit organizations have been generated in response to this lucrative criminal enterprise; however, these international crime networks are underground, fraught with government corruption, obscured by cultural norms, and fueled by economic factors that are not easily changed by social movements. The persistence of human trafficking reflects global currents in capital flow and has created interconnected markets that exacerbate the entry of more bodies in the commercial sex industry. When sex workers<sup>3</sup> are deceived or held against their will, depicted in images of

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<sup>1</sup> Although men and transgender individuals are involved in and exploited within the sex industry, I have chosen to focus on the experience of women both to narrow the scope of the research as well as integrate ideas of gender discrimination particular to the historic marginalization of women.

<sup>2</sup> Article 3, Section A of the Palermo Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children defines trafficking in persons as: *the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs* (U.N. Palermo Protocol 2001).

<sup>3</sup> The terms ‘sex work,’ ‘sex industry,’ and ‘prostitute’ all serve as euphemisms propagated by parties with various political positions regarding commercial sex. ‘Sex work’ suggests that commercial sex is an alternative labor market, just as ‘sex industry’ compares the sale of sex to industrial production. Prostitute, on the other hand, ascribes an identity to women who may engage in sex work but may not consider prostitute a desirable identifier. While these terms may provoke debate with regards to the victimization or empowerment of individuals involved in the commercial sex industry, for the purpose of consistency within this paper the term ‘sex worker’ will identify

prison-like, dirty brothels in third world countries, prostitution is easily categorized as unjust and in violation of the human rights of the women involved. However, contained within this burgeoning sex industry are many women who voluntarily sell their bodies in exchange for goods or services. The concept of choice within the sex industry therefore becomes unclear when one considers the oftentimes violent and exploitative conditions these women confront.

There exist instances of micro-level coercion, force or threat that compel women to enter the sex trade, all of which are punishable by international laws. However, the reality of global structural inequalities renders some women coerced by a sheer lack of alternatives to resort to sex work for survival. A simple categorization of these women as free agents or passive victims of global inequities does not take into account the myriad ways that women encounter poverty, seek jobs, and experience job conditions. This dichotomy has provoked a polarization among organizations that all seek to protect the rights of sex workers yet deeply disagree about the most effective approach. Many organizations do fall along the spectrum from total prohibition to regulation and are not easily categorized into these “ideal type” frameworks. However, these nuances within the “gray area” between prohibition and regulation have yet to be well articulated.

Miscommunications among organizations and advocates tend to cause unproductive divisions before they generate cooperation and collaborative efforts.

There are three primary frames for understanding the sex industry: prohibition, abolition, and regulation (Weitzer 2007). Prohibition involves criminalization of all aspects of the sex industry, while abolition concentrates efforts on prosecution of pimps

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anyone who receives resources in exchange for sex, and ‘sex industry’ will refer to the complex market that facilitates these exchanges.

and johns (clients): both seek an end to the subjugation of individuals in an exchange of commercial sex. Regulation invokes laws that protect the rights of sex workers as legitimate laborers and offers resources for their health and protection. Regulationists generally assume agency on the part of sex workers, and therefore aim to secure the rights of women to sell their body and provide the necessary resources to protect them. Abolitionists, on the other hand, tend to portray women as victims of their circumstances and purpose to dismantle the structural factors that compel their subjugation. Prohibition condemns the sale of sex, yet in practice it criminalizes the women who experience abuse by incarcerating them rather than rehabilitating them; this criminalization has proven to be a less realistic and less effective approach to minimizing the sex industry, rather driving it further underground.

The abolition and prohibition models do not simply affect the ways that organizations address the perceived needs of the individuals adversely affected by the sex industry. Each faction's ideology additionally materializes in the portrayal of these individuals through media, literature, and propaganda, all of which contribute to the public's perceptions of the women implicated in this industry. How one defines the problem dictates how one attempts to solve the problem. Because there are such varied ideas about the problem of commercial sex work, this thesis attempts to understand the fundamental axis of disagreement: choice. If the constraints that circumscribe an individual's choice to participate in sex work are understood, then proper systemic changes can be enacted to prevent the exploitation and harm of women. I will focus on abolition and regulation as the primary factions ideologically juxtaposed with regards to

commercial sex work and explain their portrayals of female sex workers as well as the problems that each may generate.

Abolitionists tend to portray sex workers as passive victims of poverty and first-world systems, compounding the discrimination that these women encounter due to preexisting racial, ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic marginalization. These images presumably mobilize otherwise ignorant bystanders of the horror of sexual abuse to create a political will against sex work that compels legislators to allocate funds that rescue these ‘helpless’ women. Regulationists, on the other hand, portray sex workers as deprived of civil liberties, identifying the human rights injustice not as sexual exploitation, but rather as a failure to empower women with the same corporeal freedom that has been concentrated in male hands throughout a history of patriarchal subjugation of women. These arguments also have policy implications, but they tend to favor the situations of first-world women with the social capital and know-how to unionize, self-advocate, and ignore the ‘job hazards’ that overwhelmingly plague women facing language barriers, illegal migrant status, few if any options for survival, and other spaces of marginalization. While the abolitionist approach to sex work may problematically moralize the issue rather than address the strategic decision-making of sex workers, the regulationist approach obscures the structural constraints within which different *types* of sex workers make the possibly disempowering ‘choice’ to subject themselves to sexual exploitation.

Quantitative research does document that a disproportionate number of sex workers are characterized by marginalized gender, race, class, and national identities – they do not all appear like the glamorous white sex workers in Europe and the United

States, but rather may resemble the third-world women in situations of indebtedness in poorly maintained living conditions (Appadurai 1990). This thesis is founded on the assumption that what is empowering to first-world women may differ from what empowers third-world women – and clearly, the discrepancy in global sex worker composition points to differential constraints. It is therefore not the project of this thesis to debate the merits of ascribing choice or victimization, but rather to turn to the sex workers' environments and describe the complex constraints within which they make choices.

The reality that many first-world women speak on behalf of global sex workers may also be inadvertently imperialistic and patronizing. Scholar Andrijasevic (2010) argues that “consensual prostitution is assumed to be performed by Western sex workers capable of self-determination, while situations of coerced prostitution are seen to affect passive and inexperienced Third World and migrant women” (p. 59). The U.S. cultural values of self-determination and individuality color the tendency of first-world women to ascribe choice to women involved in alternative occupations. However, these cultural values do not pervade all global communities and activists risk ethnocentric generalization by ascribing these traits to all sex workers. The fact that so many individuals with compound sites of discrimination are involved in this illicit and unregulated industry suggests that the systems perpetuating this industry predispose certain types of people to sex work and complicate their attempts to transition to an alternative lifestyle. These ideological arguments do not sufficiently integrate the nuanced experiences of global sex workers. It is imperative that a greater understanding of these contexts be documented and understood so that policy and organizational

attempts to address the needs of sex workers are relevant, not simply enacted to appease the ideological convictions of well-meaning but unaffected philanthropists. Lim (1998) echoes that policies surrounding ‘choice’ in commercial sex must “deal with the economic and social bases of prostitutions” or else “sanctions and measures targeted at individual prostitutes are not likely to be effective or may even be inappropriate” (p. 2).

This paper therefore seeks to evaluate the conditions under which individuals make choices and how notions of choice are complicated for women in developing countries due to constraints from macro-level structures, meso-level norms, and micro-level experiences. While many scholars discuss the changing economic and cultural context due to increased interconnectedness and communication among geographically distant localities, few evaluate the ways that these systemic shifts impact the sex industry. This thesis analyzes the effects of globalization that have complicated the notion of choice and asserts a viable theoretical framework to understand how a choice to engage in sex work is made in this global economy. The primary research questions include: *In what transformed global spaces do rational actors make strategic advancement decisions within the sex industry? What constraints does globalization create that are new to the sex industry? How do features of globalization affect the supply of women and children in the sex industry and the demand for sex workers? How are these economic dynamics different across spatially and culturally different communities?*

The purpose of this thesis is to create a new, theoretical understanding of the role of women’s agency in the commercial sex industry due to shifting global economic patterns. It will focus on the sociological concept of globalization as a social, economic, and historic phenomenon as well as theories of actor’s choice based on the traditional

agency-constraint binary. My objective is to consolidate extant sociological literature in an exhaustive literature review and put the selected texts in dialogue with each other to create a new theoretical model for understanding choice within the sex industry across various local markets. Four sex work markets will then be discussed based on the manifestation of the features of globalization and how the women in those communities make strategic choices within unique structural constraints.

Because I identify as a first-world female researcher, it is important to reflect on the ways that my personal abolitionist convictions may affect a description of these women's constrained environments. I cannot imagine a scenario in which I would voluntarily choose sex work, so my tendency is to identify factors that essentially coerce women into entering an environment that engenders abuse, rape, low self-esteem, high rates of disease and mortality, and few opportunities for community and achievement. I must acknowledge, however, that my privileged socioeconomic status and national origin hinders my total understanding of women who believe that they chose sex work. I also run the risk of undermining their self-determination by speaking for what options they encounter; it is impossible to truly account for every moment of constraint and empowerment that an individual experiences, and they may not even understand why they made certain choices at the time. Although I have many limitations due to my posture ideologically, geographically, and socially, I intend to portray as faithfully as possible the reality of life for commercial sex workers as is documented in peer-reviewed scholarship, considering the dynamic nature of this globalized world and the different environments that sex workers confront.

## **Chapter 1: Foundational Theory**

### ***I. Evolution of Globalization***

The first globalization theory was arguably constructed by scholar Emmanuel Wallerstein in the 1970s and is referred to as world-systems theory, which divides the global economy hierarchically and geographically into three distinct spaces: the core, semi-periphery, and periphery (Wallerstein 1974a). This economic system originated in technological innovation and the rise of market institutions that disintegrated local economies in favor of trade relations. This incentive for long-distance trade drove economically powerful countries to develop military strength, transportation systems, and trade routes that facilitated European wealth accumulation (Wallerstein 1974b). The combined result of these processes resulted in the world-systems structure of spatial and geographic divisions of labor: core countries are responsible for capital-intensive production, whereas peripheral areas provide low-skill labor and raw material, leading to unequal development and capital flow unidirectionally towards the core from the weak, dependent periphery.

According to Wallerstein, the world's systems are now oriented to profit-seeking on the basis of market exchange in which goods *and* labor are treated as commodities. Because of the periphery's dependence upon the core's organization of capital flow, each region shares an ideology that convinces its citizens that their well-being depends on maintenance of the system. World polity theory furthers this notion of shared ideology, emphasizing the growth of a world culture that has created a framework for resolving global disputes (Meyer et al. 1997). The ideas of state sovereignty, individual rights, and

rational progress are important to world polity theorists and diffuse from the core to the peripheral nations.

Robinson (2007) adds that regardless of the definition, certain features of globalization generate agreement among scholars: for example, connectivity among people and movement across borders. Scholars diverge on many additional points, however: whether the core is economic, political or cultural; whether globalization is a process or a condition; and whether the nation-state can be effectively sustained in a transnational world.

Robinson notes that globalization is not a new phenomenon, but rather the product of capitalism as an intensifying historical system born in the 1500s. The unit of macrosocial inquiry is therefore the historical system that generates the categories of nation-states and local economies. This capitalistic system established market and production networks that dissolved previously contained economies and brought them into a world economy, dividing and ranking them based on geography and economic power. These aforementioned hierarchically organized tiers (the core, semi-periphery, and periphery) each play a functionally specific part that collectively reproduces this structure of exploitation and inequality within the larger world system (Amin 1989).

Robinson explains that this economic repatterning has repercussions in the formation of new operational categories that transcend former nation-state systems: specifically, economic actors (transnational capital, corporations, and institutions), political actors (the transnational capitalist class), and cultural-ideological actors (cultural elites) (2007:130). The capitalist class, for example, has a vested interest in maximizing the profits of the global economy and expanding the boundaries of their corporate

empires. This new stage of world capitalism has actually globalized the production process itself, which has functionally integrated national circuits into global circuits of production and accumulation (Robinson 2007:130). Class relations are no longer bound to national hierarchies, but rather become embedded in a global valorization of capital accumulation.

Robertson provides the most widely accepted definition of globalization among scholars: as a concept, globalization refers “both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole...both concrete global interdependence and consciousness of the global whole in the twentieth century” (Robertson in Reyes 2001). Globalization is characterized by the determinism of economic factors in every society, the irrelevance of nation-state boundaries as a unit of analysis, and quickened communication among geographically distant sectors (Reyes 2001).

With respect to the various understandings of globalization, the working definition for the purpose of this paper draws most heavily from Robertson’s definition and is influenced by many authors cited by MacKie (2001). I define the term globalization in this paper as the shift in global economic relationships that results in new patterns of commodity movement and the development of social structures that sustain this movement. The features that comprise globalization will be evaluated closely with respect to their materialization within and influence upon the commercial sex industry: namely, structural adjustment programs, concentration of wealth in core communities, transnational migration, and the feminization of poverty.

*Pushing from the Periphery: Structural Adjustment Programs*

The concentration of capital in global cities has resulted in the mass devastation of rural communities, whose traditional means of ensuring survival via agrarian farming have been replaced by the privatization of land and prioritization of capital interests over social services. Consequently, many impoverished people are left with no options to sustain their family's livelihood within their communities and no social safety net to rely upon in the transition to a neoliberal economy. The already disadvantaged therefore bear the burden of augmented production and wealth accumulation in these urban centers and are forced to migrate, often under precarious conditions, to work in the urban centers.

The structural adjustment programs aimed at resuscitating struggling peripheral economies offer funds contingent upon open economies that facilitate trade flow (Pyle in Chuang 2002). However, the entry of corporations into developing countries displaces local workers while simultaneously cutting social service programs designed to support these workers. These peripheral countries are now exporting raw materials to the core centers of production and cannot provide basic resources to sustain themselves internally (Pyle in Chuang 2006:142). This power structure shift results in profit for international institutions at the expense of sustainable development in developing countries. For example, the loan policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have led to crumbling infrastructure such as lack of healthcare, clean water, and sewage services that render these populations unsustainable, causing many to leave to find work elsewhere (Brock and Thistlethwaite 1996:123). In the absence of these social safety nets, growing income inequalities and the "cumulative socioeconomic consequences" of limited viable

employment opportunities for the poorly educated have led to the adoption of survival strategies by poor families: namely, migration (Lim 1998:10-11).

Zarembka (2004) adds that the migratory patterns motivated by rural poverty in the periphery have additionally contributed to the rise in domestic worker abuse. Because the IMF and World Bank often condition loan programs on the elimination of social services, devaluation of local currencies and wage freezes, the hardships are “borne most severely by those at the bottom of the economic ladder” (p. 144). Because the impoverished rural migrants have few better options than leaving their communities, they seek work “with no assurances and at grave personal risk” and often are forced into “employment situations to which they did not agree and from which they have no escape” (Zarembka 2004:144). These spaces of vulnerability are created by structural adjustment programs that disproportionately disadvantage the masses of low-skilled workers who, prior to changes in global capital movement, subsisted on agrarian lands in closed communities. This new global economy has created routes of commodity movement that permit “transnational corporations and other actors in developed countries to transport capital, labor, goods, and services across state lines with relative ease. An unpaid or poorly paid person becomes a commodity that can be used again and again for accumulating profit” (Zarembka 2004:144).

