

Essay

“What do you want to know?” Feminist reflections on interviewing migrant women selling sex in Istanbul¹

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Abstract

This paper is a critical reflective analysis of the methodological and ethical issues I confronted during my fieldwork with Ugandan migrant women involved in selling sex in Istanbul. Conducting a research with such a fragile group, especially with migrant women in a dynamic and sensitive environment involves in different methodological and ethical challenges. Based on semi-structured in-depth interviews, informal conversations and observations, the research was focused on the relationships around commercial sex industry in Ugandan community. The researcher’s position, access to participants through gatekeepers, the hierarchy between the researcher and ‘the researched’ in interviewing women and the data analysis process will be discussed in the light of feminist discussions on methodological approaches. It is argued that being aware of the asymmetric power relations and seeking the possibilities of non-hierarchical relationships in the research processes is an important approach that the feminist methodology offers to researchers.

Keywords: Feminist methodology, migrant women, gender, commercial sex, Turkey

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Deneme

“Neyi öğrenmek istiyorsun?” İstanbul’da seks satan göçmen kadınlarla yapılan görüşmelere dair feminist düşünceler

Öz

Bu çalışma İstanbul’da seks satan Ugandalı göçmen kadınlarla yaptığım bir saha araştırması sırasında karşılaştığım yöntemsel ve etik sorunlara dair eleştirel bir analizdir. Dinamik ve hassas bir çevrede kırılğan bir grupla, özellikle de göçmen kadınlarla araştırma yapmak farklı yöntemsel ve etik zorluklar içermektedir. Yarı-yapılandırılmış derinlemesine görüşmeler, enformel sohbetler ve gözleme dayanan bu çalışma Ugandalı göçmen topluluktaki ticari seks endüstrisi etrafında şekillenen ilişkilere odaklıdır. Araştırmacının konumu, eşik bekçileri aracılığıyla katılımcılara erişimi, araştırmacı ve görüşmeler sırasında ‘araştırılan’ arasındaki ilişki ile veri analizi süreci feminist yöntem tartışmaları eşliğinde tartışılacaktır. Bu yazıda, araştırma sürecindeki asimetric güç ilişkilerine dair farkındalığın ve hiyerarşik olmayan ilişki kurma olasılığının sorgulanmasının feminist metodoloji tartışmalarının araştırmacılara sunduğu önemli araçlar olduğu ileri sürülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Feminist yöntem, göçmen kadın, toplumsal cinssiyet, ticari seks, Türkiye.

Feminist questioning of power relations in social research

Feminist research has emerged as a critical methodological approach against the traditional ways of social research. Feminist researchers have challenged male dominated science and knowledge production as part of broader feminist struggle against patriarchy (Hartsock, 1983; Mies, 1979; Oakley, 1998; Stanley & Wise, 2013). In fact, Mies (1979) argued that the 'androcentric' positivist approach cannot be used by women studies uncritically especially if those studies are used as a tool for women's liberation by referring to an idiom: "new wine should not be poured into old vessels". By criticising positivism's argument of the objectivity in the research process, feminist epistemology further argues that knowledge is not independent from the status and the position of the researcher, on the contrary, it is constructed as 'contextual', 'spatial' and 'situational' (Wolf, 1996, p.2; Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002, p.74). Furthermore, Mies suggested that feminist researchers should bring up their own experiences of oppression into the research processes in order to explore their own "double consciousness" (Leavitt et al. 1975 as cited in Mies, 1979, p.5) as well as to improve their own methodological approach. She suggested methodological principles towards a non-hierarchical feminist research by referring to some concepts such as "conscious partiality", "view from below", "active participation", "the change of the status quo", "conscientization" (Mies 1979). She argued that the research process must be a process of becoming conscious of the common grounds of women's oppression both for the researcher and the researched.

