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## Life Trajectories in the Space of Commercial Sex

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*The article is based on an ethnographic study of types of life trajectories of the commercial sex workers in St. Petersburg and Moscow in 2007-2013. The object of the study is limited to the brothel prostitution, so the conclusion of the study cannot be attributed to the street, railway station, hotel and other types of prostitution. The study resulted in determining the types of the entry into the market of sexual services, the types of career within it and different groups of factors that influence the behaviour of individuals in this space. The empirical research was carried out within the framework of the concept of social structuration highlighting the "structure vs. agency" dilemma. Data of this study have already been discussed before, but at a slightly different angle (Ilyin 2007, Romanenko, 2010, 2011).*

*Keywords: life trajectories, prostitution, commercial sex.*

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### Introduction

Prostitution is a topic actively discussed in many countries in various sciences and different contexts of discourses (see Sanders et al, 2009, for details). There is a lot of material that allows us to consider this phenomenon in historical dynamics and different cultural contexts. In the past two decades prostitution in Russia has become a subject of journalistic publications and parliamentary initiatives based on common sense that is not overloaded with scientific data, rather than a subject of scientific research. Usually prostitution is discussed in the framework of moral and criminological discourses. In this article, we discuss an approach to it in terms of the socio-cultural analysis: prostitutes are considered as a group within the social structure of Russian society. Their life trajectories is

the result of a tangle of the influence of the economic interests as the conscious ways of satisfying needs through market behaviour, on the one hand, and the sexual culture of society occurred in the process of radical liberalization, on the other.

### Methodology and methods of the study

The basis of this study is an action-constructivist approach. Its specificity in the context of this problem is to focus the research on the processes of transformation of the free and conscious activity of individuals into the stable elements of social structure. Hence the main question of this study arises: how individual situational choices of women form a socio-cultural space of prostitution? In other words,

actions are transformed into settled practices, life trajectories and are institutionalized.

This ethnographic study is part of the study of life strategies and everyday practices of young people in the emerging consumer society. It started in 2007 and continues to this day. One of its areas is the study of sexuality as a factor of social structuration of society. A private sector of this problem is commercial sex.

The basis of this article is the materials of 18 semi-structured interviews with people involved in the sex industry of St. Petersburg and Moscow or who had such experience in the recent past. Due to sensitivity of the object of the study the first criterion of selection is availability: the interviews were conducted with people who were not afraid to establish contact. The second criterion is brothel prostitution. This category includes places positioning themselves as brothels as well as so called “individuals” who have similar status (for details, see Ilyin, 2007: 241-260). For this reason, the conclusions of this work do not apply to other forms of prostitution. The third criterion is geographical (only St. Petersburg and Moscow), since migration, the centres of which are metropolitan areas, plays an essential role in the formation of the sex industry. 17 informants – sex workers, an organizer and an owner of a chain of brothels. The search for respondents was carried out in places of sexual services, as well as on the websites and social networks on the Internet, some of the respondents were found using the “snowball” method, i.e. through other members of the sex business. The vast majority of the interviews were conducted in the form of a personal conversation (face to face), and some – in the form of a chat on the Internet and in the combined form. In addition, we used the materials of the interviews with women who are far from this area, but are more or less familiar with it through the media and other indirect means (data of the project mentioned above). The consultants

were two sex workers blogging in social networks (in the form of clarifying questions).

The socio-cultural space is a space of positions. One of its kinds is the space of commercial sex that is a range of status positions forming the prostitution market: prostitutes, clients, pimps and administrators, government officials as independent individuals and bodies themselves. Since one of the forms of a social action is also abstention from it, then part of this space are the status positions of individuals, groups and institutions that, for whatever reasons, refuse to participate in the sex market.

In general, the space of commercial sex is divided into two parts: (a) a space of positions of the participants in this market; (b) its external environment, without consideration of which the review of the subject is impossible, since prostitution is an open area of the socio-cultural space, on the border of which there is a heavy traffic in both directions (entry/quit).