#### *Pulling to the Core: Concentration of Resources*

The poor conditions that globalization has engendered in rural communities certainly drive increasing numbers of transnational migrants to urban, core economies in search of the means of survival. Even in peripheral countries, however, urban centers

have transformed into hubs of outsourced economic activity as multinational corporations “distribute their operations over various countries to reduce labor costs and evade labor and environmental regulations and other laws” and rural migrants “go to urban centers in their country of origin” to find wage work (Brock and Thistlethwaite 1996:123). This delocalization of production from the Western world has produced an “integrated and complex global system of production and exchange” that is fueled by low-wage rural migrant labor (Andrijasevic 2010:4).

Global cities<sup>4</sup> serve as locations for specialized service firms, producer services, sites for innovation, and wealthy markets for the goods that are produced. Sassen (1991) characterizes a global city as one that not only innovates and produces, but one with a thriving market for goods produced by the global economy. Low-income groups are largely constituted by transnational migrants from the periphery and provide low-skilled services in these global cities (Robinson 2007:135). The type of labor available to these undereducated migrants creates uniquely precarious situations that make their extant vulnerability greater due to their lack of access to resources and protective measures against potential exploitation. There has been a shift towards “immaterial” labor that is “labeled as such due to the increasing subjective, affective, relational and communicative quality of work” (Andrijasevic 2010:5). As modern communication and technology developments facilitate the production of goods via machinery and the sale of goods via the global internet, they obviate the need for humans to assist in the production of goods.

While the shift away from industrial economies impacts many demographics of

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<sup>4</sup> Sassen defines global cities as “cities that are strategic sites in the global economy because of their concentration of command functions and high-level producer service firms oriented to world markets; more generally cities with high levels of internationalization in their economy and in their broader social structure” (Sassen 1991).

workers, Andrijasevic's discussion of immaterial labor works to explain the way that transnational migrants are uniquely and detrimentally affected by the *types* of jobs available: service sector jobs. The lack of resources that many transnational migrants possess results in their capitalization upon such intangible resources as the provision of maternal affection, sexual pleasure, or discarded household duties of first-world women entering the professional workforce. The services that require no materials beyond a female body are therefore the most profitable for transnational migrants with few, if any, alternatives to creating a livelihood for themselves.

Transnational migrants face the compound challenges of nationality, gender and racial disadvantage in this casual and informal sector of work that is further complicated by non-citizenship (Robinson 2007:137). The policies that receiving countries create to negotiate the terms of migration directly impact the migrants who may face language barriers and an inability to access resources and advocacy services. Predictably, the conflation of job opportunities in the core and failing social services in the periphery has encouraged the vulnerable movement of bodies towards the possibility of economic survival in precarious and low-wage jobs.

### *Migration Patterns*

Robinson (2007) claims that network society<sup>5</sup> is increasingly important in understanding literal movement in this globalized economy, since productivity is generated through global networks of interaction including financial markets and

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<sup>5</sup> 'Network society' refers to the increasingly connected world due to the spread of communication and information technology. This phenomenon postulates that societies are no longer bounded groups within a hierarchy, but are increasingly spatially diverse networks of individuals (Craven and Wellman 1973).

international production networks. It is not only the economically powerful who create ties between countries, however; migrants serving in low-skill service jobs have also carved new spaces of multinational identity in response to shifts in labor demand. Transnational migrants forge social relations between their countries of origin and settlement, thus creating spaces of transnational movement and exchange across borders. Robinson adds that globalization theories of space and place focus on this relationship between social structure and the meaning of space. Since worldwide social relations are intensified and connect distant localities, events in one place have direct consequences in geographically removed places. Globalization has created new paths for information exchange, the diffusion of social norms, and the physical movement of bodies.

Sassen (2004) argues that while migration from poor to wealthy countries is hardly a new phenomenon, globalization has reinscribed the exploitation of third world workers in impoverished conditions, creating what she calls “survival circuits” (p. 255). She invokes Wallerstein’s division of the core and periphery to locate third world economies struggling with debt and poverty. Survival circuits are constructed to traffic low-wage workers and prostitutes or migrant workers to send remittances back home (Sassen 2004:256). These survival circuits fill the gaps left by globalization, creating what several authors refer to as a “shadow economy” (Sassen 2002; Penttinen 2010). Illicit markets have surged in response to the lack of jobs in the formal sector and the failure of peripheral economies to provide for local subsistence due to their shift to export-based economies to fulfill loan requirements according to structural adjustment plans. Although unregulated, these shadow economies have become institutionalized to

the extent that they are oftentimes the only mechanism for providing for peripheral communities (Sassen 2002:259).

### *Feminization of Poverty*

Transnational migrants are disadvantaged due to the precariousness of their legal status and inability to access the same services as citizens. However, many scholars discuss the ways that women are particularly at risk of exploitation due to the marginalization within their home communities that compounds their systematic exclusion from mainstream economic opportunities in urban centers. Many of these women face the new global reality of agricultural subsidy withdrawals that have increased the cost of living and the privatization of land that leaves rural residents unemployed. Because many of these communities do not educate women and contains them within the domestic spheres, these women are left without the requisite skills to earn a livelihood (Das, Eargle, and Esmail 2011:242). As the types of jobs available to migrant women are increasingly relegated to the illegal sphere, the disadvantageous transformation of occupation opportunity serves as evidence that “economic growth leads to the systematic exclusion of women” (Forsythe, Korzeneicwicz, and Durrant 2000:5).

Chuang (2006) explains that many migrant women are compelled to work in unregulated, informal sectors and to send remittances from abroad, increasing the revenue of indebted countries and reducing overall poverty and inequalities in wealth (p. 144). She takes what is essentially a functionalist approach to understanding the feminization of migration by categorizing these women as “survival migrants” who serve

an important role in sustaining peripheral economies by extracting wealth from the core economies through transnational migration and low-skill wage labor (2006:138). Lim explains that the role of these transnational migrants is functionally sustaining rural communities, since “the reverse flow of remittances from the migrant women and children makes it possible for many poor families in rural areas to survive” (1998:18).

This movement creates new spaces of vulnerability, however, as embedded discriminatory practices relegate women to employment in informal economic sectors and limit their avenues for legal migration. Sassen adds to Chang’s argument, explaining that economic shifts and “growing immiseration of governments and whole economies in the global south” have enabled the “proliferation of survival and profit-making activities that involve migration and trafficking of women” (2002:258). This unregulated space of vulnerability provides a ready category of migrants, predominantly female, that faces a need for jobs and an unrelenting market demand for cheap labor (Chuang 2006; Sassen 2010).

Global cities therefore function as “surplus extracting mechanisms” that have access to peripheral labor markets of disadvantaged individuals with few other options, thus creating a global hierarchy of cities (Sassen 2002:31). Within this global hierarchy is an international division of reproductive labor, compounding extant pervasive gender discrimination to create what scholars refer to as the “feminization of poverty” (Sassen 2002; Scouler and Sanders 2010; Das et. al. 2011). Women from poor peripheral countries migrate in response to high demand for low-wage domestic work in core, service-sector economies. This migration flow undermines the sovereignty and contained

economies of the nation-state, forging a new world domestic order of transnational labor that disadvantages women.

Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2004) connect the broader theory of globalization to these new patterns of female migration that flourish in response to a demand for female labor in core societies. These authors explain that global interconnectedness has resulted in a “world-wide gender revolution” in which migrant women from periphery countries seek economic success by assuming the cast-off gender roles of first-world women of high socioeconomic status (2004:2-3). From their structuralist perspective, progressive gender equality in the first world has not changed gender roles, but rather has reassigned what type of woman belongs to extant rungs on the socioeconomic ladder, broadening its scope to global women. As first-world women gradually discard their domestic roles, they create a need for emotional and sexual resources – a need that is now increasingly exported from the peripheral regions in a global transfer of services (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2004:4). In line with this structural view that gender discrimination has not been eliminated but rather displaced, Hughes and Roche (1999) argue that the “basis of relative socioeconomic mobility of some female populations in the world has been on the exploitation of other women, especially migrant” (p. 36). This inequity creates a demand that “pulls” low-wage reproductive and care labor towards core countries while the relative poverty in the periphery “pushes” these undereducated and underskilled women toward economic opportunity.

The poverty these transnational migrants experience is “feminized” due to the disadvantage that many women face trying to provide support for their families in these economies already deprived of job opportunity and social security. Chuang argues that

this phenomenon reflects on the failure of existing social structures in the periphery to provide equal educational and employment opportunities for women (Coomaraswamy Report p. 58 in Chuang 2006: 138). Additionally, women generally have fewer inheritance rights than men and are culturally assigned to undercompensated (if compensated at all) domestic work and filial responsibility (Chuang 1996). This conflation of gender discrimination and poverty creates types of disturbance and isolation that dispossess women of sources of support and legal means of achieving economic security, leaving many of them with limited alternatives beyond the sex industry.

The global processes that are dissolving closed economies and the accompanying cultural and social norms are not merely shifting macro-level categorizations of communities, but may actually be imposing a new universal order that is unlimited in scope and penetrates the recesses of social, cultural, psychological and biological life, creating a power structure that pervades everywhere yet is centered nowhere (Hardt and Negri 2000; 2004). Although a postmodern understanding of global capitalism ultimately undermines the structural forces that sustain the sex industry by obscuring the identification of these power structures, Hardt and Negri's interpretation contributes the important work of locating power structures in the body – a component of globalization that informs a discussion of agency in this new global context. The reality that some bodies are more vulnerable to global processes and even fuel their perpetuation suggests that commodified bodies embody and reflect the global processes. These processes create high levels of vulnerability for marginalized people with few job opportunities and uniquely affect their ability to choose the ways in which they will provide for their families and sustain their communities.

## *II. Agency and Constraint*

Before examining the ways in which the constraints created and complicated by globalization affect a specific population – commercial sex workers – this thesis will examine the literature surrounding agency and how external factors coalesce to limit choices, particularly among marginalized groups. Ahearn (2001) defines agency as the “socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Hitlin and Elder 2007:172).

According to Giddens (1986), agency and constraint must not be evaluated as separate worlds or dichotomous opposites. Instead, he urges sociologists to examine the ways that they reproduce each other: in other words, how is structure reproduced through collective individual actions, and how are those actions constrained and enabled by the structures in which they take place? Although agency and structure are related in a cyclical fashion, the increasing spatial and economic inequalities between the core and peripheral zones of the world mean that certain individuals’ power results in greater-scale change (Hilsdon 2007). As economic and political power has become centralized in Western, urban core centers, these communities hoard the concomitant privilege to shape social structures.

This concentration of change-making power does not leave the marginalized and disproportionately poor citizens of developing countries without options for strategic choice. In fact, their movement to geographically distinct locations has resulted in the need for governments to create migration policies. However, the governments have disproportionate power to shape the global processes that favor their capital accumulation and consequently restrict the options of the powerless socially, politically, and economically.

There is clearly an influential role played by the marginalized members of the emerging global society as governments and transnational bodies are compelled to respond to their movement. However, a marginalized person's capacity to *influence* is not tantamount to her capacity to *choose*; this distinction is crucial in understanding the agency that marginalized sex workers exercise. On a basic level, it is commonly understood that the word "choice" necessitates two or more possible avenues of action that an individual chooses between. Giddens (1987) corroborates this understanding of choice, claiming that a truly agentic choice is one in which the actor "could have done otherwise." (p. 220) Both the commonly understood nature of "choice" as well as Giddens' academic definition suggest a dependent relationship between the range of options and the capacity for agentic action. As the range of options narrows, so the latitude to exercise agency becomes constrained or, in extreme cases, is entirely eliminated, resulting in forced action. Even if the coerced individual takes actions that influence her coercer, perhaps by physically resisting or refusing to cooperate, she still does not exercise agency in entering her situation due to the complete lack of options she confronted.

This causal relationship helps to frame an analysis of choice in geographically distinct contexts. As the options for employment narrow in rural areas, for example, Giddens' definition supports the assertion that the latitude for agentic action consequently approaches elimination. Additionally, the influence of range of options on the possibility for agency suggests that the individuals responsible for eliminating possible options for sex workers' livelihoods are implicated in the marginalized women's choicelessness. It is the powerful individuals' decisions to reshape avenues to economic sustainability and

limit social services that have narrowed the range of survival options for marginalized individuals.

Habermas' (1984) theory of structure-agency furthers the notion of privileged access to shaping social structures by explicating the tension between the 'lifeworld,' an individual experience on the micro level, and systems, or macro-level constraints that "supplant the lifeworld by replacing reciprocal interaction with money, power, and bureaucratic practice" (Bungay et al. 2010:16). Habermas explains that colonization happens when lifeworld perspectives are subsumed and silenced by these materialistic macro-level concerns. Those in power are therefore responsible for maintaining these lucrative systems that undermine the ability for unconstrained micro-level social processes to transpire. Habermas' focus on the interplay between structure and agency illuminates the reality that agency is a negotiation made on an individual level within constraints that are created by the complex processes surrounding an individual. The salience of his explanation is its focus on the ability of the powerful to perpetuate their elevated position by undermining 'lifeworlds,' or micro-level experiences, in favor of exploitative social processes that unidirectionally benefit the powerful.

In Western, liberal societies, there is a tendency to charitably attribute poor and disenfranchised peoples with agency so as not to undermine their humanity (Weitzer 2010). Weitzer describes this as a Western fetishization of choice that elevates the rational decision-making and ignores the emotions of the individuals who operate within constraints of their communities. By attributing their independent action as rational and unburdened, however, the reality of their marginalized context is rendered invisible. Scholars cannot simply attribute agency to marginalized people as a type of remedial gift

or apology for the inequality tied to the actions of Western countries and conclude that their lifestyles are the result of their choice.

Structural constraints are shaped by the most powerful members of society to maximize their economic profit at the expense of the least powerful, whose realms of agency are restricted by the larger global processes that pull them into the core and push them out of the periphery resulting in precarious patterns of migration that disproportionately affect women. Their need to survive despite their great vulnerability limits the options they have to secure survival. Priscilla Alexander argues that if a woman confronts “poverty, hunger, sexual abuse, homelessness, inaccessible education, unobtainable medical treatment, or inadequate funds for childcare,” then her ability to secure a mainstream occupation or even survive are limited and “well beyond the traditional concept of choice” (Brock and Thistlethwaite 1996:125). Because so many options are precluded for women facing compounded marginalization and limited resources, Davidson (1998) explains that certain seemingly undesirable occupations may be more agency-endowing to women. She refers to the Weberian notion that individuals deliberately choose a course of action based on their evaluation of possible options and the meanings they attach to actions and events:

These insights allow us to speak of people being in a position to exercise more or less choice over the details of their life, and to claim that, at the apex of the prostitution hierarchy, prostitutes’ circumstances ... allow them to exercise a great deal more choice than can be exercised by people at the base of that hierarchy (Davidson 1998:105).

Agency among third-world women has been denied in a rescuer framework that paints women as passive victims (as discussed in the overview of the abolitionist faction with regards to commercial sex work) or overstated in an attempt to endow the same liberal

notion of empowerment that first-world women more readily enjoy. Instead, the notion of agency among women in peripheral countries ought to be explored. They are no less rational and no less strategic in their decision-making. They do, however, face a unique set of social structures that vary greatly from the structures that constrain women in the core countries. This is not meant to undermine the experiences of impoverished or violated people in the Western world, as it is impossible for a social theory to encompass the totality of phenomena in the social world. However, this thesis does the important work of beginning to outline the specific constraints within which women in the third world make strategic decisions.