Methodological challenges in social research have created diverse positions among feminists in the sense of producing adequate and valid knowledge through the knowing subject and connecting between ideas and reality. As feminist movement covers diverse approaches within itself, these differences also contribute to the discussions of feminist social research such as empirical, postmodernist or standpoint approaches. For example, while the feminist standpoint theory, emerged as a feminist critical theory in the 1970s and 80s, challenges the traditional relations between knowledge production and power practices (Harding, 2004, pp.1-2), it has been criticised by overlooking differences and power relations within women. However, different theoretical, political and ethical concerns within feminist approaches can potentially negotiate common moral and political positions "to question existing 'truths' and explore relations between knowledge and power" (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002, p.2). In fact, the aim of the feminist research is not only to produce the knowledge of social reality from the perspective of women, but also to use this knowledge for a social change to make women's lives better.

Although feminist research has a great potential to make visible the invisible experiences of women and social change, as Maguire points out, research process is also considered as 'the weakest link' (1987 as cited in Wolf 1996, p.3). One of the central issues of feminist research is how power is exercised in the production of knowledge

where unequal hierarchies between ‘the researcher’ and ‘the researched’ are often “maintained, perpetuated, created and re-created” (Wolf 1996: 2). Wolf argues that these power relations and hierarchies originate from three main areas:

(1) personalities of the researcher and the researched (race, class, nationality, life chances, urban-rural backgrounds); (2) power exerted during the research process, such as defining the research relationship, unequal exchange, and exploitation; and (3) power exerted during the post fieldwork period – writing and representing. (*Ibid*)

According to Wolf, when doing research with marginalised or fragile groups such as migrant women, the researcher’s background, class, educational advantage, ethnicity, citizenship and privileges cannot be altered easily as these hierarchies are often carried over in to the research. Compared to these inherited hierarchies the researcher is assumed to have more control in other areas by using some methods which give more power to ‘the researched’.

The challenges of reproducing power relations and social inequalities in the production of feminist knowledge where feminist researchers have privileged positions over others is an important criticism against feminist methodology and researchers. As Ramazanoğlu and Holland argues (2002, pp.38-39,147) focusing solely on gender and treating women as a homogenous category can have a negative effect on the research process as it ignores significant divisions and differences among women as well as have a risk of reproducing power relations as it empowers the researcher over other differences. The researcher’s social identities, experience of gender, education and family background, occupation, class or ethnicity not only determine the research motivation and design, but also risk producing and reproducing the social hierarchies and power imbalances during the research. Applying such feminist criticism, I will explore and discuss the difficulties and dilemmas that I encountered during my research process.

Position of the researcher

My research interest in Ugandan women’s migration to Turkey stems from my participation in a feminist group and a small solidarity group with migrant women in Istanbul. Established in 2012, the aim of the group was to discuss and raise awareness about the problems that migrant women face in Turkey. After a year, we decided to open a Turkish language course in Kumkapı where migrant women could easily access. The idea of starting a Turkish course was to build solidarity through a language course with migrant women in the neighbourhood

which women could improve their daily Turkish speaking skills. The course continued for more than three years in different places in the neighbourhood such as NGOs' or trade unions' offices or in churches. Our Turkish course was important to get to know the district, the relationships between migrants and locals, and the living conditions of migrants. However, my close relationship with Ugandan migrant women started when a friend of mine from abroad was seeking support for two women who were in a difficult position in Istanbul in 2013. Two Ugandan women³ were in trouble with their sub-letting landlord as they could not pay their rent for the room in Kurtuluş district of Istanbul. After a temporary accommodation, we found an old house in Kumkapı for rent. I was visiting them almost every week. During my visits I mediated between the women and the real estate agents and the landlords, I went to the hospital and some other public institutions with them as they did not speak Turkish. I encouraged them to join the Turkish course but they were not really interested in as they have urgent needs to cover. First, they applied for asylum in Istanbul, but had to go to one of the remote cities designated for asylum seekers. They did not have a regular income to enable them to live in the remote, satellite city so they stayed in Istanbul and after a while the two women became undocumented. During this whole period of a year, I had the opportunity to get to know Ugandan migrant women and to understand something of their migration and living conditions. My observations of the difficulties they experienced during their stay in Istanbul along with other migrant women's stories led me to start a research in 2015.