Such dichotomy of the gender space goes back to the extreme antiquity. As noted by one of the researchers, a “prostitute” or a “whore” makes a contrast to a woman as a mirror image of “Madonna” reflecting the pure femininity – sacred and holy. The binary project “Madonna/whore” forms the status of a prostitute-woman as an example of fallen femininity marked by her immoral sexual behaviour that should be avoided (Pheterson, 1993). This dichotomy is clothed in the forms of morality, religion, law, administrative practice and everyday practices.

The socio-cultural space is a space of possibilities, in which individuals based on their conscious interests and resources carve out the life trajectories. Free choice is made in the context of the available structural factors that, on the one hand, provide certain opportunities, but, on the other hand, cut off the others as unrealistic. And women’s behaviour in the space of commercial sex is the resulting trajectory arising in the course

of realization of the subjective aspirations in the space of possibilities, limitations and compulsions. Actions are not just the result of structural compulsion, but also a form of reproduction of the social structure.

### **Barriers for the entry into the sex market**

Typically, the first question that comes into mind when studying prostitution is: “Why do women go for it”? Following the logic of sociological imagination proposed by R. Mills (Mills, 2001) we set a different initial question: “What does motivate women who do not become prostitutes”? Why do not their life trajectories enter the field of commercial sex? In other words, what are the barriers that stand in the way of getting into this market?

Girls observing prostitution through the prism of the mass media specify a large variety of barriers that exclude this way for them.

1. Denial in terms of public morality. Prostitutes are subject to judgment, stigmatization, their lives contradict to the norms shared by the majority, so they become the objects of social exclusion.
2. Value settings inherent in the process of socialization (selectiveness in choosing sexual partners, rejection of sexual relations for money, setting for monogamous love, lack of obsession with material wealth, religiosity) contravene the practices of prostitution.
3. Psychophysiological qualities of women (squeamishness, introversion, unattractiveness, health problems, etc.).
4. Availability of resources to find occupation that does not force to turn to prostitution.
5. Marital status (having a husband or a long-term partner). On the one hand, having a partner is a powerful tool of social control that normally excludes prostitution, but, on the other hand, it is often a material support that allows a woman not to resort to such drastic means in order to survive.
6. Fear of losing social skills, that is to miss out chances given in life and face the prospects of degradation.
7. Fear of digressive social mobility typical for a prostitute: over the years her capital (looks) only dissipates, which leads to a decrease in demand for her services.
8. Fear of getting a disease and unwanted pregnancy.
9. Fear of getting into a harmful environment where people consume alcohol and drugs, which may lead to the acquisition of the reputation of a “troubled woman”.
10. Fear of the prospects of physical, mental abuse. The girls have heard a lot about rapes, sexual slavery, sexual coercion, intimidation and blackmail in the prostitutes’ surroundings.
11. Lack of social protection for prostitutes (chances of facing the law, the possibility of deception of customers and organizers), which follows from the illegal nature of their activities.
12. Fear of coercion to unacceptable sexual practices, the lack of opportunity to choose a partner, intense and multiple sexual contacts, etc.

### **Factors of the entry into prostitution**

What are the personal and social factors that influence the choice of a trajectory in the space of commercial sex?

**(a) Migration.** The newly arrived migrants (from the regions of Russia and CIS countries, and often from Africa) face serious difficulties of settling in a new place. They have no money to rent an apartment, no way to find a job; the proposed level of remuneration is not often

adequate; and moreover they need a work and/or residence permit to get involved in the legal labour market.

There are much more flexible forms of inclusion and support for newcomers in the sex market. It does not require residence and work permits, as well as the possession of special skills: all you need to get in the business is your own body and willingness to provide sexual services. Moreover, the organizers of the sex business often solve the housing problem for the newcomers by providing the opportunity to live right in a brothel, meet them at the airport/train station removing a burden of settling down in an unknown city. Thus, for young women the sex industry is the most accessible form of migration. For example, after finishing high school a Russian girl named S. left Uzbekistan where she did not see any prospects for herself. In St. Petersburg she was only able to get a job as a waitress, but the money was barely enough for housing. And then she was offered to try to work in a brothel. She took the offer and did not see anything wrong in it. She stayed there until she got married (Sn.-13).