## **Chapter 2. Theoretical Framework of Choice in Commercial Sex**

The purpose of the following chapter is to evaluate the ways that moments of freedom as well as moments of constraint are created and sustained in the globalized world. According to Ahearn's (2001) definition of agency, the capacity to act is modified by the sociocultural environment of the actor. I have chosen to divide the factors that mediate decision-making into three levels: macro, meso, and micro. Although these categories may seem indiscriminate or subjective, they serve the important function of organizing the myriad factors that work to constrain agency in geographically and culturally distinct contexts. This system of classification forms the basis of my new theoretical framework, creating a lens through which unique sex markets can be compared.

For the purpose of this discussion, macro-level constraints are those that occur at broader levels of nation-state governance and policy-making. For example, policies such as legal measures to determine nationality and corporate trade agreements affect a wide range of individuals and provoke patterns of relocation and wealth distribution. Meso-level constraints are those that occur at a community level, typically involving regional religious and gender norms that may be influenced by broader trends or charismatic individuals but are characteristic of particular localities. Finally, micro-level constraints are individual experiences that, although perhaps shared by numerous people, are unique moments in that individual's life and may not be tied to broader trends. For example, a female's experience of marital abuse may occur privately and seem to her an isolated instance, regardless of high rates of battering that may be rooted in collectively held

patriarchal norms or a lack of shelters for abused women. Although there is inevitably overlap between these categories as well as phenomena that could arguably be categorized in multiple levels, they provide a framework for understanding possible constraints that will later be applied to evaluate the sex markets in four distinct communities.

### ***I. Constrained Choices: Globalization on the Macro Level***

As mentioned previously in the discussion of regulationist and abolitionist ideology with regards to commercial sex, there are two dominant frameworks that shape the argument over choice in the sex industry: one that views sex workers as empowered women using their bodies to advance financially, and the second that situates them as victims of exploitative masculine and patriarchal systems. Although these frameworks are elaborated in various forms and invoke other ideologies, such as moral conservatism or imperialism, the fundamental question of choice lies at the center of such debates.

Many scholars are confronted with practical data indicating the inherent harm contained in the sex industry as well as ideological arguments that oppose the capitalist, patriarchal system of sex work. Because sex workers face violence at alarmingly high rates, abolitionists claim that sex work is undesirable and its participants would not choose sex work in the presence of other viable options. Feminist scholars also draw on themes of anti-capitalism and anti-patriarchy to challenge the benefits of sex work. For example, feminist scholars such as Kathleen Barry “situate the sex industry along a continuum of female sexual slavery that runs from marriage to sex work” (Brock and Thistlethwaite 1996:13). Capitalism has rewritten valued resources as commodities to be

bought and sold, and commoditized bodies become victims of the more powerful economic entities. Scholars like Barry assert that females who voluntarily sell their bodies subjugate their gender to unequal power relations. By reducing themselves to a market object to meet male sexual demand, these sex workers communicate that men have a right to demonstrate their power on the bodies of women.

Unfortunately, many of these discourses focus the debate on the individual engaged in sex work and how this industry perpetuates problematic gender marginalization via participation in sex work. This universalizes the attempts to explain her choice, or lack thereof, without recognizing the nuanced experiences of women from different spaces geographically and socioeconomically. In light of the theoretical explication of agency as well as the particular historical moment of flourishing globalization within which actors make decisions, this thesis aims to evaluate the particular challenges that globalization processes place on the agency of women involved in the sex industry. It is not until the context of a woman's decision is understood that relevant services and legislation can be produced.

### *Economic Policies*

The spread of global capitalism has a variety of consequences both positive and negative for various stakeholders in the economic system. Unfortunately, the growth of global inequalities and capital accumulation in core economies has increased the wealth of the wealthy while further impoverishing the already poor. Inherent within capitalist free market ideology is the belief that all workers have freedom to choose where to sell their labor based on their skills and educations. However, as narrowing opportunities in

rural spaces result in the concentration of low-wage jobs in core, urban centers, fewer 'choices' exist for wage laborers in their communities of origin. Matthews (2008) notes that sex workers "formally have the same choice as other sectors of the workforce and in principle enjoy the same level of unfreedom," but are disadvantaged by the reality that the labor market is "highly segmented" and the ability to access different types of occupations is "a function of education and skills" (p. 30). Therefore, individuals raised in poverty without education are postured to occupy jobs that require little else: their bodies.

Hochschild (2004) explains that this "yawning gap between rich and poor countries is itself a form of coercion, pushing Third World mothers to seek work in the First for lack of options closer to home" (p. 26). Due to the predominant free market ideology, however, the decision to migrate for job opportunity is viewed as a "personal choice," but in reality, they choose it "because economic pressures all but coerce them to" (Hochschild 2004:27). Many of these women respond to this economic exploitation by moving to centers of capital growth - global cities - and the consequential service sectors that provide "work in menial jobs at very low wages" or even the sex industry, because "it pays better than any other work available to young, unskilled, and often illiterate women" (Brock and Thistlethwaite 1996:4). In fact, scholar Andrijasevic (2010) identified economic need as an "impersonal form of control" that, while less visible than a violent pimp or corrupt law enforcement system, nonetheless sustains the conditions that compel women to meet economic need by selling their bodies (p. 68).

MacKinnon (2011) agrees that the coercion behind sex work "produces an economic sector of sexual abuse...the money coerces the sex rather than guaranteeing

consent to it” (p. 274). Citing research from South Africa, Canada and the U.S., she adds that “urgent financial need” is the most frequent reason cited by sex workers for engaging in sex work (2011:276). In fact, 89 percent of female sex workers asked what they needed in prostitution replied “to leave prostitution” (2011:289). Although these responses originate in primarily first-world places, it is clear that sex workers are not choosing sex work for the occupation itself, but rather see its financial possibilities as the best option for survival. This does not indicate a lack of agency on part of the sex workers, as they were not “duped into selling sex” but rather, they “made what they saw as the best choice from within a very narrow range of options” (Sandy 2007:203). In consideration of the prevailing economic inequalities that leave prostitution as the most lucrative low-wage job for many marginalized individuals, MacKinnon argues that sex workers are observed to be “prostituted through choices precluded, options restricted, possibilities denied” (2011:274).

It is not merely ‘poverty’ that has contributed to a burgeoning sex industry, but the characteristics of modern, globalized poverty that have carved paths for commodified bodies to be bought and sold for the profit of modern criminal networks. Multinational business operations have simply created more possibilities for expanding industries of exploitation by forging trade partnerships, transportation systems and networks for communication that can be easily converted into structures propelling the sex industry: “if other kinds of businesses turned global, why not prostitution?” (Thorbeck and Pattanaik 2002:30).

Sandy (2007) confirms this connection between global capital flow and contemporary sex work, cautioning against simplistically linking rural poverty and

prostitution, since this industry is sustained by a more complex web of systems that benefit from the exploitation of sex workers. Women choose sex work, she argues, because of “narrowing employment opportunities and income-generating activities for women; gendered divisions of labour, landlessness, rising health care costs, a lack of access to basic health services, the lack of a welfare system, and increasing levels of familial responsibility” (Sandy 2007). Structural adjustment programs that erode subsistence production in rural communities, burden low-skilled and undereducated individuals with loans, and require mass entry into a nonexistent market with a limited social safety net leave women with few options beyond sex work or another low-wage job, and these policies “may very well be part of the explanation why an increasing number of women have turned to prostitution” (Thorbeck and Pattanaik 2002:30).

*Globalization in the Shadows: Capital Flow and Patterns of Exploitation*

In this globalized world, however, it is not merely the differential accessibility of jobs that disadvantages already impoverished women. The global processes have commodified certain types of bodies and compel them to enter the flow of capital that may perhaps be their only avenue towards economic survival. Recalling Hardt and Negri’s (2004) explanation of the penetrative nature of global power structures in the body, scholars Das, Eargle and Esmail (2011) outline the complex movement of capital and the ways that bodies are contemporarily manipulated into this overwhelming and objectifying current of exploitation. They describe the Global Commodity Chain (GCC) as the production process that begins with the procurement of raw material and ends with marketing the finished product, arguing that “each phase is a spectrum of unequal

exchange” (Hopkins and Wallerstein 1986 in Das et al. 2011:231). There exists a hierarchy that dictates which countries participate in these exchanges, relegating developing, peripheral countries to the supply side and maintaining developed core countries or regions on the demand side. Because economic power dictates the sending and receiving countries and economic reforms work to exacerbate the marginalization of women in developing countries, the arrangements of bodies in sex work resemble those of any other global market: demand in developed countries and urban centers, supply in developing countries and rural spaces (Das et al. 2011). Although unequal relationships usually exist in economic exchanges, the sex trade is unique in that “people turn themselves into commodities and voluntarily insert themselves into a GCC, subject to currents of power that eliminate their ability to influence their conditions” (Das et al. 2011:233). These global processes remove the autonomy that a person has over her labor, rather transforming her into a commodity that forfeits the power to control the terms of her exchange.

The commodification of bodies is not a neutral or unbiased process of exploitation, but instead differentially determines *what types of bodies* will enter the sex industry based on preexisting patterns of exploitation. Penttinen (2010) builds on the GCC model, agreeing that the global sex industry operates through the same landscapes as systems of legal capital exchange. She uses the term “shadow globalization” to describe the illicit sex industry that certainly exists in the same space as legitimate industries, but feeds off of the discard of globalization “using as its material (its discard) the women and children for whom the effects of globalization have resulted in their own poverty and insecurity” (Penttinen 2010:30-31). Therefore, they may not simply turn to

the sex industry as only a means of economic survival, but as a response to their marginalization due to the exploitative process of globalization and deterioration of rural communities. According to Penttinen, the women's choice "becomes one between subject of this shadow globalization or an abject without clearly dictated subjective responsibilities and freedoms" (2010:31). Key in Penttinen's description of shadow globalization is the notion that global processes do not simply limit their options for employment, but also change the way they view their identities as rural citizens of developing countries – a constraint unique from those also plaguing first world women in the sex industry.

Appadurai (1996) discusses the commercial sex industry as a space in which gendered and ethnicized subjectivity and agency emerge as effects of the globalization of the world economy and culture. She redefines globalization as a process that produces subjectivities and reiterates them through the body. Sassen (2004) adds that the demand for low-wage labor in the service sector is gendered and racialized, encouraging the transnational migration of women in particular. This demand represents an alternative economic global circuit of domestic, care, and sex work that occupies the same space as global capital development in industries such as technology and information. This concept of "counter-geographies" of globalization resembles Penttinen's "shadow economy," both of which emphasize the growing importance of illegal, gendered, and racialized industries as profit-making activities for the migrant women displaced by the very capital growth that facilitated urban development. Globalization fuels the demand and consequential creation of the sex industry while simultaneously impoverishing rural, peripheral communities that provide a ready supply of workers. The remittances sent

home from migrant workers sustains these rural communities deprived of alternative resources and capital investments and has become a functionally integrated component of rural economies.

*Receiving Countries' Legal Policies: Moments of Vulnerability Inhibit True Choice*

Far from an empowering occupation chosen from among a series of viable options, sex workers engage in the industry as a “reaction” to the adverse conditions they experience as citizens of forgotten, discarded communities (Penttinen 2010). It provides what little power is accessible to them as their communities have been deprived of economic and social service resources, traditional subsistence living opportunities, and education opportunities. However, it is falsely simplistic to argue that this reclaiming of power, albeit limited, is experienced similarly by women engaged in sex work. In fact, while many women initially ‘choose’ the sex industry as an alternative to rural poverty, policies in receiving countries render transnational migrants more vulnerable to exploitation and unable to govern the terms of their employment.

Patterns of migration do not simply follow a rural to urban track within a country’s borders, but rather extend beyond these increasingly irrelevant demarcations to the realm of transnational movement. Although these borders are rendered insignificant due to the collapse of closed economies in favor of global markets, the sovereignty that individual nation-states exercise within their borders shape a woman’s realm of possibilities as she migrates. The need to migrate combines with politically motivated restrictions on migration to promote “risky labor migration practices” (Chuang 2006:140). The initial move from country of origin to receiving country is fraught with

vulnerability for a woman attempting illegal entry. Her fear of deportation and minimal legal protection create an opportunity for traffickers to seize her papers and force the woman into a situation of indebted labor. While a degree of choice was arguably present in the decision to move, disregarding economic pressures, any remnant of choice is then obliterated as traffickers wield total control over her movement and the terms of her employment.

The reality of debt-bondage within the sex industry further complicates the ability of any female sex worker to exercise true choice, as bondage is a component of slavery and a violation of international trafficking laws. Scholars Thorbeck and Pattanaik (2002) argue that an inability to escape a potentially violent or exploitative situation means that a woman's 'choice' to engage in sex work no longer exists because it cannot be revoked at any time. Her one-time decision to enter a situation demands relinquishment of future decision-making against her will. Similarly, Davidson (2006) views the dichotomy between 'choice' and 'total control' as problematic, since oftentimes debt is used to control a worker. She points out that debt can be real or fictional: oftentimes, pimps or brothel owners allege grandiose debt that the women owe and leverage the safety of their families against its payment. Regardless of the justification for this manipulative tool to coerce her cooperation, the existence of any debt begs the question:

If debt is used as the means to control a worker, is this complete control or does the debtor have a choice about whether or not to comply with the demands of the person s/he is indebted to? Does an opportunity to quit represent a 'choice' even when it carries with it a risk of being reported to immigration authorities and deported? (Davidson 2006:7).

As Davidson notes, it is not only the debt that eliminates a woman's ability to relinquish her original choice to enter sex work, but also the reality that she may lack legal ability to

move freely once she has entered a new country. There are legal ramifications that divide the liberty of those who “are free and able to take new citizenship” and those who are constrained to movement in the illegal sector to avoid incarceration (Thorbeck and Pattanaik 2002:4). Her lack of status works against any attempt to seek freedom, since for undocumented migrants in the sex industry, “being identified as potentially vulnerable to abuse and exploitation often means exposure to additional risks rather than an opportunity to access rights and protections” (Davidson 2006:6). Their inability to access the legal sector in these receiving countries compounds their marginalization in the workforce, eliminating most choices beyond selling their bodies in the thriving market of illicit sex.

It is therefore ignorant to claim that sex workers in every country experience the same viable occupational options that would render their choice to enter sex work similar to that of a “liberated Western woman” with different reasons to sell and consequences for selling her body. A true choice to enter the sex industry, in line with Giddens’s (1987) characterization of agency as inherently dependent upon alternative options, is feasible when the option to not enter the sex industry exists. As these authors document, even an initial desire to enter the sex industry cannot be a true choice if consent is not present throughout the extent of their employment and if economic and legal policies prohibit the transition to alternative forms of survival. A concession of the regulationist approach, which emphasizes the civil rights and agency that women possess, has been to criticize trafficking while defending prostitution. The United Nations’ Palermo Protocol definition of human trafficking includes being sexually exploited through force, fraud, or coercion for commercial sex, all of which indeed occurs in the sex industry. MacKinnon (2011)

highlights that this definition also includes sexual exploitation through “abuse of power or a condition of vulnerability” (p. 300). Demographic features certainly serve as conditions of vulnerability, and in this globalized world, race and gender compound to increase the marginalization and powerlessness of women in developing, peripheral countries. MacKinnon cites Sigma Huda, Special Rapporteur on Trafficking from 2004 to 2008, who observed that “prostitution as actually practiced in the world usually does satisfy the elements of trafficking” (2011:300).