Entering the field ...

Ugandan women represent a gendered migration profile not only by numbers but also by the gendered characteristics of their migration journey and living conditions (Coşkun, 2018). As most Ugandan women cannot cover the cost of their migration journey, they often come to Turkey through employment agencies or through borrowing money from their relatives, and consequently become indebted to different parties. Contrary to their big expectations of finding a good job which usually means better-paid and secured jobs compared to the high unemployment rate and the average wage in Uganda (around 50 USD) and a better life, they soon realized that life in Turkey was not as easy after all. Far from saving a huge amount of money they could hardly find a good job. While their dreams and reality collided, Turkey's increasing restrictions and control over immigrants also made their life more difficult. For example, the only visa type they could get, is a business visa which expires within 15 days (or a month) so they become undocumented without applying for a residence permit. However, as the duration of their stay gets longer in Istanbul, women develop their own survival tactics by creating their own social networks and knowing better their available options as they become much more adapted to the physical and social environment. These tactics may include making friends and especially local male friends

³ Both women have left Turkey for good, one of them is in Europe and the other one is back to Uganda.

whom they could ask for help in case of an emergency, knowing physical environment better, improving their Turkish skills and having better knowledge of the migration legislation. For example, some women were able to escape from those exploitative relationships by getting help from other members of the Ugandan community in Istanbul. However, these tactics are not always strong enough to protect themselves from being exploited, sexually harassed, ill-treated and from unequal relationships in general. The problems they face in Istanbul led me to do a research. My aim was to reveal how the migration regime in Turkey works for these women and how the gendered vulnerabilities of migrant women lead to systematic violence and the criminalisation of migrant women through these women's experiences. I received a small funding for the research which gained me some mobility and time so I started the research in the summer of 2015.

I tried to adopt a feminist methodological approach with a flexible research strategy which could be exploratory through a semi-structured questionnaire and mixed data collection tools such as in-depth interviews, informal conversations and observations. First, I opened up the issue to some women from the Ugandan community and asked for their support in the process of designing the research. They did not hesitate to support me and to offer some potential interviewees. In addition to semi-structured in-depth interviews and informal conversations, I visited different places and participated in a number of events where I could observe the different relationships among migrants. Therefore, my research methodology could be described as semi-ethnographic as it involved in considerable observations and participation. Although the fieldwork was unfolded easily with the help of Ugandan women, there were important dilemmas during the research process such as accessing women in prostitution⁴ and the hierarchical relationships between the researcher and "the researched".

Hierarchy between the researcher and 'the researched'

As Wolf argues, it was especially difficult to eliminate the hierarchies inherent in social identities in my fieldwork. Apart from being a 'white' citizen of Turkey and a native speaker, having some knowledge of the migration system, my educational background and access to social and economic resources always stood between me and migrant women. For example, not being able to access work permits, the language barrier, low-waged gendered jobs, discrimination, limited mobility and no easy access to public spaces were important barriers for migrant women. Moreover, the racism that black women encounter in daily life makes these hierarchies even more visible. Although there is little research on racism against migrants in Turkey (i.e. Şimşek, 2019), Ugandan

⁴ In this paper the terms 'prostitute', 'prostitution' and 'selling sex' are used instead of the terms 'sex work' or 'sex workers' with a reference to a particular position regarding feminist discussions on forced and voluntary prostitution (see Outshoorn, 2004). Apart from the negative meanings attributed to these terms in Turkish official language, this terminology choice is related to my findings and arguments which claim that migrant women's involvement in prostitution involves a lack of choice, coercion, exploitation as well as agency.

migrant women feel that they are at the bottom of the hierarchies among migrants, as black and women. For example, working for less wage than other migrant groups, always doing the dirty work at the workplace, being noticed everywhere, being easily harassed on the street or sexually harassed in the workplace, being constantly deceived by the shopkeepers or being verbally-physically harassed by the men on the street were some of the observable difficulties experienced by Ugandan migrant women. Against these difficulties, women have developed their own tactics such as arriving late to meetings in a public street as a way of avoiding being noticed, harassed, or ID checked by the police.