*(b) Marital status.* One group that is particularly prone to enter this market is single mothers and divorced women with children. According to the studies of the social structure of Russian society (see Tikhonova, 2011: 31), the majority of women in the area of formation of the lower class have underage children, while about 60% are raising these children out of wedlock with a man. According to the owner of the brothel, this category accounts for about 30% of the staff (D.-12). The need to make a living for herself and a child combined with limited employment opportunities for jobs with a strict working regime is a powerful factor pushing towards flexible prostitution market. Most strongly this factor puts pressure on women living alone without parents who could support

them – it is a barrier to prostitution, but it is often insufficient. Having a husband, a common-law husband or a long-term partner is the most powerful factor for this group that prevents the entry into the sex market, but it does not give an absolute guarantee: one can find women from this category in the brothel, although not very often. Sn. lives with a common-law husband hoping to formally get married. However, the partner earns little and gives her even less. At some point, the salary temporarily dropped (beauty salon). So she took a job at a brothel (Sn.-13).

*(c) Force majeure financial difficulties.*

In everyday life people with low incomes and/or incredibly inflated claims (the effect of these factors is similar) often turn out to be on a tight personal budget. Massive involvement of people with low and unstable incomes in the bondage of consumer lending attaches a systemic nature to this factor. Consumer society generates a revolution of claims without creating enough jobs adequate to them. As a result, the need for a “fancy” mobile phone, a new car or new wardrobe inspired by the cultural environment takes on the character of a force-majeure circumstance. Working as a prostitute allows a woman to quickly get additional revenue.

There are two **basic sociological** models for the entry into prostitution. The first model reaches out to structural inequality, in which a woman is pushed to get involved into prostitution without a decent alternative for earning (Shrage, 1989). Traditionally, the main reasons for getting into prostitution here are poverty, unemployment, lack of another legal alternative. This thesis should be referred to quite critically now: these factors are in effect, but they have a relative nature (pressure does not mean the inevitable submission to it). >>>

The second model considers the reasons for the entry into prostitution in the framework of individual biographies and proposes the existence

of so-called “free contract” that is the chance for a woman to make a decision regarding her employment, since not all women under similar social conditions are engaged in prostitution just to earn money (Ericsson, 1980). The owner of a chain of brothels explains the reasons for coming under his wing: *“Those who are really in need (for example, girls from troubled families) are not that many. As for the students, most of their parents make a good living and send them money. They are just lazy and do not want to strain themselves at normal work for peanuts. But here they get it all at once”* (D.-12).

**(d) The lack of profession giving a chance for the alternative employment.** This category clearly includes people with education not higher than the secondary level. They are adjoined by those who received purely formal education (correspondence courses, unwillingness to work within profession, lack of experience, which blocks their inclusion in this segment of the labour market). When they quit prostitution, they have no chance for employment in another field with a comparable remuneration. In this situation they come up with a dilemma: either to content themselves with low-paid but hard work or to get involved in prostitution. The second option is much more attractive in the presence of a great expense item in the personal budget because of the lack of places to live in, a child without a real father, as well as the formed consumer needs that exceed the budget limit.

**(e) The loss of alternative competencies.** Relatively long-term prostitution significantly reduces the chances of self-fulfilment in other areas. This process is going in different directions. First of all, the loss of mental qualities required in many workplaces: for example, the ability to get up early every day and go to work, and for at least 8 hours fulfil functions requiring initiative, intellectual and/or physical strain. The prostitute’s lifestyle having a lot of

issues makes many of the personal qualities that are part of the minimum set of a candidate to take mass vacancies unnecessary. In this respect, prostitution is not something unique. Any continuing work reduces the willingness to pass on to the next activity. However, among the popular professions the psychic minimum is often similar, but prostitution has its own standard that differs from it considerably. Secondly, even if a woman has had some professional skills and knowledge, in the end they get devalued, which makes it difficult to find a job in the profession.

**(f) Adjustment to this lifestyle.** This is a natural consequence of a long involvement in the sex industry. A habit is formed with varying speed normalizing a prostitute’s life: the elements of this lifestyle initially repelling or causing stress begin to be perceived as “normal”.