## *II. Mediated Choices: Globalization on the Meso Level*

It is certainly not just the economic constraints and legal categorizations that constrain the behavior of sex workers, compelling their entry and complicating their exit. Rather, the culturally held notions of “natural” gender roles and the differential spaces that men and women occupy mediate women’s perceptions of these larger structural constraints and what avenues of possible action exist. Additionally, the networks that these women create as migrants within communities of sex workers facilitate their ability to access resources and job opportunities, creating new windows of agentic possibility.

Das et al. (2011) argue that cultural values and historical-regional distinctiveness coalesce to create norms that govern the style of the sex trade in each locality. For example, the prevalence of the value of self-expression reduces the cultural validation of the use of women’s bodies as commodities, whereas survival values support the use of their bodies as commodities. Matthews (2008) adds that collectively held norms regarding gender circumscribe a woman’s decision to ‘choose’ prostitution. He says that this choice is “structured by relations of domination and subordination and a corresponding ideology which signals that men have the right to demand that women’s bodies are sold on the market” (2008:30). This type of coercion is not overt, but rather “embedded within a range of institutions that tacitly presuppose the legitimacy of this relation” (2008:30).

It is not only permissible for women to engage in sex work because of male gender superiority, but in some regions prostitution plays a functional part in preserving the institution of marriage by offering an outlet for the sexual relief of men (Lim 1998:12-13). This explains why some women, typically of a higher socioeconomic class,

ignore the victimization of lowerclass women as a necessary evil to preserve the loyalty of husbands, even categorizing these women as naturally promiscuous and belonging in sex work. Gender norms also permit the manifestation of male economic power through the conspicuous consumption of sex with prostitutes in communities with steadily increasing wealth, such as urban centers in peripheral countries. The supposedly natural sexuality of men and their access to the public sphere is dichotomously opposed to the purity of women as possessions of men contained in the private sphere.

Bernstein (2007) suggests that sex work has not brought women into the public sphere in an empowering way, but has transformed the division between public and private sex. She claims that “sexual commerce is no longer grounded in its opposition to the private sphere but is invested by the emotional and affective labour once associated with the intimate or domestic” (Bernstein 2007 in Andrijasevic 2010:5). The intimacy associated with women has been brought into the public sphere only to be controlled and dominated by men whose hierarchical superiority permits their gendered access to female bodies and the façade of intimacy that their commodified sex provides.

The fact that gender roles are internalized and propagated generationally within communities may explain why some women accept the exploitation of their bodies or even view the sex industry as a natural product of male sexual need. The way women from peripheral communities interpret female gender norms may differ from the perceptions of women in developed countries who reappropriate commercial sex as a method of extracting power from males by charging them for what has historically been accessible via marriage. Instead of viewing sex work as an empowering institution, women in other cultures may see it as the best means to fulfilling filial obligations that

are traditionally expected of women. Sandy (2007) refers to the decision to enter sex work as a “response to perceived needs and constraints” as a way to “meet their obligations to their families” (p. 203). Different perspectives that vary by region mediate a woman’s understanding of her options as well as her internalized sense of duty: whether a more Western notion of individualism and empowerment, or a more Eastern notion of filial piety and loyalty.

Both a woman’s way of interpreting her gendered role as well as the ways she feels power to change her situation are mediated by the cultural norms that she was socialized into. For many women in peripheral countries, traditions of gender division and the relegation of women to the private sphere all but eliminate their real or perceived possibilities for activism or self-advocacy in situations of exploitation. Many of these women are underprepared by their communities for work beyond the domestic sphere and, with the reduction of social services as mandated by structural adjustment programs by the IMF and World Bank, are left with few alternatives to sex work if they are abandoned by their husbands and have families to care for. Das et al. (2011) document that the more a society “supports gender equality, the more it integrates women in the formal sector employment” which results in a reduction of the “feminization of poverty that contributes to an increase in sex trafficking” (p. 238-239).

#### *Internalized Perceptions of Agency: The Role of Networks*

Local norms mediate a woman’s perceptions of structural constraints and her range of agency in her judgment of these options. While her process of socialization and the collectively held norms dictate possibilities, it is through exposure via networks that

she evaluates the benefits and disadvantages of these perceived choices. Social networks serve as links between macro-level structural factors and policies compelling transnational migration and micro-level networks and practices designed to cope with migratory movement. Thorbeck and Pattanaik (2002) argue that social networks create structural patterns by serving to “bind migrants and non-migrants together in a complex web of social roles and interpersonal relationships and connect them across time and space, which means that migration flows become self-sustaining” (p. 71). These migration flows characteristic of a globalized world create spaces that transcend prior national boundaries. Within these spaces, migrant women network with relatives back at home and offer tangible proof of the feasibility of migration or the risk of exploitation. Membership in a social network affects a woman’s perception of possible means to achieve economic survival.

Additionally, a woman’s social network facilitates collective action and offers support that bolsters her sense of agency in leaving a harmful situation. Davidson (1998) explains that as conscious actors, sex workers can choose how much effort to exert and attempt to resist exploitative conditions. However, because of the reality of constraints – both economic and legal – many of these women have learned that “collective action is more likely to lead to lock-outs or mass dismissal...even in unity, there is little strength” (1998:191). Whether or not collective action among marginalized sex workers results in improved conditions, membership in social networks does facilitate greater purposeful action and these women’s perception of a better chance at achieving their goals.

In fact, the pimps and brothel owners typically understand that social networks increase a woman’s autonomy and intentionally separate her from opportunities to

develop emotional ties to other sex workers. She becomes more attached to what little emotional fulfillment her pimp provides and acquiesces to the coercive demands of her job if she perceives no realistic alternative as an isolated woman (Thorbeck and Pattanaik 2002). Meso-level factors such as cultural norms and social networks mediate a woman's perception of structural constraints and influence the micro-level decisions she makes in response to these pressures. Whether or not these decisions are detrimental or empowering to her, it is clear that her community greatly affects the concrete actions that she, as a rational actor, takes in response to her observations of the world and her possibilities within it.

### *III. Skewed Choices: Globalization on the Micro Level*

Although the purpose of this thesis is to understand the constraints that affect women's decisions to enter the sex trade, it is important to consider the way that globalization has affected a woman's self-perceptions and individual experiences that contribute to her unique decision to engage in sex work. Globalization has reshaped the patterns of movement that dictate a woman's options, but has also commodified her and inscribed meaning on certain types of racialized or gendered bodies that render them more belonging to spaces of sexual exploitation.

Penttinen's concept of shadow economies illuminates the ways that globalization has transformed the body from a way to produce labor into the object that is exchanged by other, more powerful entities (2010). The subjectivities that bodies experience create physical, corporeal constraints on the movement of bodies and the places they are allowed to enter. For example, bodies marked by dark skin from rural communities cannot access many legal employment opportunities. As a result, their individual opportunities for movement are limited.

The particular life stories of each woman engaging in sex work may seem removed from processes of globalization and impossible to connect to macro-structural constraints. However, Davidson (1998) explains that many sex workers experience trauma early in life that predispositions them to entering the sex industry. Although trauma does occur on an individual basis, women living in the third world with unreliable means of survival, higher infant mortality rates, fewer social safety nets, and a myriad of other challenges certainly experience more *opportunities* for trauma-related events to occur. If these women are making decisions based on their perceptions of the best

possible options, but their traumatic experiences have distorted their ability to envision a healthy future self beyond the sex industry, then they are exercising choice within a skewed range of options. Matthews agrees that “for those who have histories of sexual abuse, engaging in prostitution may be seen as a less traumatic event” (2008:31).

Although structural constraints such as poverty and constrained economic opportunity limit women’s access to social service and job opportunities, driving women to migrate in search of economic opportunities, “a feeling of being ‘stuck’ in life’ ...is equally important as economic hardship in capturing the reasons why people migrate” (Andrijasevic 2010:139). For some who experienced abuse in the home or shame due to their impoverished conditions, migration can serve as “a way out of what [they perceive] as a series of impossibilities and failure” (Andrijasevic 2010:139). Andrijasevic (2010) argues that agency is expressed when women recognize the inability to achieve in their community and leave to pursue perceived opportunity regardless of the particular impetus for migration. This may make them more likely to acquiesce to a trafficker’s plan to secure them employment in an urban center and not evaluate potential risks that later restrict their freedom to move or seek alternative employment. Regardless, the emphasis here is on the reality that women want to migrate to take their chances at a better life since nothing exists for them: the act of recognition and consequential action points to rational agency on part of these women. It may not be until they are working in a brothel, indebted to a pimp, that they would choose not to pursue the sex industry (Andrijasevic 2010:139).

Although their agency is corporeally constrained by the commodifying processes of globalization and their predisposition to traumatic events, these women still make

choices that reflect a capacity to survive and adapt within harsh and unpredictable conditions of sex work (Penttinen 2010:33). It is clearly important to consider the individual life histories of women and the ways that their environments in underserved and impoverished peripheral communities impact their sense of self and perceptions of possible occupational options, as well as their deservingness of any alternative options.

### **Chapter 3. Comparative Analysis of Global Sex Markets**

The global sex industry cannot be reduced to mere economic or social structures, since the history of sexual commerce in each region and local milieu filter the norms that circulate on the transnational level to create a nuanced sex industry in each region. Processes of globalization have transformed local cultures through the forging of transnational relations that have introduced previously contained economies to the world market, rendering them vulnerable to exploitation and reshaping by greater global currents. These shifts have created new opportunities as well as new inequalities. It is the purpose of the following section to explicate the ways that globalization has altered the political, social and economic structures of four diverse economies. This comparative analysis of these four countries will interrogate the way that female sex workers make strategic decisions within these macro-level constraints, considering the particular meso-level cultural norms and micro-level challenges unique to each region. The objective of this review is to offer a grounded application of the theoretical structure outlined in the previous sections that illuminates the nuanced constraints within which women from different global communities experience constraint and freedom.

Theories of globalization have succeeded in describing macro-structural trends but have less comprehensively examined the connections between these movements and the subjective meanings and experiences in various communities. While some proponents of free trade argued that growing transnationalism would blur the boundaries between the core and periphery and lead to greater homogeneity, it is clear that these spaces are reproducing extant inequalities due to the exploitation of impoverished markets and concentration of global capital in the wealthy core. As Brennan (2004) claimed, the sex

industry is another space vulnerable to exploitation by stronger political and economic entities. She adds that to understand these changes, academics must “anchor or ground transnational processes in particular places and histories” to make visible the effects of globalization (p.15). This comparative analysis of four countries’ shifts in the wake of globalization demonstrates the complex ways that locals reproduce their culture as their communities enter the precarious realm of imposing political and economic forces. These local negotiations within global structures circumscribe the sex markets within which women make strategic decisions.

Kelly (2007) documents that in this “new era of economic globalization (and what astute observers would call a ‘recolonization’ of the developing world)” more than “seventy Third World nations submitted to neoliberal structural adjustment” (p. 11). Considering the consolidation of economic power that permitted the IMF and World Bank to offer loans based on Third World countries’ cooperation with invasive structural adjustment plans, this comparative analysis focuses on four of the many countries affected by the adoption of these neoliberal policies in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. I have chosen to profile Thailand, India, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic due to their status as Third World countries during the introduction of neoliberal policies that restructured their political, economic and social composition for the purpose of development; however, the materialization of these policies had unintended and deeply unequal consequences for the already poor in each nation.

I have chosen to discuss each country’s sex worker communities within the aforementioned framework’s categories of macro-, meso-, and micro-level constraints according to the characteristics of each. For each country’s macro-level analysis, I focus

on the neoliberal economic policies and legal structures that shape patterns of movement and income-generating activities among female commercial sex workers. The meso-level analyses emphasize regional religious and gender norms as well as the capacity for women to forge supportive networks among other sex workers and clients. Each country's micro-level analysis explores the particular features of family interactions and possibilities for trauma that may compel women to enter the sex industry. I lastly discuss the ways that moments of freedom and constraint are experienced in each country and what role the various actors play in altering the latitude of agency that female sex workers confront.

Although based on a variety of academic sources that document the choice-making possibilities for sex workers in each country, this evaluation lacks a mechanism by which these countries can be compared or ranked in terms of latitude of agency or severity of negative experiences incurred during women's experiences in the sex industry. The division of each country's agentic possibilities across the macro-, meso-, and micro-level serves to provide a foundational theoretical framework that will ideally lay groundwork for future research. It would be productive to develop a set of criteria by which geographically and culturally distinct countries could be compared in a more comprehensive study. In fact, organizations such as Shared Hope International have received grant funding to evaluate the efficacy of legal attempts to minimize commercial sexual exploitation in various countries. It may prove effective to use these rankings to pressure countries into bolstering their infrastructure to combat exploitation or grant funds contingent upon their perceived efforts towards eliminating this injustice. This project, however, lacks the scope and the resources to engage in such a systematic and

comprehensive review. For the purpose of this discussion, I have chosen to focus on the elements of each country that distinguish its commercial sex industry from others. The subheadings within each country's analysis have therefore materialized from the content of documented scholarship on the local sex industries. The following discussion of each country's evolution throughout globalization aims to document the nuanced circumstances that contextualize the decisions of local sex workers.

### ***I. Globalization in Thailand: Sex as a Functional Industry***

In the 1970s, Thailand transitioned to a parliamentary democracy and a free-market economy that increased overall economic growth. Although those in the middle and upper classes benefitted from this economic shift, those who paid the price were concentrated in the lowest economic strata (Aoyama 2009). In 1977, the Thai government's Fourth National Economic and Social Development Plan promoted economic structural adjustment to develop infrastructure by reallocating resources. Continuing into the late 1980's, the fifth and sixth plans included the borrowing of funds from the World Bank on the condition that these structural adjustment plans be implemented. These neoliberal economic policies included tightening expenditures and devaluing the currency to spur foreign investment.

Although this shift from an agricultural economy to manufacturing for export succeeded in its attempt to dramatically increase the per capita GDP in Thailand, it drastically widened the gap between the wealthy and poor as it drove impoverished rural families off of agrarian lands into the city for work. Aoyama (2009) evaluates these policies as one of the main "pull factors" for migration to Japan from Thailand (p. 179).

The government was well-intentioned, aiming to posture Thailand to compete globally in terms of education and material wealth. However, it did not sufficiently consider the ways that the very economic policies aiming to increase growth would disadvantage the already poor in Thailand (Aoyama 2009).

Traditional systems of female inheritance were interrupted by the formal land ownership policies introduced through modernizing practices that required male legal registration of property. This made the “culturally recognized pattern of land inheritance through women’s lineage unrecognizable” (Aoyama 2009:49). The young people fled villages seeking wage labor and skill training that would equip them with tools to obtain financial security (Aoyama 2009). Legal migration spurred by laws that facilitated movement out of Thailand beginning in 1979 created routes that were later used for illegal migration to Japan (Aoyama 2009). The ease with which rural migrants could travel to urban centers of commerce, both within Thailand and beyond its borders, as well as the structural adjustment programs, arguably serve as the primary origins of the growth of the sex tourism industry in Thailand in the late 1970s (Brock and Thistlewaite 1996).