Despite the systematic difficulties and violence against migrant women in daily life, a significant problem was also my social position as a local, an activist and a researcher middle-class 'white' woman. In order to minimise hierarchies between us, I tried to be careful when we choose socializing places, not to make decisions on behalf of them, or build relationship based on interests. Although there was no direct financial support (except some urgent needs which were covered by my feminist network or some NGOs), I sometimes used my advantaged social position and social network to find solutions to the difficulties encountered by migrant women. In a sense, I made myself available and useful to them. For example, I called their employers many times when their wages were seized, negotiated with the landlords, contacted with NGOs for urgent needs, I went to hospitals, police stations, banks or to local shops in the neighbourhood. The most important reason for using my social position and capital was the impossibility of ignoring some urgent situations when people ask for help in cases of serious illness, death, giving a birth, seeking a lawyer against gendered violence, contacting the police or following up migration documents.

Violence against migrant women was so evident that four women died and three Ugandan women were hospitalised between 2014 and 2017. I was aware that these relationships which were built through solidarity also created a hierarchy between us. In order to escape from this role and to establish a critical distance, I tried to minimize these hierarchies in the research process by being aware of and questioning my privileged social position in the complex field of social relations I was engaged in. It is possible to say that these hierarchies were much reduced during my visit to Kampala, Uganda where I was a 'foreigner'⁵.

Feminist methodological discussions do not suggest a formula for these hierarchies, especially with such a fragile group, but offer some conceptualizations and enquiries. For example, Oakley (2016) conceptualizes these

⁵ I have been to Kampala, Uganda in January 2016, to attend a conference and to visit some Ugandan women who used to live and work in Istanbul. It was a good opportunity to understand Ugandan migrant women's backgrounds and living conditions in their hometown.

interviews as a 'gift relationship' in which potential women interviewees dedicate their time and share their stories. Discussions on feminist research methodology emphasise the importance of including and empowering women in every process of the research in order to conduct research 'with women'. Similar to activist and action research approaches, feminists also suggest some tools such as co-authoring, polyvocality, direct representation of women to allow 'the researched' to exercise more power over the research processes. However, these tools cannot be applied easily as feminist researchers tend to control the research processes as much as any other mainstream academic research so eventually end up reproducing these hierarchies and benefiting more of the research (Wolf, 1996, p.3). For my research, women neither fully participated in the whole research process nor were relations shaped around the researcher-researched hierarchies. After many years of acquaintance with migrant women, I could not change my position and the relationship created between us easily, however, being aware of the hierarchies inherent in social positions and often questioning them, it can be said that we have formed a kind of friendship that is partially based on solidarity. To explain my relationship to the field better, the next section will explain my position in the Ugandan community further.

Being recognised in an unfolding field

I have been to Kumkapı many times between 2012 and 2016, first to find a home for the two women and after through the Turkish course. Through visiting the district over some time, I have met many people in churches, restaurants, and houses. Speaking English as a common language made my social interactions easier. I have attended celebrations for Christmas, Ramadan and weddings in Kumkapı, Kurtuluş or Okmeydanı and some funerals as well. Sometimes we would meet at the weekends to spend time together, for having picnic, cooking, seeing a movie or going together to 8 March International Women's Day meetings. I became closer with some women who came to visit me at home, and met my mother and friends. Years of activism, volunteering, helping and socialising underpinned how I was seen by the community. Making contacts for urgent situations, finding NGOs for specific needs and pursuing the rights of migrants contributed to my presentation of self as a trustworthy, helpful, organized and knowledgeable woman. Although these connections and relationships were developed over time, it was not my intention to do such research in the beginning of these social interactions. On the contrary these relationships led me to start such research.