**(g) Adjustment to a relatively high level of income.** Moving on to other areas inevitably implies a decrease in the standard of living – the prospect that is perceived quite painfully. Prostitution gives a woman without an in-demand alternative profession little chance to get the same income and maintain an accustomed standard of living in another area. The transformation of consumerism into the common culture makes this transition especially painful.

**(h) The availability of the developed infrastructure of the sex market** that facilitates the entry into the market and settling in there, maintains an acceptable working conditions, etc. Such places like the brothels of St. Petersburg and Moscow are open to the beginners. This infrastructure not only allows women to get in and out of prostitution easily, but also, at their own free choice, to take a break and return to the same or another brothel because there is very strong demand for work force.

**(i) The liberalization of morals** that minimizes the moral issues created by the transition of the social boundary. The liberalization

of sexual morality (for details see Golod, 2005) deprives prostitution of the former stigmatized status. Values, norms and practices of sexual life of a significant part of the youth are characterized of such kind of freedom and pluralism that turning into prostitution is not a shocking step for many girls. The practice of promiscuity has become a widespread cultural phenomenon among young people. The usual series of multiple and virtually impersonal sexual encounters become a source of income in the brothel.

**(j) Personal psychophysiological predisposition for such a sex life.** It is a factor of choice for any kind of activity, and it is especially important for prostitution: not all women, even under heavy pressure of social and economic factors, are able to be prostitutes by choice. While to some women the need to daily have multiple sexual partners without any attraction seems like an insurmountable obstacle, there are many of those who do not see a problem in this. *“Refusal to serve a client just because she did not like him is completely incompetent”*, – said the owner of the brothel chain (D.-12).

However, many of our informants claimed that it is usually possible to avoid an especially undesirable contact, to refuse to provide some additional services. But these possibilities are obviously limited.

There are quite a few women who like this job, even though they are a minority. According to the above mentioned owner of the brothel, there are about ten percent of such women in his brothel (D.-12).

**(k) The anonymity of the life of the metropolis.** In small and medium-sized cities the described forms of prostitution are hardly probable because it is difficult to hide a status. Prostitution tends to be kept confidential, and it is difficult to maintain confidentiality in close contacts in a confined space. Therefore, an essential part of our informants are from small towns, where they

have never been engaged in prostitution, and they believe that it is totally impossible.

### **Social trajectories of prostitution**

#### *1. Accidental or episodic entry*

For centuries, the border between prostitution and “decent femininity” was a social and cultural gap making shuttle mobility an almost incredible phenomenon. The situation has radically changed in the post-Soviet Russian society. Mobility that can be called the shuttle prostitution has emerged and acquired a notable scale. “Average” young women from time to time get in and out prostitution for a while, and then come back again. In sociology of work all this is described by the category of flexible employment. It is carried out in different modes. One of the most common is a temporary side job combined with other sustainable forms of employment – school or full-time job. Girls come to the brothels for a short time. They stay there for a few hours a week according to the schedule convenient to them. It may be a part-time job for one to two weeks or months, after that they leave, and then there is another episodic entry to prostitution. Thus, S. studies at two universities on a paid basis. Her parents help her, but it is not enough to cover expenses on both studying and current needs of a girl who wants to look fancy and beautiful. And then there was the need for a paid surgery, but she could not ask her parents for money. So she came to the brothel for “a while” to earn the required amount of 50 thousand roubles. (Sf.-13).

#### *2. Systematic secondary employment*

The model of shuttle prostitution tends to evolve into another model – systematic secondary employment. Easiness of getting out of a short-term difficult situation gives an incentive to keep this way. According to the logic of the law of increasing needs, a satisfied need creates a new,

higher one. But within the “normal” employment it is not real to reach this level very quickly. A dilemma remains: either to reduce requests or to make sex work a stable secondary employment. Among prostitutes working in the brothels there are many girls who have low-paid jobs and in the evening (according to a certain schedule) come to the brothel. Thus, K., a non resident, works in a flower shop. She spends almost the entire salary to pay for rent. She makes money for other needs in the brothel where she occasionally comes into in the evening after the main job (K.-13).