Women were differentially devastated by the lack of jobs in rural sectors and changing distribution of wealth across Thailand which led to the growth of the informal service sector and burgeoning sex markets. The demand for jobs in Thailand as the workforce steadily grew was unmet in the formal sector, and the few jobs which were available typically required physical labor and were primarily accessed by men. Therefore, the combination of minimal job opportunities for women and their under-preparation for the legal sector led to more women entering the informal sector and migrating illegally. Aoyama (2009) describes the 1980s as the beginning of the

“feminization of the transnational workforce” as the kind of work done by women was being steadily exported from impoverished countries to geographically nearby countries with greater accumulated capital, characterizing the migration from Thailand to Japan (p. 2).

The economic disparities that lead to this migratory flow are not simply resolved upon entry in the informal sector in the receiving country, however. The lack of regulation in these sectors result in conditions ripe for labor exploitation; however, as Brock and Thistlewaite (1996) argue, the “economic conditions of many Asian countries are such” that “even unfair wages are better than what most young women and children can earn elsewhere” (p. 8-9). It is unsurprising that waves of migrants facing few opportunities and enabled by well-used migration routes are traveling to Japan in search of the means of economic survival. Aoyama (2009) found that more than 50 percent of documented migrants are female. She recognized that many migrants are undocumented, and estimate that more women are driven to migrate illegally due to the lack of formal sector jobs available to women. Women are certainly a formidable workforce in Thailand and have frequently been referenced by feminists seeking to portray the country as more egalitarian than its neighbors; however, many of these women had to pay for the increasing gap in inequality by the nature of their high-risk and unregulated occupations (Aoyama 2009).

As anticipated, one of the most accessible jobs for women is work in the sex industry. Aoyama (1996) estimates that between 40-50,000 undocumented Thai sex workers are living in Japan. Statistics are notoriously difficult to gather and close records are scarce because sex work is illegal in these countries. However, selling sex has

become a functionally important income-generating activity contributing to the development of Thailand. It is arguably one of the “largest contributors to the gross national product because it brought massive foreign capital into the economy” (Brock and Thistlethwaite 1996:10). Lim (1998) clarifies that close to US\$300 million was transferred annually from urban to rural areas in the form of remittances to rural families by women working in the sex sector; this sum was “much larger than the budgets of many development programs funded by the Thai government” (p. 10). The total profits of this integral income-generating activity comprise somewhere between 15-18 percent of the country’s GDP (Lim 1998:10). Considering that other associated costs - such as entertainment licenses and building rentals – are also transferred to the government via taxes, this illegal market benefits the Thai government. The economic basis of the sex sector points to an inextricable link between economic growth and the maintenance of the sex industry.

Economic growth has not only contributed to the supply of female bodies with few options beyond working in the sex industry, but has also created greater means for male consumers, both in Thailand and neighboring Asian regions, to purchase sex. Purely demographically, the quantity of potential male sex consumers increased between 1985-1990 as the workforce experienced a dramatic increase – more individuals between the ages of 18-65 were earning consistent incomes (Aoyama 2009:178). As is documented, more males had access to jobs in the formal sector. It can be presumed that more men had greater expendable incomes that facilitated luxury purchases such as sex. The patterns of consumerism fueling the conspicuous consumption of sex are also due in part to the exposure to global Western trends of materialism and capital accumulation.

The burgeoning sex industry is also somewhat a response to the surge in economic growth between 1987-1988 that fueled the creation of entertainment districts expressly designed to attract Japanese consumers (Aoyama 2009:179). In fact, tourism jumped by 33.7 percent in 1988, reaching a total of US \$150 million dollars that year (Aoyama 20-09:50). It is not mere coincidence that tourism increased contemporaneously with the economic policies that lined the pockets of wealthier men. Aoyama (2009) states that the male to female ratio of tourists visiting Thailand demonstrates the demographic shift towards greater male tourism: between 1976 and 1997, the ratio went from (female:male) 7:3 to 6:4 females (p. 50). It is clear that Thai macro-structural economic policies facilitated the mass entry of women hindered from the formal sector to the available income-generating jobs in the sex market. This changing landscape of stratification created avenues of migration from deprived rural regions to urban centers utilized by legal migrants as well as undocumented individuals seeking jobs in the increasingly wealthy urban centers' informal markets. Moreover, they provided extraneous income to male consumers of sex that fueled the demand for a thriving sex industry.

#### *Meso-level Cultural Norms: Buddhism and Women's Karma*

Aoyama (2009) documents that approximately 95 percent of Thai are Theravada Buddhists (p. 44). The pervasiveness of this religion means that its influence on gender expectations cannot be ignored in an analysis of meso-level cultural norms that affect women's options in Thailand. Dominant interpretations of scriptural teachings do in fact offer a gendered notion of karma, placing women below men as 'this-worldly' beings

who have not attained enlightenment like their male counterparts, who are ‘other-worldly’ and spiritually higher (Aoyama 2009). Women are therefore believed to be more intrinsically capable of providing practically for their families, and are held responsible for sustaining their livelihoods. This may contribute to gendered socialization of young girls that teaches them that women can attain higher spirituality by providing well for their family (Aoyama 2009).

These Buddhist beliefs lead to female-centered households that burden women with providing for their families. Aoyama (2009) explains that their social status is tied to their reproductive sexuality via motherhood. Sex in this context is a valorized and ‘good’ role for females, steeply contrasting with the representation of sex workers who exploit this capacity for economic, materialistic gain. These very representations became fuel for debates over political identity during the rise in globalization that elevated more families to middle- and upper class strata. As new global trends threaten traditional notions of Thai culture, many newly wealthy people cling to peasants as symbols of Thai tradition and heritage. Jeffrey (2002) explains that the bodies of these rural women have been stripped of agency and turned into symbols of political identity:

While women working in the sex industry may have seen themselves as family wage earners, or as women willing to take risks in order to take advantage of the modern and the foreign, to the growing middle-class student movement they represented the degradation of Thai culture through Americanization. For the students, rural women’s bodies marked the borders of the Thai nation. Their sexual use by foreigners indicated an invasion by a foreign other (p. 50).

The bodies of rural, disadvantaged women became political tools for female activists to use to demonstrate their moral upstandingness. The voices of these female activists, the majority of which belonged to women in the middle- and upper class, gained greater

significance in the political realm in the late 1980's due to national economic growth and the influence of Western modernization that influenced female political inclusion.

Although Aoyama (2009) confirms the entry of women's issues into the sphere of national concern, she adds that rural, poor women – the most likely to turn to prostitution – were absent from these women's development plans aiming to paint an image of Thai morality. This worked to drive a gap between these differentially privileged women, painting the women in sex work as lacking discipline or “worse, seen as lured into the mainstream values of ‘consumerism’ that was crumbling society” (Aoyama 2009:43). These disparities worked to produce an erroneous image of rural women that patronizingly labeled them as deviant, materialistic fortune-seekers. It also compounded the reality of constraints that these women faced, as their lack of voice in the political sphere left their concerns unheard in decision-making processes that affected their access to resources and jobs.

Jeffrey (2002) explains that female elites took on the project of returning morality to the peasant spheres by purging sex work and condemning their immorality. Prostitute women were therefore accused doubly for revoking their feminine traditional role of provider, and by circumventing the sexual morality of Thai tradition. They are blamed for seeking materialist objectives through sex work, which is compounded by the pressure that globalization has created to adhere to cultural norms so as to preserve the Thai of centuries past (Jeffrey 2002). By painting these women as the “undeserving poor” who interpret the decisions of rural women to enter the sex industry “as the brazen product of consumerism, middle and upper class elites work to silence the realities of their lives ” (Jeffrey 2002:132). Aoyama (2009) clarifies this condemnation of sex workers by

arguing that sex work became associated with an atmosphere of freedom for women who sought to consume material goods like upper-class women. Although the sex workers' means of accessing the same freedom that upper-class women enjoy in modernizing Thailand differs, it is no less an expression of resistance to the structural and community constraints that relegate them to the status of over-burdened provider and condemned moral deviant.

### *'Choice' Amidst Stigmatization and Marginalization*

The way that migrant women negotiate their belonging to two different cultures works as a form of adaptation that translates into power in their destination countries. However, this demonstrates the way that migrants consider the demographic, linguistic and legal barriers on the macro level as they adapt and respond strategically to advance economically (Aoyama 2009). Aoyama adds that these "creative strategies" are born out of difficult experiences that required the abandonment of a former 'self' to play the role that consumers desire (p. 53). Women create the opportunity for agency by choosing a deviant or criminal path that requires acclimation to new circumstances, accrual of new skills, and the development of networks. These tools help stigmatized women navigate the macro-level constraints and community prejudices against sex work to achieve financial stability.

Moreover, these decisions demonstrate the rationality and drive that these sex workers utilize to fulfill the expectations of family provision. Believing that their control was totally gone would strip these women of the hope that sex work is merely a means to greater economic stability – a temporary occupation, not an identity (Aoyama 2009).

These women seek to preserve their honor by creating social networks with other sex workers and crafting a sense of normalcy in the midst of a deviant career (Aoyama 2009). They also meet these demands within discursive expectations and external labels, demonstrating high levels of rational decision-making to make ends meet despite their circumstances. By profiling these women as powerless victims rather than strategic decision-makers, these women's true courage is undermined and their voices are silenced.

However, failing to recognize the myriad constraints that circumscribe these strategic decisions wrongfully excuses the systems that benefit from these workers' marginalization. The difficulty that women experience navigating these decision-making contexts is enhanced when they are driven underground, made invisible, and unproductively criminalized. There are furthermore material constraints such as illegal status, language barriers, and physical restraints imposed on them as they migrate that work against their freedom of movement in the sex industry (Aoyama 2009).

Attempts to decriminalize prostitution unfortunately rely on the impetus to reify Thailand's role as a paternalistic, protective state that hides female sexuality in the confines of the home. Thailand may not be ready to legalize prostitution if it intends to use legal power to constrain marginalized women to the private sphere – it is known that this type of regulation simply drives extant sex work further underground and increases its vulnerability to exploitation (Jeffrey 2002). Women's sexual behavior under this model becomes an "object of control" rendering prostitute women "targets of reform and rehabilitation" (Jeffrey 2002:134). The context of Thailand has rendered attempts to categorize women as unrestrained agents or passive victims unproductive and irrelevant:

structural constraints and collectively held values of women work against her freedom of movement. Attempts by the state to endow sex workers with greater freedom seem to further entrench her voicelessness by patronizingly reinforcing traditional morality and female chastity, focusing on the bodies of the workers rather than the forces driving demand for commercial sex.

## *II. Globalization in India: The Expansion of a Traditional Industry*

In India, globalization has not necessarily driven waves of transnational migration, but rather is reflected more deeply in the movement of rural dwellers to urban areas that has transformed the traditional sex industry. Sahni and Shankar (2008) explain that historically, India has boasted a sex market of highly skilled, beautiful women that serve as high culture performers to high-paying customers. The onset of globalization has spurred the movement of more low-skilled, impoverished women to work in these sectors to fulfill the increasing demand of higher-paid male consumers in the developing cities. In a sense, globalization has commodified the bodies of these sex workers that used to be frequented by 'regular' patrons to cultivate a type of extramarital relationship. The increase in workers has rendered these one-time servants substitutable and disposable. The global shifts in capital accumulation have therefore dehumanized sex workers in India, putting them at greater risk of having unmet medical needs and confronting violence in their work (Sahni and Shankar 2008).

The marginalization confronting female sex workers is truly a pervasive problem throughout the country. Sahni and Shankar (2008) document that between 1.5-3.5 million women work as sex workers in India and are frequented by between 9 and 13 percent of the adult male population annually (p. 241). The integral nature of this industry cannot be ignored: it functions to provide remittances to rural impoverished families and is therefore an essential component of the Indian economy. In fact, almost every girl interviewed had two or more mouths to feed beyond those of her children (Sahni and Shankar 2008:96).

Increases in poverty and the reduction of social services have particularly and detrimentally affected women. Although the particular gender norms that coalesce to effectively hinder their security of equal rights will be discussed subsequently, it is important to note their marginalization due purely to macro-level policies that underprepare them and sustain their relegation to informal labor sectors. Illiteracy and inaccessibility to avenues of skill-building are beyond the reach of most women and weaken their abilities to seek livelihood (Sahni and Shankar 2008). Sahrasrabuddhe and Mehendale (2008) add that commercial sex is not a preferred option for these women, but is a consequence of their vulnerabilities, such as “poverty, illiteracy, ignorance, substance abuse, stigma, discrimination and forced-servitude” (p. 239). Options precluded and opportunities refused, many women have bleak alternatives to sex work if they are responsible for feeding their families.

Although official records claim that ten percent of households are female-headed, the actual incidence is more like 30 percent (Sleightholme and Sahni 32). Sleightholme and Sinha (1996) cite the 1991 census, which records 8 percent of the total female population as widows, 62 percent of whom had no support from their families (p. 22-23). Women left to fend for the well being of their families have few options in the formal sector due to reality that most communities undervalue female labor and assume that women will marry at young ages, rendering their training irrelevant. In terms of physical labor, women are prohibited from most types of agricultural labor, which comprises most of the opportunity for paid work in rural areas. Women therefore experience the struggle to earn a living “differently from men...without a husband, widows, single or separated women are seen as easy game for other men because they are not the ‘property’ of any

particular man. Thus, they are prey to sexual harassment and exploitation” (Sleightholme and Sahni 1996:31).

This vulnerability in rural areas causes many women to migrate in search of jobs in the informal sector. Sleightholme and Sinha (1996) document that domestic work and sex work were two of the main employment options available to women until the seventies; currently, more options are available particularly in urban spaces but only within the informal sector. They add that “increasing male unemployment and rural poverty have resulted in more women migrants coming to Calcutta in search of work” (Sleightholme and Sinha 1996:18). It is furthermore not always clear what types of jobs will be available until the women arrive from their communities of origin. Kara (2009) explains that many girls migrate on the assumption that they will make significant income by dancing in clubs, only later to find out the sexual nature of the jobs available to them.

Another structural component of the Indian economy beyond job inaccessibility to women is the loan system that disadvantages women unfamiliar with banking and credit systems. Sahni and Shankar (2008) explain that women are not only unfamiliar with financial systems, but additionally unable to access credit and loan through formal avenues. Loans are easy to take in red-light districts, although interest rates of 60 percent are common (p. 98). Sahni and Shankar (2008) identify the availability of these exploitative loans and the hindrances of the formal banking system as catalysts for a woman to become indebted to her brothel owners, further stripping her of the liberty to leave sex work when she chooses. They add that in India, the most common form of sex work is through brothels, which take a large part of a woman’s earnings – typically about

50 percent - and then collect the remainder as a payment towards her ever-increasing debt (Sahni and Shankar 2008).