These meetings and social interactions gave me better insights about the Ugandan community in Istanbul. I realized that religion is very important for the community and that the pastors have a great influence on members. Another powerful group backed by their high financial income were women who sell sex or who are intermediaries in the commercial sex business. While these women were stigmatized by other members of the

community, their business shape their relationships in the community. I realised that some Ugandan women were also acting as pimps and mediators as they had many 'girls'. Some Ugandan men with Turkish language skills were also making money from this business both as translators and guards. Men not only had these pimp-friend type roles, but men also rented rooms to prostitute women, owned companies that ship cargo to Uganda, were merchants bringing goods from Uganda, run restaurants or nightclub-like businesses and were beneficiaries of the economy created around the sex business. Even the relations with local shopkeepers and landlords revolved around this income. According to migrant women from other sub-Saharan countries and locals, Ugandan women were clearly associated with prostitution.

The system basically worked as follows; Many women who decided to migrate from Uganda due to poverty, unemployment and/or gendered responsibilities, get help from intermediaries to cover their migration expenses and/or to find a job prior to their journey. Shortly after arriving in Istanbul-Kumkapı, women become undocumented, they are then either employed in sweatshops or directly involved in prostitution depending on the scale of their indebted status or by force of those in the community. This system, which is easily can be identified as 'trafficking of women for sexual exploitation', is legitimized by relations based on verbal contracts (see Coşkun, 2018). Women whose expenses for visa and travel were covered by mediators, have to pay back two or three times the amount of their debt. Considering that those working in the sweatshops do not earn even the minimum wage, it was difficult for women to pay thousands of dollars for their debt. When some women had difficulties in paying back and object to their debts, they may be forced in prostitution as they were seen as not fulfilling the requirements of a verbal agreement. For example, as I was told, when a woman did not pay her debt, the issue was discussed by the community leaders, and she was forced to repay her debt based on a so-called rightful verbal agreement. Another case also shows the community's power, when a woman became ill while she was selling sex on the street she was 'forgiven' for her debt. The majority of women selling sex on the street had freedom of movement but were bonded by their debt and surrounded by hierarchical relationships in the community, and even they could be threatened with the police when they wanted to exit. They were forced to sell sex on the street which can be a 'quick way' to repay their debts. Women were forced to work in such bad conditions (i.e. no bargaining power over sexual demands of men such as unprotected sex, or number of customers) for at least a few months until they got to know the environment and develop some tactics. The main reason of staying in such forced relationships was the fear of deportation and they knew that they would be deported if they made a complaint to the police. After they had given all their energy, time and money by taking the risk of going to another country, 'returning with empty hands' was not an option for many women. Sometimes

through coercion, sometimes through the construction of the consent⁶, women could turn to prostitution where they could earn money in a short time. In fact, there are success stories of women in prostitution, demonstrated by the amount of money they sent home, the houses they built in Uganda, or the way they sent their children to expensive schools also attracted other migrant women in poverty in Uganda. Women in prostitution, especially those who have stayed in Turkey for years have more power. They can also become fearless after going through extremely oppressive relationships and eventually can reproduce oppressive practices against other migrant women. Some women were making money by exploiting other women by bringing them to Turkey. On the other hand, when there is a detention and sickness, or a death requiring a sending the body home and a funeral back in Uganda, these women were the ones who supported others. But despite their solidarity with the community members, they were also able to exploit other women such as new arrivals or those in great need.

During my research, I was confused about these relationships as it was difficult to understand who does what and who benefits from these business, I lost track. For example, I later realized that I had been speaking to one of the women who directly benefited or mediated these relationships. It was also difficult to position some men within the community relationships. For example, I learned that a church pastor who helped women exit from prostitution was also violent to his wife. By getting know better these complex relationships, I realised that I had embraced a certain stereotype of victimizing all migrant women. Despite their fragile position in Turkey's migration and gender regime, I realized that there are more complex relations of power and exploitation among migrants. Women can utilise a range of resources against the oppressive relationships rather than being powerless subjects as they 'fight back' (Stanley and Wise, 2013, p.22) with their social and economic resources of gendered relationships. In general, these complex relationships also made it difficult for me to describe social positions of both women selling sex and the men I met. Sometimes I felt like I was drifting between these multi-hierarchical complex relationships in which I failed to position migrant women.

