

News from Asia

Debt bonds and Vietnamese migrant sex workers in Singapore: exploitation or win-win system?

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COUNTER-TRAFFICKING DISCOURSE perceives informal debt-financed sex migration as a manifestation of exploitation and human trafficking. This paper examines in short the social form and function of the debt-bond in a specific case study,¹ and shows that contrary to commonly held assumptions, debt-bonds in the migration process do not necessarily always lead to risk and exploitation, but at times to a migration system in which both parties benefit.

The migration broker's services

The main role of the migration broker is to facilitate travel, from Vietnam to Singapore, and accommodation for the clients (the Vietnamese migrant sex workers). In this case study, the broker offers a package, costing US\$815, which includes: a return air-ticket from Vietnam to Singapore, the advance of the 'show money' to use as evidence of solvency when requested by immigration officials (up to US\$800), an address outside Geylang and Joo Chiat (the two red-light districts where the majority of Vietnamese work) to use on the embarkation card, taxi pick-up, admission into the boarding house, inclusion in the peer network, and advice.

Most migrant sex workers decide to hire the services of a broker mainly because they must continually deal with the law. There are no legal statutes in Singapore prohibiting or criminalizing the act of prostitution per se, but procuring and persistent soliciting in public places are legal offences. Foreign sex workers can also be arrested under immigration laws. The majority of those currently working on the island are foreigners residing on a 30-day Social Visit Pass (tourist pass). As such they are not permitted to work. In addition, two sections of the Immigration Act allow the authorities to stop and expel suspected migrant sex workers considered to be 'Prohibited Immigrants'. It is thus common for immigration officials to refuse entry to Vietnamese women who are suspected of coming to work in the prostitution sector.

Repaying debts and exploitation

The agreement is that the broker (creditor) arranges travel logistics on credit, and that the client (debtor) reimburses the cost by working. Vietnamese sex workers can make an average of US\$570 (if they buy the migration package), or US\$800-1200 (if they organize the trip by themselves) per month. It is possible for them to pay off their debt, but they have to serve at least ten clients within a month to do so. It may take a few days for an experienced sex worker or a few weeks for an inexperienced one.

During the investigation, I wondered how the migration broker ensured that the debt was recovered. My findings show that the broker did not resort to violence or abuse because: she does not acquire any rights over the productive activities of her clients, meaning that she cannot force them to work; she neither confines her clients to the boarding house, nor does she confiscate their passports; violence or other methods to pressure clients would involve added costs, as the broker would have to travel to Vietnam or hire someone there to pressure the clients who evade their debt; acts of violence would trigger

Above: The cover of a sensationalistic media report about trafficking in Singapore published in *The Straits Times* (11 June 2011). An entire section reports on migrant sex workers, debt-bondage and exploitation.

Below: A pub on Joo Chiat Road, a Vietnamese red light area in Singapore.



a reaction from the community in the house thereby causing the broker a loss in business and network; newcomers are greatly dependent on the broker for arranging their basic and daily needs, and the constant fear of arrest and expulsion reinforces reclusion and social isolation; the strong social pressure within the boarding house and Vietnamese community in Singapore discourages migrant sex workers from breaking the rules. To sum up, pledging of sexual activity, exploitation, coercion and violence were absent because the social context is strongly binding for all parties.

Social relationship between broker and clients

Analyzing and understanding the broker/migrant sex worker relationship is crucial, as it helps us to frame the social setting in which there is debt-bondage, but no exploitation. This relationship generally begins with the purchase of a migration package by newcomers, which enables them to enter the boarding house and its vibrant social world.

One of the first things that struck me upon my arrival in the house was how familial the broker and her clients were with one another. They addressed each other using the kinship pronouns *con* (child) and *me* (mother), instead of the more usual pair *chau* (nephew/niece) and *co* (paternal aunt). The roles associated with these pronouns constantly located the broker (mother) and sex workers (daughters) in a strong but reassuring hierarchical and familial position.

I am particularly interested in this dynamic relationship in which intimacy, roles and economic activity are constantly negotiated. The relationship is *dyadic*, as it binds two people; it is *personal* because it falls outside any kinship, administrative or political system; the relationship is *personalized*, as some sex workers are more dependent on the broker than others because of personal affinities, history of their relationship, etc; it is *voluntary*, as both parties enter voluntarily into the relationship (no one was coerced or deceived); it is *informal*, as it is neither legally formalized nor validated by any ritual or oath (the commitment was always oral and moral in the house); the relationship is *hierarchical*, as both parties are in an unequal position in terms of access to material and symbolic resources; and lastly, the study shows that the broker and migrant sex workers undertake *business* as well as *non-business* monetary transactions (in addition to the sale of migration services in cash or on credit, the broker and the sex workers also borrow, lend, give and pay each other for services in ways that mark their relationship). In brief, different aspects and dimensions are added to the relationship making it particularly dynamic, complex, multi-faceted and difficult to classify.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Vietnamese migrant sex workers who purchase the migration package on credit are economically and socially tied to the broker. But what does dependency mean here? The concept may be understood as a broad spectrum that ranges from correlation, interdependency and solidarity on one end, to subordination, bondage and exploitation on the other. It seems to me that the situation

I have described relates to the first rather than the latter classification. I do not deny the fact that there exist models of informal migration in which indebted migrants are forced to work in constraining environments. But contrary to the trafficking discourse that associates debt-bondage with exploitation, the research shows that some migration business models support non-exploitative and well-organized migration systems in which both parties benefit.

As for debt-bondage representations, some scholars have already pointed out the gap between counter-trafficking narratives on debt-bondage on one hand, and the 'reality' of debt-bonded migrants on the other (O'Connell 2012, Testai 2007). Not only is there a gap between the situation that I have described and its perception and representation (see Basu 2011 for a sensationalistic media report about trafficking in Singapore), but there is also an assumption that informal debt-financed migration regimes are exploitative whereas formal regimes are not. This is misleading. As my case study shows, Vietnamese sex workers are debt-bonded in an informal regime, but they are not exploited and they have a large measure of autonomy in their work. Government sanctioned debt-financed labor migration in Vietnam, however, often involves much higher loans, higher risk, and legal means to immobilize, isolate and exploit migrant workers (Wang and Bélanger 2011). It is ironic that this debt-financed migration is sanctioned and promoted, whereas informal debt-financed sex migration is condemned and persecuted (O'Connell 2012).

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Notes

- 1 The discussion here is based on a six-month ethnographic investigation conducted in Vietnam and Singapore, focusing on the relationship between Vietnamese migrant sex workers and one particular Vietnamese migration broker in Singapore. My informants were 16 Vietnamese migrant sex workers, including six in Ho Chi Minh City and ten from a boarding house in Singapore. I am aware that 16 informants do not constitute a representative sample.