### *Meso-level Gender Discrimination*

In India, meso-level cultural norms surrounding the appropriate place of women do complicate their attempts to freely choose an occupation beyond marriage, so the entry into sex work is a troublesome yet often-chosen route to economic survival that reflects deeply embedded gender discrimination. Women not only cope with ill-preparation for the formal job sector due to a devaluation of female participation in the public sphere, but also the deeply embedded notions of female inferiority that lead to early marriages and consequential abuse in the home (Sahni and Shankar 2008). The cultural norm of early marriage also adds to the possibilities for discontentedness among female child brides. Sleightholme and Sinha (1996) document that, at the time of the study, over 25 million girls were married between ages ten and fourteen and are typically from “poor families who have married their daughters early because they cannot afford to keep them” (p. 24). Sleightholme and Sinha (1996) explain that in India, romantic love is idealized within popular culture but rarely materialized in the institution of marriage. Rather, marriages tend to be based on family arrangements and mutual financial convenience.

Kara (2009) explains that this combination of frequent partner abuse and inability to seek other alternatives made one region in India a “breeding ground for sex slaves” (p. 78). When women were not “being raped or abused, they were unable to survive due to a lack of education, job opportunities, and basic rights...nothing could possibly be worse than the life you were already living” (Kara 2009:78). The bleak options for survival

mean that women can actually access a “degree of independence” by choosing sex work as a livelihood option, a dependence denied to her by the patriarchal culture that relegates poor women to the domestic sphere in marriage (Sahni and Shankar 2008).

The growing global norm of materialization and conspicuous consumption as a response to the development of Third World countries under neoliberal policies has not been exempt from developing India. Ghosh (2008) explains that sex work is a glamorized activity that does not only generate “sexual satisfaction in the body” for men, but also “provides mental solace for the men clients in catering to their loneliness, alienation” (p. 61). Due to the male desire for intimacy beyond the marital relationship, the sex industry is often characterized by more long-term relationships between prostitutes and clients than random encounters. Men tend to fall in love with women that will service their every desire rather than women bound by contract to sleep with them.

*‘Choice’ in Indian Sex Work: Indebted Servitude and High Occupational Risk*

The pervasive gender discrimination, as mentioned, contributes to higher rates of interpersonal violence that occur on an individual level and serve as determinants that drive women into the sex industry. Sleightholme and Sinha (1996) add that high rates of physical and sexual abuse, child marriage, desertion and widowhood are prevalent in India and coalesce with poverty to drive women into sex work. These authors cite a study that found 13 percent of sex-workers had joined the sex trade after leaving or being abandoned by violent husbands or by parents-in-law (p. 25). Considering the myriad variables constraining women in their homes, communities, and India as a country, Sahni and Shankar (2008) take issue with the use of the term ‘sex worker,’ which they trace to

the World Bank and as a result, reject the use of that nomenclature, preferring instead ‘women in prostitution.’ Their reasoning is that by “using the term sex work, we are rationalizing the situation where women are losing their traditional jobs and occupations, and therefore entering commercial sex work activity” (41). Sleightholme and Sinha (1996) add that the assumption is that sex work is lucrative for women, easy because of the lack of requisite skills, and freely chosen – “none of which is true in India” (p. 92).

Moreover, there are high occupational risks inherent in the sex industry. Increasingly vulnerability to HIV leaves many women further indebted due to medical bills and weakened health that does not outweigh the financial benefit to engaging in sex work (Sahni and Shankar 2008). Sahrasrabuddhe and Mehendale (2008) explain that the nature of their profession requires “avoiding unnecessary public contact, and this denies access to adequate healthcare and social support, thereby making them vulnerable to many sexually transmitted diseases;” the accumulation of these hindrances lead to their “inability to prevent diseases, due to any lack of control over self decision-making resulting in continued acceptance of the sex trade” (p. 239). They add that sexual services “do constitute ‘work’ like in a factory with wages. But it is without any consistency of income, or any benefits of work like stipulated working hours or weekly holidays” (Sahni and Shankar 2008:189). It is clear that many women who flee abusive marriages and untenable job opportunities in India “discover that taking money for sex is only a small step,” and enter into situations intended to secure financial and personal liberty, but instead provide a high-risk form of exploitation (Sleightholme and Sahni 1996:31).

The process of choosing sex work begins by acknowledging the economic value of one’s sexuality and entering one’s body into the market. Sleightholme and Sahni

(1996) argue that these rational decisions to cope with poor situations are not a “matter of choice but of compulsion, of being compelled to become a sex-worker as a survival strategy, and then of learning to cope with this situation” (p. 31). However, there is a categorical difference between a woman who recognizes the potential of economic survival via her sale of sex and a woman who is sold by her family member who profits from the sale of her sex (Sahni and Shankar 2008). There is a system of debt bondage present in India that necessitates the entry of young females in the sex industry to repay. Remarkably one man who sold his wife to a brothel owner to repay a family debt, “We are dying in this village. We can never repay our loans. We are dying” (Kara 2009:66). The reality that women are property of their family, then translated to a man via marriage, results in the possibility of her sale into sex work. This instance of trafficking is a clearer version of coercion or force, as she is sold against her will. However, the instance of a woman recognizing her inability to survive and entering the sex trade does not seem much different than her family member recognizing their inability to survive and selling her. Either way, the family profits from the commodification of her body. She is met with the same job hazards, discrimination, and shame.

The nature of a sex worker’s job renders her shamed by her community, but they nonetheless depend on her earnings for survival. Sahni and Shankar (2008) explain that “remittances are often unidirectional and serve to support family members, who cannot be relied upon for support post retirement considering the stigma borne by the sex work” (Sahni and Shankar 2008:174). Women face a double-bind as they take on the burden of provision as well as the lifelong demarcation as deviant women – and sometimes in this context, entirely against their will.

### *Regulation as State Control of Her Body*

It is difficult to hold the very governments that benefit from exploitation in the sex industry responsible for its regulation and for protecting the human rights of the women contained within it. Kara (2009) argues that too many global efforts to remedy poverty and the ills of globalization “rely on the consistent action of governments and institutions with interests that run counter to the measures required to redress the severe inequalities in the contemporary capitalist system” (p. 42). India has benefitted from the remittances sent by sex workers to their rural families and sustained itself internally by this industry. It is clear that their efforts to legally acknowledge the presence of the sex industry are intended to maintain a steady revenue stream rather than protect its citizens, particularly the needs of “deviant” women who are marginalized by their professions and poverty.

In terms of legalization, India has taken a toleration approach that does not criminalize the sex worker per se for engaging in commercial sex, but prostitution is punishable if it happens near a public place (Sleightholme and Sinha 1996:53). These authors accuse India of being more concerned with maintaining a “hypocritical public morality” than protecting the rights of the women (54). This version of legalization in a country where sex workers are still stigmatized sends it further underground – it also reaffirms the problematic gender notions that men have uncontrollable sexual urges that ought to be fulfilled through the subjugation and control of women’s bodies. They are also not granted greater access to resources by this legal status due to the pervasive stigmatization of their profession. They are “deprived from legal advocacy, possibilities

for alternative employment, and protection from corrupt law enforcement” (Sleightholme and Sahni 1996:147).

In India, the presence of deeply embedded gender discrimination is institutionalized and structurally inhibits women from accessing formal job markets. On a community level, these norms stigmatize women who use the sex industry to secure economic survival for their families. In terms of intimate relationships, many women are abused or involved in unhappy marriages that lead them to seek stability through other means. These structures coalesce with community norms and motivate many women to use the only resource available to them – their bodies. The financial sector inhibits formal loan access, so many women become indebted to their brothel owners and are trapped in a form of indebted servitude. Unfortunately, in India the high rates of poverty have also compelled families and husbands to sell their wives to brothel owners. The blurry division between overt trafficking and voluntary entry into a disease-ridden and opportunity-forsaken industry complicates the notion of ‘choice’ for Indian women. It is clear that the problematic structural hindrances and collective devaluation of women coalesce to complicate any notion of agency for women. Yet they continue to make strategic decisions to toil under exploitative brothel owners and within forced marriages to solicit the patronage of men and secure the financial stability of their families.

### ***III. Globalization in Mexico: The Importance of Sex Work to Rural Migrants***

Mexico adopted neoliberal policies after a foreign debt crisis in 1982 left them no choice but to take on loans by the IMF and World Bank. They began focusing on the private export sector as “*the* vehicle for new economic growth and increase in foreign investment in Mexico” (Kelly 2007:12). These neoliberal policies aimed to modernize Mexico as the country entered the First World. However, the antipoverty programs that distributed food to impoverished families did not compensate for the devastation created by a shift from small landholder populations to the privatization of agrarian regions by global corporations. Accompanying this lack of economic opportunities in traditional rural communities was a decrease in state support such as loans and credit for agrarian products, which further contributed to an inability to sustain families in areas that had once based their economies on subsistence farming. The authors argue that this “relief” was actually an “intensification of ongoing unequal North-South relations that have existed since colonization” (Kelly 2007:11). These neoliberal policies did not “ease poverty but institutionalized it” (Kelly 2007:12).

The consolidation of private property and shift to the cultivation of commercial crops pushed many people from the now-impoverished Mexican countryside to the modernizing urban centers, resulting in mass migration (Bliss 2001). In 1970, for example, about 28 percent of Chiapanecos lived in urban centers; by 1995, this number had risen to 44 percent (Kelly 2007:18). Women were particularly affected by these policies. Kelly (2007) writes that since the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, poverty in female-headed households increased by 50 percent. Mothers who additionally carried the responsibility of providing for their

families were affected by steep cuts to childcare that, between 1989 and 1998, reduced public assistance by two thirds (Kelly 2007:5).

Many women – particularly migrants - found the answer to widespread poverty in the sex industry. Formal sector jobs are difficult to obtain and as a result, for poor women in urban Mexico, “prostitution was sometimes an answer” to the changing economic structures that left them impoverished and displaced with few occupational alternatives (Kelly 2007:7). In the region of Chiapas, for example, sex workers can earn up to ten times the minimum wage – an unarguably better wage in a country “where women with little education or resources have few options” and sex work offers “a viable alternative to a life of material deprivation” (Kelly 2007:185). The stability that sex work provides is essentially inaccessible to them due to their “class, citizenship, gender, and their place in the global economic order” (Kelly 2007:206). It is not simply the global racial hierarchy that decreased the ability of migrant women to access jobs beyond the sex sector, but local resistance to their migration that further marginalized them as a workforce. Kelly (2007) discusses the patterns of “ethnic or racial hatred – engendered by structural vulnerability of native workers and competition (real or perceived) between them and new migrants” (p. 141-142). Rural migrants face multiple sites of discrimination not only from global hierarchies but also from local opposition to their migration.

### *Cultural Norms Surrounding Sex Work*

Although the trend of neoliberal globalization and privatization has led many scholars to deemphasize the power of the state in favor of transnational corporations, the Mexican government sought greater control over the commerce within its borders in the

wake of its adoption of neoliberal policies (Kelly 2007). The regulation of sex work was no exception: the Mexican government acknowledged the prevalence of the sex industry and its increasing importance in sustaining rural communities and sought to control the market via legalization. Although sex work was acknowledged and served as an important revenue stream for individuals left in rural communities, sex workers were not spared the stigma associated with their profession. It is important to note that Mexican prostitution is not as much influenced by global sex tourism as regions such as the Caribbean or Southeast Asia, but rather is a local-regional industry that has been shaped by global political-economic events (Kelly 2007). Therefore, cultural norms dictate the permissibility of both the supply and the demand in the sex market. However, gender inequalities and double standards are prevalent as male sex consumers are spared from the stigma of illicit sex while women are marginalized by their association.

The stereotype of female sex workers as promiscuous can be traced to a 1872 Mexican law that labeled any woman over age 14 who had sex with more than one man as a prostitute and thereby a deviant member of society (Bliss 2001:28). By labeling as deviant the women who went beyond their socially understood duties inside the home, this law communicated the nature of women's roles as reproductive, monogamous, and faithful. This law held no punishment for the men who, supposedly acting according to their biological sexual nature, purchased sex from these women. Kelly (2007) adds that these women were perceived as a "threat to a social order marked by gender inequality and female economic reliance upon men" and therefore associated with "promiscuity, immorality, and even prostitution" (p. 25). The locus of the state's attention seems not to be on protecting these women nor providing for them financially, but rather on

controlling the bounds of sexuality that may threaten the existing order of gender inequality.

Contradictorily, Mexican gender norms for males promote the use of prostitutes. Kelly (2007) explains that men make group visits to brothels and reinforce norms about appropriate masculinity via conspicuous sex consumption. Although not all males lose their virginities to prostitutes, many young boys are encouraged by older male relatives and friends to gain experience with paid sex workers as a sort of coming-of-age ritual. Bliss (2001) argues that purchasing sex places more of an emphasis on male bonding and sociability rather than the actual sex act with the woman. In fact, Kelly (2007) confirms the social role that conspicuous consumption of sex plays by documenting that many working-class Mexican men do not use prostitutes, but rather middle and upper class men demonstrate their wealth by buying sex (p. 177). Not only do these patterns reflect local gender norms, but they are infused with the global trend toward “increased commoditization and consumption of household activities, sex included” (Kelly 2007:207).

Beyond the norms governing the promiscuity of female sex workers and valorization of male sex consumers lies the deeply rooted cultural belief that, regardless of how, women ought to nurture and provide for their families. Although many women attempted to hide their occupations, the reality that their extended families depended on remittances motivated many of them to continue in a shameful and undesirable occupation (Kelly 2007). Kelly refers to the importance of the earnings of sex workers to rural families as “networks of dependences” that characterize the sex trade and motivate the state’s legalization of the industry (2007:115). It would be economically devastating

to rural families if low-wage labor in the city were abolished. The economic reforms that marginalize women seeking economic stability are mediated by cultural norms that stigmatize her for earning money in an occupation that transgresses traditional notions of female domesticity and monogamy. However, the simultaneous cultural value of family loyalty and provision causes many of these women to choose sex work and make every effort to hide their shameful occupation.

Although many women face the same adverse job conditions, the macro and meso-level features of the globalized sex trade in Mexico coalesce to inhibit any collective action. Few women working in zones of legal prostitution actively network with other sex workers. Kelly (2007) explains that the precariousness of globalization for sex workers has created too many risks – many of these women have much to lose if they are incarcerated or deported and cannot send remittances to their families. Furthermore, meso-level cultural norms that shame sex workers inhibit many women from identifying and gathering with other sex workers. The individualism and “decided lack of shared consciousness as workers” is common in the contemporary neoliberal Latin America due to “unemployment, underemployment, increasing fragmentation of the labor market, growth in the informal economy, decreases in social spending [that have] led to the erosion of class identity among many Latin American workers” (Kelly 2007:100-101). Moreover, many of these women have minimal free time to engage in activism and are simply more focused on generating income via sex work than collective action for an unguaranteed result.

*There's Nothing Left: Agency in Choosing Sex Work*

It is not only the cultural values that contribute to a woman's choice to enter the sex industry, but also her individual experiences. However, these nuanced life stories are not exempt from the influences of globalization. Global patterns of capital flow have contributed to the creation of environments and relationships that facilitate exploitation of young girls, leading to their documented predisposition to enter sex work. For example, patterns of domestic servitude that have risen due to increasing gaps in wealth in Mexico channel many young girls from rural communities into the homes of wealthy Mexican businessmen. Bliss (2001) explains that these vulnerable placements expose young girls to "potential moments of sexual violence (p. 39). As a result of their "involuntary sexual debut," many of these girls opt to engage in sex work (Bliss 2001:37). This is an instance of micro-level trauma interacting with meso-level beliefs about female sexuality: it is not simply the instance of violation, but also the culturally-held belief that non-virgins are ineligible as potential wives that leads her to devalue her body as little more than an object for male sexual use.