### *3. Professional employment limited in time*

The third level of being drawn into prostitution is transforming it into a professional activity that is the main or, most often, the only source of income. When systematically practicing the second model, the main (legal) job quickly turns into a disguise, the main function of which is not to enrich the budget, but to provide cover for the eyes of friends and acquaintances. Sooner or later, such combination starts to seem tedious and economically meaningless. And then there is a transition to the third model when employment in the sex industry is regarded as the only source of income, but has a temporary status. Time limitations are often explained philosophically: “You will not do it your whole life anyway! You lose shape and you will have to create a family someday”. More specific limitations are linked to the solution of specific problems that require financial resources: for example, to finish studying, save for a new apartment or a car. Such temporary employment often drags on for years gradually turning into the fourth form.

### *4. Sustainable professional employment*

The line between the third and fourth models is very blurred and flexible. Only after some time with the great experience behind, we

can confidently identify a model of sustainable professional employment. The point of this model is usually in the lack of plans to take up a different profession, and in the determining of time of quitting in vague terms: “I will work while I can”. I. got into prostitution after moving to St. Petersburg from the regional centre. She could not find a job with a good salary within her speciality. First she went to the brothel “on a temporary basis”, then became a professional individual prostitute leaving the idea of working within the speciality for some time, and then realized that there is nothing to look for and would work as long as there was demand (I.-11).

The beauty is the key capital in this market, but it dissipates quickly. There are not very many women who say that they are around 50 years old. Taking into account the age understatement typical for this market we can add 5 or even 10 years to the announced figure. However, the descending mobility usually occurs in this profession very early due to the falling demand.

### *5. Going out to a transnational space*

The relative openness of Russian borders allows laying professional trajectories outside the country. S. lived in the United States for several years, where she was involved in individual prostitution, then returned to Russia and took up the same activity in Moscow, but with the help of friends began to prepare the ground for a short-term trip to work in the Netherlands (S.-13). T. travels regularly within the borders of the Schengen area between St. Petersburg and Germany.

### *6. Managerial or entrepreneurial work*

The key figures of the modern market of sexual services in Russian cities are entrepreneurs who organize brothels and administrators who perform operations management. It is a quite different kind of work in comparison with

the position of prostitutes. However, many prostitutes involved in sustainable professional employment are perfectly aware that after they end their careers there are almost no chances to find something that could bring a comparable income in another area. Hence, they dream of opening their own brothel. Indeed, some of the owners of small brothels are former prostitutes who have spent a long time in this market and have accumulated a start-up financial and social capital. H. worked as a prostitute for a long time, she made enough money and gained great experience having lost the looks that provided the demand for her services. And then she opened her own brothel (L.-12).

However, we must mention that not all the brothel owners, especially large ones, have had experience of working as prostitutes. At this market of mid-sized business domination of men is obvious, although this topic is beyond the scope of our study; therefore, this statement has the status of a justified hypothesis. The transition from prostitutes into brothel administrators (performing the functions of managers) is a more likely scenario of social mobility, although it has a limited appeal.

Strong demand for sexual services and stable willingness of women to offer them have led to a high level of institutionalization of the sex industry where there are sustainable mechanisms to ensure the connection of supply and demand: brothels of sexual services operating in the form of brothels and individual enterprises (usually it is a flat rented by two or three women), magazines and websites that provide advertising, law enforcement agencies providing a “roof” (criminal protection racket), the owners of large apartments who rent them out.

### **Quit**

All trajectories run into the problem of quitting. In mass media the topic of sexual

slavery is very popular. Its essence is the forcible involvement and retention in the sex industry. Such phenomena, of course, occur, but mainly have a marginal nature. Without statistics it is difficult to compare prostitution with other segments of the labour market. But if we rely on the mass media data and criminal reports, the slavery covers different areas and is not localized by prostitution. The main argument against the exaggeration of the role of slavery as a form of retention is based on the indirect logical factors, not on the mass survey that is not possible in this area. This market is so attractive that it has a constant influx of new forces, so sexual slavery as a common practice is meaningful. There is a strong competition between brothels, so any obstacle on the way out is a powerful constraining factor. There is a large influx of those who want to earn some money, which generates employment flexibility unthinkable in many other segments of the labour market. In addition, the forcible retention is a serious article of the criminal code, so mostly the law enforcement agencies that cover this business do not need such problems.

