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2010-08-10
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MIGRANT WOMEN IN SEX WORK: TRAJECTORIES AND PERCEPTIONS OF ZIMBABWEAN SEX WORKERS IN HILLBROW, SOUTH AFRICA

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A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (by Dissertation) in Forced Migration Studies

2010

Johannesburg

ABSTRACT

The economic and political collapse of Zimbabwe resulted in the movement of women and men beyond their borders in search of better economic opportunities. The movement of Zimbabwean women has been accompanied by an outcry in neighbouring countries about their involvement in sex work. Contrary to the sensationalised views in the media and the public health discourse, this work highlights the experiences of Zimbabwean sex workers in South Africa, to understand how they engage with discourses in sex work and sexuality given the norms and mores that govern sexuality in the African context. The aim of this study is to bring to the fore trajectories, experiences and perceptions of migrant sex workers in Johannesburg.

Using postmodern feminism as a theoretical resource, the study is qualitative and employed ethnographic methods for data collection. The research was conducted in Diplomat Hotel, a hotel turned brothel on the periphery of Hillbrow, a residential area in Johannesburg. Using observation and informal interviews, the study explores Zimbabwean sex workers trajectories and perceptions of sex work.

Findings suggest tensions and contradictions as women negotiate, challenge and resist the binaries of good woman/bad woman. It is clear that women view prostitution as work as it provides a livelihood for them and their families. However, there are times women embrace the shame and stigma society accords to sex work and self degrade. This reveals the fluidity and tension in their perceptions as women negotiate the polemic debates between the abolitionists and sex work advocates. Women have found ways to navigate the precarious sex work industry and retain their autonomy through the use of humour, a veto of certain clients and re-appropriation of the whore label.

The study brings to the fore gender inequalities that keep women poor and predicate entry into sex work. The gendered nature of sex work and how most female work is unrewarded and unrewarding are exposed given the options open to women in the sex industry such as domestic work or the service industry. Zimbabwean sex workers have created their own social networks outside the accepted networks to deal with the everyday challenges of sex work. The study highlights systemic gender inequalities at the root of women's entry into sex

work. Finally, the study reveals that migrant women in sex work are propelled into sex work not by traffickers or pimps but structural gender inequalities embedded in marriage, the general disregard for feminised work and sexual inequalities in society.