Globalization has also led to a rise in female-headed households. As men migrate to seek work, these women are abandoned and uneducated for work in the formal sector. Men with families in rural regions face bleak job opportunities due to privatization of land. They are nonetheless confronted with cultural *machismo* norms that delineate their role as provider. When no means exist to fulfill these expectations, these men may react violently or be prone to dangerous habits such as alcoholism. According to Kelly (2007), these pressures on men have increased rates of abuse that may consequently push more

women to seek sex work as an “attempt to resolve problems in her personal life” such as abuse or hopelessness (p. 127).

There are myriad constraints within which Mexican women negotiate job opportunities and choose to engage in sex work. On the macro level, neoliberal economic policies that privatize historically agrarian lands and deprive citizens of social services limit job opportunities in the formal sector and encourage mass migration. Meso-level cultural norms expect women to support and nurture their families while simultaneously shaming women sell sex. The men are additionally socialized to access the bodies of prostitutes as a form of conspicuous consumption free from the stigmatization that plagues women. Widespread economic hardship has contributed to the vulnerability of women in intimate relationship that furthermore drives them to escape their individual situations. These factors coalesce to engender suffering among the women whose historical and economic circumstances “constrain agency” (Kelly 2007:5). Although these women are unrestricted in the “Galactic Zones” in which prostitution is legal and the women exercise autonomy as independent workers, they are still dependent on male economic power to sustain their business (Kelly 2007). Kelly (2007) claims that sex work is “neither wholly oppressive nor liberating. Rather, the work, performed within a broader system of unequal power relations and burdened by stigma, contains within it a complex blend of exploitation and freedom” (Kelly 2007:206).

#### *State Response to the Sex Industry: Constraint via Regulation*

Many advocates of state regulation claim that women will experience greater freedom in an environment that does not penalize sex work by rendering it illegal, but

rather takes control of various aspects of the market. Unlike laws governing sex work in other countries, prostitution is legal in thirteen of thirty-one states in Mexico (Kelly 2007). Although this may seem progressive to some audiences, the way regulation operates in Mexico suggests that government control of the sex industry may work not to empower women but further monitor and control their actions in an effort to centralize commerce within its borders. Governmental oversight of the “Galactica Zone” indicates that the neoliberal state is not reducing its role, but rather shifting its focus from internal development to a region that attracts foreign investors. The government “encourages the free market, nurturing the growth of a low-wage, exploitative service-sector economy while eroding support for subsistence and community-oriented economic activities” (Kelly 2007:208).

According to the scholars, the Mexican women involved in sex work do not view the government as an ally, but rather another imposing force that shapes their range of possible action. As Kelly (2007) documented, many women repeat the mantra “nos quieren domesticar” (they want to domesticate us) when discussing the government’s regulatory behavior. They claim that government officials do not seek to lower stigma, decrease disease, or protect the women, but rather to gain increased control over sex commerce to render it invisible (Kelly 2007:209). Bliss (2001) adds that the arguments surrounding legalization focused on the health of the city rather than the well being of the women potentially exploited and violated in the sex industry. Abolitionists argued that sex work ought not be tolerated due to its immorality, while regulationists wanted to cleanse the city of diseased bodies by quarantining them in one zone (Bliss 2001). Both groups of advocates were clearly focused on manipulating actions of the sex workers to

achieve other political ends. Whether or not these women are exercising agency, which seems nothing if not stifled in the current neoliberal political economy, even the groups controlling their range of freedom are speaking *for* the women without integrating their voices.

#### ***IV. Globalization in the Dominican Republic: The Creation of a Sex Tourist Economy***

The Dominican Republic's economy is characterized by a thriving tourism industry that accounted for over 50 percent of the country's gross domestic product in 2004 (World Bank cited in Cabezas 2009:41). The importance of sex work as a development strategy cannot be ignored: increasingly, the D.R. is known as a destination for consumers from the First World, and these earnings sent from sex workers sustain rural communities impoverished due to late 20<sup>th</sup> century neoliberal economic reforms. In 2007 over 4 million international tourists were documented visiting the Dominican Republic (World Bank cited in Cabezas 2009:41). This massive demand for "pleasure services," which overwhelmingly include sexual services, has been met with waves of workers displaced from rural communities. In fact, in this country with a population of 8 million, anywhere between 50,000 and 250,000 people work in the sex industry (Padilla 2007:57). This section does not only describe the residual effects that globalization has had on this community of sex workers, but traces the links between globalization and the particular sex tourism economy that has emerged. The Dominican Republic is unique due to the fact that the sex industry is not merely a component of its economy hidden in the shadows, but rather the central resource – bodies as commodities - that draws tourists and consequently, sustaining economic capital (Brennan 2004:16).

Global capital has had destabilizing effects on industrial economies that have shifted jobs to the informal sector, and the Dominican Republic is no exception. The Dominican "Austerity Law" of 1966 froze wages for a decade and, in conjunction with IMF demands for structural adjustment programs, contributed to a decrease in the base wage in the formal sector and relegated educated and skilled workers to seeking jobs in the informal sector (Padilla 2007:51). Additionally, development programs aiming to

modernize the capital city of Santo Domingo reduced funds that provided education and skill training for rural citizens. Food riots in 1984 were the result of austerity programs that invoked the structural adjustment plans that caused vulnerable segments of the population – female-headed households, agrarian farmers, and urban impoverished families – to be adversely affected by the state’s decreased role in education, health services, and basic amenities such as water (Cabezas 2009). The Dominican Republic’s prioritization of investments via privatization, trade liberalization and currency devaluation shifted the concentration of capital into foreign hands and the privileged uppermost class. These social, economic and political decisions shifted structures to sustain domination by outsiders, rendering the Dominican Republic dependent on the “wane of the colonial model of dependence on cash crops and raw materials” in favor of the development of the “global tourism industry” (Padilla 2007:2).

The neoliberal economic policies that introduced the Dominican Republic to the current of global capital flow left more individuals unable to seek employment in the formal sector and created the need for a thriving informal sector. The development strategy employed by politicians was to bolster the tourism industry to attract foreign capital, commodifying the bodies of their citizens to meet foreign demand for sex. The supply was readily available due to the increasing poverty in rural sectors; as locales such as *bateys*, or Dominican sugar cane communities, became privatized and deprived of economic opportunities, increasing numbers of migrants who fled to urban centers in search of jobs. By 1970 half of Santo Domingo’s population was composed of internal migrants who had no regional jobs, fewer educational opportunities, and a lack of safety net in governmental support or family resources (Padilla 2007:67). Men and women in

the Caribbean are using “informal participation in the sex tourism industry as a means to make ends meet in the context of shrinking options for formal wage work in traditional economic sectors” (Padilla 2007:3-4). Females’ inferior position in the Dominican culture has led to differential adversity among many women migrating to urban centers. Considering the few agrarian jobs available in rural regions, they are still unavailable to women who must migrate to cities. Their participation in paid labor in urban sectors has increased, but their quality of life has not (Cabezas 2009:58).

The remittances sent by sex workers to their families in rural communities are essential to the economic survival of the entire country, not simply the individuals working in urban centers. As other sources of income drain, resulting in the poverty level in the Dominican Republic being the highest in all of Latin America and the Caribbean in 2005, fewer options to sustain families are available (Cabezas 2009:66). In spite of their thriving tourist economy that provides sufficient profit to sustain – even at poverty level – much of the country, a large part of the tourist revenue does not remain in the Dominican Republic, as the negotiations are oftentimes arranged by foreign corporations. These tourist economies are functional insofar as they provide high wages relative to formal sector employment in the Dominican Republic, but the majority of profits benefit the global transnational tourist and travel industries (Padilla 2007).

### *Sex Tourism as a Phenomenon of Globalization*

It is clear that the development of the international tourist industry is a response to the shift in jobs from the formal to informal sector and the consequential impoverishment of much of the Dominican Republic, leaving many with few resources to capitalize on

beyond their bodies. Globalization did not simply spur the creation of this industry, however; these global phenomena have facilitated the particular features that characterize this industry. In the Dominican Republic, the island's history of global participation – specifically, its colonization and exploitation for raw materials – colors the way that contemporary global inequalities are manifest in political, economic and social interactions. As the landscape of local and global relations of power shifts in response to global changes, the “historical context of colonialism converges with more recent transformations in *neocolonial* political economy to shape the social organization of Caribbean sex work” (Padilla 2007:2).

The imperialist economic model of exporting raw labors from Caribbean colonies reflects the current industry organized to export reproductive labor. Currently, occupational shifts along gender lines in the first world - specifically, the mass entry of women in the professional workforce – are creating jobs in the domestic service sector for many transnational migrant women to fill (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2004). This global model of ‘outsourcing’ undesirable jobs by bringing Third World women to developed countries parallels the phenomenon of ‘outsourced’ reproductive labor present in the sex tourism industry. Dominican raw materials, such as sugar cane, used to be the currency of this global trade: now, the pleasure industry is exploiting the bodies of Dominican laborers by transplanting a global market in this community and creating a “transnational revolving door” that allows easy entry by foreigners and traps sex workers with few alternatives (Brennan 2004:20).

Globalization has facilitated movement across nation-state boundaries and easier communication between distant entities. It has not only created the channels of

movement through which potential exploiters move, but is furthermore responsible for creating the mechanisms by which these sex transactions are occurring at an increasing frequency. Padilla (2007) explains that multinational investment in tourism infrastructure and the ease of commercial air travel have permitted potential consumers of commercial sex to travel quickly and affordably. She therefore claims that “Caribbean sex work is closely related to larger changes in forms of capital accumulation, population movement, and information technology that have been described by some theorists as fundamental features of the contemporary ‘globalized’ world” (Padilla 2007:4).

New patterns of consumption by wealthy males contribute to the demand for bodies in sex work, particularly in liminal spaces such as the Caribbean that are beyond ordinary social life, marked in the collective conscious by antiquity, and market their exotic nature to these overworked, typically male, consumers (Padilla 2007). However, unlike other sex markets in which the conspicuous consumption of sex carries social meaning for men, Brennan (2004) documents that male consumers of sex in the Dominican Republic are not flaunting their wealth by frequenting brothels. Rather, these men access the bodies of sex workers in private. Acknowledging that these men could access darker-skinned, “exotic” bodies closer to their homes in the first world through migrants and red light districts, she ascribes their travel to the appeal of “feeling rich” that unlimited consumption in a poor economy generates among these consumers. The global inequalities in wealth have generated greater materialism, perhaps encouraging ordinary individuals to travel to inexpensive destinations to try on the identity of a wealthy consumer (Brennan 2004:28).

The generation of this sex tourist economy, or the phenomenon of “sexportation,” is not merely the result of economic shifts that have allowed exploitative male consumers to accumulate capital and exchange it for the bodies of impoverished women. Rather, the prevalence of social conceptions of bodies that place darker-skinned women lower on the global racial hierarchy have allowed easy justification of this commercialized exploitation. This “racialized model of Caribbean sexuality” portrays these darker-skinned bodies as promiscuous and categorically different from Western women, reducing the consumers’ potential concerns with purchasing sex extramaritally (Padilla 2007:3). The economic domination of the First World is reflected in this physical domination of “exotic” sex workers in the commodified access to intimacy and pleasure that this market provides.

Evident within the exchange of sex that creates a flow of bodies as commodities is market specialization. As a feature of modern capitalism, the segmented sex industry has created supplies to meet the various demands of wealthy consumers as their capital accumulates in core nations (Padilla 2007). They have adapted “flexible” market strategies that play to the racial-sexual fantasies of foreigners and market the women as commodified sex objects (Padilla 2007:162). Scholar Kempadoo refers to this marketing process as “state pimping,” since the developing economies depend on tourist revenue for economic stability and facilitate the mass sale of local women’s bodies by playing on this global racial hierarchy (Padilla 2007:163).

*Agency in the Sex Tourism Industry*

Many authors who discuss the sex industry in the Dominican Republic are quick to attribute greater freedom to these sex workers than those working in other countries with more third-party control over the sex workers' actions. It seems that for women in this particular sex tourist economy, the prospect of leaving their home country may motivate their very entry into the sex industry. Because so many consumers of sex are perceived – perhaps not incorrectly – to be wealthy foreigners with connections to core countries, being a sex worker can be a “stepping stone” to other outcomes (Cabezas 2009:136). The possibility of acquiring legal migration through a marital relationship motivated these women to view their work not as single transactions of exploitation, but as a form of courting potential husbands. Cabezas (2009) observed that these women attempted to “transcend the commodified aspect of the relation” by creating affection connections that may lead to “transnational networks” to facilitate migration (p. 129).

Brennan (2004) agreed that performing love was a strategy “por residencia,” not “por amor” (*for residency, not for love*) (p. 21). The sex workers strategically enter the transnational realm from below, feigning love with their clients to forge relationships that may lead to legal migration opportunities. She adds that these sex workers exercise a great degree of agency in that their labor is not merely for survival, but rather for advancement. She emphasizes their long-term aspirations of migrating and achieving a higher socioeconomic status for their families. Additionally, many of these women are “freelance” sex workers, meaning there is an absence of pimps or third-party controllers that create more space for decision-making with regards to rates, clients, and hours (Brennan 2004:23). Describing them as victims, she asserts, obscures their possibility for “maneuvering within the sex trade” (Brennan 2004:23). However, despite their strategies,

the recurring story is that most women who pursue fantasies of migration and marriage “end up just getting by, rather than improving their own or their children’s futures” (Brennan 2004:25).

Brennan (2004) found that many female sex workers are drawn into the industry through social networks and family members, as opposed to regions in which many women are trafficked or sold. The cultural norms that govern her entry into the sex trade are apparently not as severe as other countries’. Padilla (2007) explained that a common saying among female sex workers is “*buscársela*,” which means to make do with what’s available, including using your body, to feed your children (p. 59). The culture has permitted sex work among women to meet the reality of its impoverishment and dependency.

This desire to migrate may also be grounded in troublesome interactions between family members and intimate partners. Brennan (2004) explained that entry into the sex industry typically occurs at a young age and is frequently the result of traumatic experiences of abuse or neglect. The micro-level stresses of handling poverty and a crumbling state infrastructure may be related to Dominican women’s desire to marry and migrate. Cabezas (2009) explains that women may even find protection in these sexually-based relationships with foreign men. The prospect of egalitarianism in a relationship with a “gringo” seemed better to some of her interviewees than the norm of dominant masculinity that governs many local relationships. She writes that “sex work with tourists offered a way to escape the violence of poverty, beatings, and life-threatening situations that too often take place in intimate relationships (p. 140).

While overt coercion may be less severe in the Dominican Republic than in other regions, it is clear that patterns of economic exploitation and disintegrating agrarian family structures are contributing to a decrease in feasible means of achieving stability and an increase in women “opting” to enter the sex industry. The agency that women demonstrate in their “freelance” decision-making, strategic advancement and affective relations with foreign men is still circumscribed by a nation deprived of social services and economic opportunities for its citizens. Brennan confirms that even within this maneuvering and willingness to migrate, women’s “flexible citizenships” invoke the destabilizing cultural logics of “capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions” (p. 43). These women have little – if any – control over the greater structures that dictate their job opportunities, deprive resources from their children, and inscribe value on their bodies. The very flexibility that these women are required to possess is a function of their vulnerability within the global arena.