Access to women selling sex

Once I began to understand the group dynamics in the Ugandan community, I became interested in the relationships built around commercial sex industry and women selling sex. I knew that two Ugandan women whose flat I was visiting in Kumkapı rented their room to another woman, Afiya⁷. Her share for the rent was

⁶ The consent issue in prostitution is an important topic and usually works against women in Turkey as the official definitions of prostitution involves in material gain and police officers are usually motivated to prevent unregistered prostitution, those who have freedom of movement and/or small material gain are interpreted as voluntary prostitutes. For a detailed explanation see Coşkun, 2018.

⁷ Pseudonym.

higher than others, and two others said that they split the rent in half because she was occupying a room alone. Afiya was working in a sweatshop, as she told me. When I went to visit them on the weekends, I didn't see her very often because she was asleep all day. One day, when I asked if the work was really tiring, she said that sometimes she works the night shift and sleeps during the day because her legs hurt. We ran into each other a couple of times on the street in the early evening. She was usually standing on the main street with a younger, shorter and skinny Ugandan man who was talking to local men who came along. We had short conversations on the street a few times. After some time, I understood that he was a friend of hers who was also doing translation, pimping, and negotiating with potential clients for selling sex. After noticing these relationships, I started to observe the neighbourhood where one can see migrant women selling sex waiting at the lights, crossing the lights, in front of telephone boxes, or leaning in to a car while smoking and negotiating with a 'client'. At every hour of the day, one can also see men especially, middle-aged men, wandering around looking for sex who might ask any women around - "kaç para" (how much?). Sexual intercourse was taking place in the back streets behind the boulevard, hotels, pensions or in private flats organised for commercial sex.

When I started the research I was going to focus on Ugandan migrant women working in the sweatshops, however, later I decided to include women in commercial sex, so I spoke to Afiya. I told her about my research subject and that I would like to talk to her. She was a little hesitant, but agreed to meet me a few weeks later. She had a kind of daily work routine and she would meet me when she had a break. We met at a fast food restaurant close to where she was soliciting. In our interview, she explained how difficult it was to work in the 'fabrika' (textile atelier-sweatshop) as she received little money for long working hours and with no lunch. She was not earning enough money to take care of her four kids in Uganda. The reason for selling sex on the street was the pressure from her family to send money back home. She showed me photos of a half-constructed house which will be her future house in her hometown. Some parts of the interview were emotionally heavy but others were joyful with some jokes. I didn't ask her the relationships on the street or her 'customers' and she did not want to talk about them. I asked Afiya if she could ask her friends for an interview but unsurprisingly, they did not want to participate in research which would not benefit them directly, and which on the contrary, might make them uncomfortable by sharing their personal stories. However, she gave me a phone number of a man who had close relationships with women in commercial sex and act as a pimp-friend. I phoned him, introduced myself and asked if he could arrange a meeting with women who sell sex in the nightclubs and on the street. After some months he arranged two meetings but meanwhile we had a few conversations over the phone as he asked me to explain some documentation, visa applications and to help one of his friends.