Bondage addiction is a more real mechanism for retention. Migrants arriving in a new city are often provided for accommodation and even “start-up” money. If the first encounter with a new job causes rejection, women automatically must return the debt. However, this is a purely temporary problem.

Formally, an easy way out of the sex market is one of the most powerful factors that attract young women looking for ways to solve temporary difficulties. In reality, the easiness is illusive not because of the non-forcible coercion, but due to the formation of a specific habit excluding alternatives.

Why do almost all women employed in the sex services plan to quit, think and dream about it?

Despite a significant change of its status, prostitution remains a stigmatized activity. Because of this fact a common focus on women's self-realization through love and family brings a question of quitting prostitution to a head. This orientation does not just require quitting, but suggests that this will happen as soon as possible, since, as it is known, the chances of a meeting a "decent" partner are getting less over the years.

Many women recognize the inferiority of prostitution and think about alternative forms of legal employment. Some of them have already entered universities; some of them are planning to do so. They want to have a job that they may not hide from relatives and friends.

Both negative and positive scenarios for ending a career of a prostitute are possible. Quitting prostitution would be subject to the emergence of one or more "barrier" factors referred to in this article. For example, according to the organizer of the sex business, sooner or later, many get married; some save money and start their own business (D.-12).

Working as a prostitute is not that easy as many people think. It is full of risks and requires a lot of mental and physiological stress: *"Nothing bad has happened to me so far, but I was told about the girls of our own chain. They were invited to the apartment, and there was the whole group of clients. They broke our bodyguard's ribs, and raped the girls all night"* (S.-12). Sometimes the clients may deceive, force to have unprotected sex, etc. But, according to the organizer of such a brothel, *"It is business, and there is no place for pity. It's their money*

*too"* (D.-12). Although extreme cases do not happen often, it is a factor to quit as well. L., a 40-year-old nurse, worked in various brothels for about a year. This allowed her to get out of a force majeure situation that led her to the brothel. The encounter with the police that came there for a check was a strong argument: "It is time to put an end to this! What a shame!" She left the brothel, although some of the old customers would occasionally come to her on a fee basis (L.-12).

### Conclusion

Thus, the space of commercial sex of Russian cities, on the one hand, is fenced off by the whole system of prejudice repelling most of the young women from it. On the other hand, a number of social and personal factors make sex work attractive to a significant portion of young women. The modern space of brothel prostitution is an area that is open to get in and out providing opportunities for flexible employment, which generates diversity of life trajectories. This flexibility is a powerful attractive factor in the eyes of young people.

Opponents of prostitution are trying to fight it by means of moralization, spreading myths the informed youth do not believe in (as opposed to politicians), taking administrative actions leaving the basic mechanisms that ensure its progress aside. These mechanisms lie at the junction of the features of this segment of the labour market and the liberalization of morals. And they do not succumb to the simplified methods of regulation of this sphere that are so popular among the Russian lawmakers.

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## **Жизненные траектории в пространстве коммерческого секса**

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*Статья опирается на этнографическое исследование типов жизненных траекторий работниц коммерческого секса Санкт-Петербурга и Москвы в 2007-2013 гг. Объект исследования ограничен салонной проституцией, поэтому выводы исследования не могут распространяться на уличную, вокзальную, гостиничную и другие виды проституции. Его результатом стало выделение типов вхождения на рынок сексуальных услуг, типов карьеры в его рамках и разных групп факторов, влияющих на поведение индивидов в этом пространстве. Эмпирическое исследование осуществлялось в рамках концепции социальной структуризации, выдвигающей на первый план дилемму структура или свободное действие? (structure vs agency). Несколько в ином ракурсе данные этого исследования уже обсуждались ранее (Ilin 2007, Romanenko 2010, 2011).*

*Ключевые слова: жизненные траектории, проституция, коммерческий секс.*

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