## *Conclusion*

The discussion of these four countries' varied histories and cultures overwhelmingly suggests that globalization does not affect all spaces, nor the individuals they contain, equally. Rather, processes of globalization articulate with specific economic and cultural contexts of certain countries and even across diverse communities within these countries to produce unique pathways to sex work. The theoretical framework that divides constraining factors into three primary levels - macro, meso, and micro – creates a space in which distinct countries' reactions to the process of globalization can be understood. Within each of these levels, the various challenges confronting marginalized women can be better explored and compared to determine factors that increase the vulnerability of women and their likelihood to opt for sex work in the absence of other feasible alternatives.

On the macro level, global processes have shifted patterns of wealth accumulation by concentrating jobs in urban core cities and causing migration in search of work. Developments in communication and technology have also begun changing the *type* of jobs away from industrial production towards the service sector. As these undereducated and underserved rural migrants pour into cities en masse, jobs in informal economies are increasingly their only option to sustain livelihood – including lucrative jobs in sex work. Meso-level cultural norms vary dramatically across countries. However, many regions in the countries discussed sustain gender norms that reinforce the subjugation of women. These immaterial prejudices are materialized in poor education, social services, and occupational training that render women unable to fill jobs in the legal sector. Moreover, these discriminations ostracize women who capitalize upon their capacity to

sexually service their husbands in favor of economic gain. There exists a perplexing double standard in which women are expected to provide for their families but are shamed for the *way* they earn money, even if sex work is their only plausible income-generating activity. On the micro-level, instances of abuse and trauma as well as coerced sex work compel many women to consider commercial sex as their only alternative. In many cases, such as child brides in India or male conspicuous consumption of sex in Mexico, these individual experiences are tied to collective norms. However, many of these women are not aware of the prevalence of such phenomena and make strategic decisions without the support of a collectivity of abuse victims.

Although these categories serve the relevant purpose of organizing and evaluating different constraints, they must not be interpreted as distinct and isolated classifications. Rather, they provide a lexicon for articulating the interaction of multilevel processes in influencing a woman's complex decision to sell her body in exchange for material resources. For example, while male abandonment of a family in rural Mexico may seem an isolated traumatic event, scholarly literature suggests that (micro-level) broken households are connected to the (meso-level) patriarchal expectation of male provision that is stifled by the deprivation of agrarian land that traditionally supported livelihood but has been replaced in favor of (macro-level) privatization. The devastation to traditional income-generating activity prompts the male to seek employment; since jobs are concentrated in urban centers due to neoliberal development policies, his job search will likely lead him to relocate to fuel the burgeoning service sector in a global city. The division of these challenges into the macro, meso, and micro levels is not intended to obviate a discussion of the way these factors interact and compound one another, but

rather to provide a foundation for comparing distinct countries across categories. For example, the reality that neoliberal economic policies drove families from deprived rural Thailand *as well as* from rural Mexico suggests that neoliberal policies *generally* disadvantage already marginalized populations.

This theoretical framework additionally provides a way to understand how sex work has become functionally integrated into national economies. More importantly, an understanding of the ways that governments and corporations *benefit* from sex work will elucidate the structural obstacles that complicate attempts to end the exploitation of women in the sex industry. Although the importance of remittances varies from region to region, many areas deprived of social services depend upon the profits of female sex workers for survival. In other words, the informal sex markets have taken the responsibility of provision that was abandoned by nation-states in their attempts to restructure their national economies and develop the urban infrastructure. It is therefore in the best interest of these governments and transnational corporations to permit the continuation of sex work so that they can continue to neglect the extreme poverty left in the wake of their development plans.

### *Recommendations*

Although this thesis aims to theoretically frame the challenges that women face in order to better *understand* the way that choice operates across geographically and culturally distinct contexts, its classification of the constraints into three levels provides a basis for suggesting policy changes that may ameliorate the injustices embedded in the sex industry. The following section is by no means a naïve attempt to suggest that a

multi-billion dollar industry – a largely illegal one, nonetheless - can be dismantled by a few well-intentioned legislative actions. However, as mentioned in the introduction, the way that a problem is framed impacts the way the problem is addressed. Current attempts to ameliorate the injustices of exploitation within this industry frame the problem differently: regulationists, as a deprivation of civil liberty; abolitionists, as an abuse of capitalism and patriarchy. Both parties desire that the myriad abuses and exploitation within the sex industry be eliminated. However, their attempts to address sex workers' plights may work to further constrain and silence the voices of the most afflicted: the sex workers themselves.

It is clear from the aforementioned examples that state intervention does not necessarily work as a mechanism of female protection free from greater constraints on her action. Regulation, in some cases, signifies stronger paternalistic policing of her actions and the spaces she is allowed to occupy. For some women, to *choose* sex work is not to break free from the patriarchal tradition that relegates women to the private sphere for reproductively sexually servicing her husband. Rather, sex work may mean that she is monitored by a regulatory state that has functionally integrated her labor into its economic development plans while failing to grant her freedom of movement in order to sustain a façade of a “pure” civic sector free from government corruption and corporeal exploitation.

I am not suggesting that government intervention is altogether untrustworthy or an infeasible avenue to ensuring greater security for sex workers. I do believe, however, that a failure to consider the ways in which the government may exacerbate a woman's exploitation will result, and has already resulted in, futile attempts to ameliorate this

injustice – such as quarantining sex workers or taxing their income, which is already divided by third party managers such as pimps if she is not in a state of indebtedness. It is clear that addressing the issue of exploitation in the sex industry by controlling the *women* - the supply that meets the burgeoning demand for disposable, commoditized bodies - is not sufficient.

It is therefore my fervent recommendation that the burden to change this industry and grant women greater freedom be placed on the males that demand commercial sex. It is time for women to be liberated from the double standard that demands their filial loyalty yet shames them for using their reproductive capacities for economic gain – even in a total absence of alternative options. If there is to be regulation, then it ought to be of those who are directly responsible for the abuse, rape, and infection of the sex workers. It is within the realm of governmental control to strengthen the laws that prosecute exploiters and purchasers of sex workers. Moreover, the mechanisms used to enforce these laws ought to be consistently applied and corruption ought to be rigorously removed.

These ideal aims fall within the realm of nation-state governmental action on the macro-structural level. Although it may be difficult to hold such diverse governments responsible for the sex industries in their respective regions, the influence that structural adjustment programs had on the internal structure of peripheral countries dependent upon the IMF and World Bank's loans suggests that international bodies may be able to wield significant influence on the actions of dissimilar countries. If global bodies such as the UN create contingency plans that only grant aid on the basis of proactive measures to reduce exploitation, poorly regulated and financially dependent peripheral countries may

act based on this financial motivation. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act, passed by the United States in 2000, is grounded on a similar principle. Countries are evaluated based on the relevance of their laws and the intensity of their enforcement, then ranked accordingly. This ranking ideally serves as an impetus for these countries to craft laws that protect women, prosecute their exploiters, and provide more effective services for their marginalized populations.

To address the economic inequalities that are pushing migrants to seek precarious work in the informal sector, it would be beneficial to create programs that provide financial incentives such as tax exemptions to transnational corporations that pay standardized wages to displaced workers in rural, agrarian areas. If families that have traditionally subsisted by farming were given equipment via microloans to grow and sell their own crops, it may be possible to channel some jobs back into deprived regions. Furthermore, it is essential that education and occupational training be available to all children regardless of gender or income level. The more tools women have at their disposal, the greater latitude of options for survival become available to them. In reality, any anti-poverty measures that create new jobs or endow marginalized people with skills to seek extant jobs in the formal sector will reduce the flow of women into 'last resort' jobs.

While these macro-level suggestions may work to abate the pressures that compel women to migrate and enter precarious positions, there are still pervasive religious and gender norms that mediate a woman's perception of what lifestyles are available to her. It is nearly impossible to regulate such geographically distant and culturally diverse regions, nor is it the prerogative of one country to impose its belief system on another.

Religious and gender norms cannot realistically transform unless the will of the power-holders changes to integrate these priorities. Unfortunately, advocates cannot rely on compassionate human rights sentiments to drive these changes. When problematic and exploitative norms are identified and exposed by international bodies, however, the consequential ‘peer pressure’ to increase equality and justice may effectively motivate leaders to adopt policies that educate women and treat them equally.

Norms such as *machismo* in Mexico that compel men to conspicuously consume sex and shun the women that engage in commercial sex cannot be regulated by another country. Similarly, the micro-level interactions of abuse and abandonment that occur within closed communities cannot simply be legislated to disappear. However, some of the channels of communication that globalization has created may actually be used for good. For example, the increased exposure to Western ideas of gender equality and religious freedom (not categorically benevolent, but oftentimes very different from rural communities governed by religious law and a history of patriarchy, may empower women to advocate for educational opportunities or fairer treatment by males. Resources such as the internet have already served as a realm in which uprisings can be coordinated and facilitated, and may act as an avenue to expose injustices in distant locales that can mobilize advocates who may not have known otherwise.

Macro-level policies that motivate countries to adopt stronger prosecution laws, mechanisms to enforce these laws, occupational opportunities for the marginalized populations, and the tools to secure these jobs will all work to address the root causes of such broad exploitation. Although reducing poverty and diminishing exploitation by holding the consumers of commercial sex accountable will ideally change the landscape

upon which women navigate survival, these do not address the regional norms that mediate a woman's interpretation of plausible options, nor do they eliminate the individual instances of trauma that may motivate her uniquely to seek refuge in commercial sex. It is my fervent recommendation that anti-exploitation advocates, whether they seek to regulate and legalize sex work or abolish it entirely, focus on systematically and exhaustively analyzing the commercial sex industry across diverse locations. It is only through this information that accurate recommendations can be crafted to address the actual needs of women in cultures beyond the Western First World. Moreover, reliable documentation of injustices can be used to prosecute and pressure the governments that allow harm to persist in their states and fail to remedy the systems that perpetuate it, even benefitting from the revenue generated by the sex industry. These policies must not be rooted in the divergent convictions of advocates, but rather in the facts that circumscribe the lives of abused and exploited women globally.

### *Agency or Empowerment?*

Globalization, in all its complexities and layers, has created new challenges for marginalized individuals in developing countries that disproportionately disadvantage women. The economic and political policies that constrain their movement and limit their job opportunities interact with cultural norms that devalue them based on gender, oftentimes using collective systems such as religion to justify their subjugation. These forms of marginalization relegate women to jobs in informal markets, and as more men gain the capacity to purchase sex, the demand for objectified female bodies steadily increases. Globalization therefore generates more pathways to commercial sex as it

eradicates other avenues for women to earn livelihoods. The question of choice, then, becomes complicated as marginalized women have little to no control over the paths they confront as they attempt to provide for their families.

Regardless of the moments of empowerment that sex workers experience, they are nonetheless constrained within a global system of inequality. It is problematic to strip sex workers of their capacity for rational decision-making by rendering them passive victims of circumstance. The conclusion of this thesis, however, is that many global women engaged in sex work have no realistic resources to capitalize on besides their bodies. Moreover, they are powerless to change the structures that contextualize their occupational options. Agency, therefore, is a reaction to the increasingly limited array of options for economic survival as global inequality erodes realistic possibilities for human freedom. If agency truly is the capacity “to have done otherwise,” according to Giddens (1987), and globalization has obscured the opportunities for “otherwise” occupations, then the latitude of agency in choosing sex work approaches nonexistence. This does not mean that women do not use rational decision-making strategies in their everyday lives, but rather that many women face a narrow range of opportunities or *interpret* their opportunities as narrower than they may be in the wake of globalization’s inequities.

Matthews (2008) expands upon this powerlessness to change structural inequalities by comparing the women trapped in the informal service sector to slaves who “may consent to perform certain services for her master” without altering the “structural relations involved or the levels of oppression” that dictate her range of options. Oppressed people do make choices within these “asymmetrical relations of power,” however, but the “exercise of that choice does not necessarily change those relations” (p.

33). The reality is that global processes influence the choice of sex workers but their cumulative choices are reactionary, not reciprocal. MacKinnon (2011) echoes this disdain at the way structures have limited both occupational options and possibilities for self-advocacy among sex workers. She claims that nothing has changed if “people with the fewest choices are still railroaded into the industry and kept there, and control of the relations and conditions is not possible as a practical matter while still providing what prostituted people are there for,” which is overwhelmingly economic survival.

As mentioned at the start of this thesis, abolitionists and regulationists both fall prey to rhetorically manipulating the experiences of sex workers to further their political agenda. I take issue with the regulationist belief that sex workers find empowerment and liberty by selling their bodies, essentially recovering the economic privilege historically hoarded by patriarchal capitalists through sex. Although prosecuting sex workers in a prohibitionist model is certainly not as productive as providing resources and protection that First World regulationists call for, it is clear that the regulation model differs among countries and may not provide unilateral benevolent assistance but rather work to constrain the freedom of sex workers by zoning them or inhibiting collective action. Furthermore, it is imperative to interrogate one’s own privilege and status within a global hierarchy that limits viable options for women in the Third World. Even if privileged First World white women can access safe avenues of commercial sex, their experience does not give them a universal voice to speak for women struggling to feed entire extended families displaced by the neoliberal policies that spur capital accumulation in the First World and fund safer spaces for these ‘liberated’ sex workers.

Abolitionists, on the other hand, problematically victimize women by focusing on the moments of disempowerment and violation to generate sympathy towards their exploitation. They may risk patronizingly suggesting that women exercise no choice, when in reality these women clearly make strategic decisions to advance economically and protect themselves in a way that demonstrates the rationality and survival instinct universal to all humans. They are not women without a capacity for choice, but rather women with a capacity but no viable options to choose from.

As is evident throughout my analysis of the sex industries in Thailand, India, Mexico and the Dominican Republic, I have taken an abolitionist position in my own attempts to understand the nuances of the sex industry. I do not believe sex work is an uplifting and liberating occupation, but rather contributes to the dehumanization and violation of women globally. Even within these liberated First World countries in which women may be more likely to unrestrainedly choose sex work, statistics indicate that high proportions of sex workers were victims of abuse prior to their entry in the sex industry. Furthermore, sex work is fraught with risk of violence and psychological trauma, as well as organized by a racialized erotic hierarchy that does not privilege all categories of Western women. As MacKinnon (2011) asks:

If there is nothing wrong with prostitution, if this is freedom and equality and liberation, if it really can make a woman's life more autonomous and independent, if its harms are negligible or occasional, what on earth is wrong with children doing it or seeing it being done? (p. 297)

It is clear that sex work is not an uplifting occupation that contributes to women's physical and mental well being and arguably perpetuates the norm of male access to female bodies, complicating attempts at gender equality by regulating the commodification of women in a subjugating commercial exchange. This project lacks the

scope, depth, and expertise to condemn or praise the institution of sex work. However, it offers a theoretically structured examination of particular sex markets that suggests that greater global and local forces constrain the realistic options for women's survival. This thesis ideally contributes to the field of globalization studies and abolitionist scholarship that critically evaluates the structures that sustain systems of oppression within which strong women make necessary choices to survive.

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