“What do you want to know really?”: ‘Normal’ questions vs. reality

My first meeting was arranged with three Ugandan women who were working in nightclubs in the neighbourhood. The women met me on the low ceilinged second floor of a restaurant in Aksaray where women live nearby. I introduced myself shortly and showed my university ID card which was necessary to build a trust relationship with women who are usually deceived or cheated. I explained my subject and aim in doing such research, I answered some of their questions. They introduced themselves, then I started asking general questions about their migration motivation, journey etc. Since they did not want me to record I just took short notes. Bale, who spoke the most, was in her early 30s, a university graduate, married with two kids. She worked in Uganda for many years but unemployment and financial difficulties made her migrate, and her husband did not object to her decision. The story of her migration was also through an intermediary agency and borrowing money. She talked openly about her journey and how she was accommodated in the same house as women working in the nightclub. She was very much aware of her situation and told me that her consent was built gradually by making her see the difficulties with working in a *fabrika* and the luxurious life of her roommates. Then she talked about her working conditions in the nightclub and the relationships with intermediaries such as a nightclub operator, taxi driver, and hotel owner. She mentioned that these intermediaries provide security and could interfere quickly in violent situations. Since she had been working in a nightclub for a while, she was not happy with the conditions but she had some degree of control on the conditions. The other two women were also talkative and compared their conditions with others. Salma mentioned that her family and husband knew what she was doing but they ignored it as long as she sent money. Similarly, Acanit (32), a divorcee with kids, also said that her sister borrowed her money and pushed her to sell sex in order to pay her back. The youngest one, Camila (22) was selling sex on her own and she explained to me how she used dating applications and took security measures. Her aim was to save some money in order to marry back in Uganda. Women were sincere and friendly to me, I listened them carefully without interrupting their stories. This meeting was important to understand different relationships and mechanisms built in the community and in the commercial sex business.

My meeting with another group of women took place in a July evening in 2015. We met at a coffee shop in the same boulevard. The young Ugandan man I spoke on the phone, three women, and another man I knew from the community came along. First I introduced myself and then asked the two men to sit somewhere else. Three women were sitting across from me in a crowded coffee shop and after we had our coffees, I explained my research loudly in the noisy coffee shop and started asking my routine question. They were new in Istanbul, one of them even arrived only two weeks before while the others had been there for 3-4 months. All of them were undocumented which was usual among migrants. They were young women between the age of 22 and 27. When

I asked them why they came to Turkey, they told me about the economic difficulties they had, their children and unemployment in Uganda, and the opportunity to save some money in Turkey. These were the common reasons I was told by other respondents. When I asked them if they borrowed any money to come here, they said yes. One of them was indebted by a huge amount of money and she had to pay back more than 7,000 dollars by selling sex on the street. In fact, they did not even have the chance to look for a job and one of them even started selling sex in the same day she arrived from the airport. When she asked to have some rest, she was told “What did you expect? It is not a holiday”. It is said that it was part of the contract made between them and the money lenders. The women said that they were expected ‘to work hard’ in order to pay back their debt, however they did not expect such bad conditions in which they felt confined and confronted ill-treatment. They knew that they would work in commercial sex or entertainment but they were basically forced to work hard on the street. They told me that the money lender visited them without any notice to check if they have got any extra client in their flats. One of them said she could not sleep at all, always waiting someone to enter their rooms. In fact, she seemed sleepless, angry and suspicious of everything.

I kept asking my 'normal' questions such as their motivations, work or living conditions which I prepared to ask to my potential interviewees in general. Considering the situation in which these women were struggling with, my questions were too 'light' to understand their experiences. When I asked them what kind of problems they had, one of them asked me impatiently “What do you want to know really?”. I kept quiet. She continued, “They treat us like animals, they don't want to use condom and want to take us from behind”. I could not say anything but I will never forget the anger reflected in her eyes as she talked. At that moment, I stopped asking because it was nonsense to continue asking my 'normal' questions. I thought their situation could be considered as trafficking into prostitution and that probably they had no passports with them and that they were indebted so somehow bounded to work. I dropped my researcher ID and started to talk to them about the possible situation they were in and some options. I offered them my assistance if they wanted any help to get out of this debt relations. I told them that there are special NGOs working in the field of human (sex) trafficking and I could contact with them to consult with the situation and get some specialist help. The same woman replied “No one could help us” and mentioned the impossibility of their return to Uganda with empty hands. I told them that there is a possibility of sending them back after going through some ‘support mechanism’ for victims of trafficking according to the regulations, and tried to encourage them to take an action. I did not think of anything else except giving my phone number again and telling them that they could reach me any time. I think that was one of the most desperate moments I ever felt. I could not help thinking that if that meeting was arranged through a different social contact -which probably would not be possible – the interview would have been different. It is worth

noting that, even in this meeting, the women talked about their feelings, the mistreatment by customers, their debts and others. Their real life experiences were important to my research, but this interview made me question my position as a researcher and my access to the respondents through a male gatekeeper. After this meeting, I decided not to interview women who sell sex again through a man, in fact, I stopped interviewing at all.

Feminist methodology draws attention to the fact that knowledge production is highly gendered and argues that the effort to produce knowledge of the invisible is necessarily shaped by women's daily experiences and practices. However, accessing potential respondents and the knowledge production are also part of a political process that includes different hierarchies, as Harding (2004) suggests. In my research, I realised that gendered hierarchies among fragile groups and the role of (male) gatekeepers were extremely important in accessing potential respondents (Watts, 2006; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). In fact, these hierarchical relations, which are usually managed by men, often not only shape design and knowledge production but risk reproducing hierarchies. In my research the challenge was to access women in prostitution. The commercial sex industry, either legal or illegal in Turkey, is also one of the fields where female researchers have much more difficulty. Existing studies show how difficult it is to conduct research in this field, both as a result of its informal or underground nature and because of the difficulty in getting permission from local governments (Açıklın, 2013; Gülçür & İkkaracan, 2002; Zengin, 2011). Furthermore, doing a research with migrants also involves in other ethical issues such as stigmatisation or the risk of deportation etc. Researchers in the field of migration face several dilemmas such as accessing respondents by using hierarchical relationships through their employers and NGOs if otherwise is not possible. By using such male dominated social relationships, women may either avoid sharing their experiences or feel compelled to share their personal stories, sometimes exaggeratedly. Consequently, the researcher can reproduce and reinforce these male dominated hierarchical relationships. In this sense, it is not sufficient to obtain the so-called informed consent of the interviewees who often do not know exactly where and how their stories will be used or what purpose they will serve. Therefore, the design of the research, access to the interviewees and the ethical issues become important in questioning these hierarchical relationships. During this research, I experienced how gender hierarchies not only shape community relationships but also the research processes. Men's advantageous position in the community allows easier access to public spaces, stronger economic and social resources, knowledge of Turkish, and, having migrated earlier, creates a hierarchical position among migrant community and in Turkey, a male-dominated society.

Interpretation, constructing the data and analysis

Another area that feminist methodology points to and where these hierarchies are produced is in data and the writing process (Wolf, 2009, p.400). In fact, the researcher has more control over her own research processes and results during the writing process (ibid.) As when quoting the stories of women, the researcher can take the initiative to include in her analysis what she finds important. The researcher can also use initiative with the terminology she uses, the way she narrates and interprets the testimonies. However, when doing research with the disadvantaged in particular, the researcher is responsible for the effects of the data she uses, both to the people she interviews and to the wider social group they represent. Basic ethical principles such as protecting personal data, not harming respondent individuals or groups, using a stigmatizing or criminalizing language or terminology are some of the issues that the researcher should question when analysing the data (Clark Kazak, 2017). In order to minimize the power in data analysis, researchers adopt some strategies such as direct representing or co-writing by incorporating the perspectives of the interviewees into knowledge production and theory (Ong 1995 as cited in Coşkun et al., 2020, p.77; Wolf, 2009, p.375). For example, asking the opinion of the interviewees before the data analysis and discussing the results with them are some of the methods that are used to ensure this polyphony. Although these methods are criticized for some ethical issues (reflecting a certain tendency, etc.), they are often not applied by the researcher as they require a significant amount of time and energy even when participants are willing to share their views. In my research, although I had a chance to ask their opinions on the findings and discuss different dimensions of the research, most of them were either busy working or uninterested in academic reading. I did not have any other chance again to talk to women respondents selling sex on the street. I also tried to discuss the results with some participants and other feminist researchers. For example, I was advised to adopt a critical approach to women's stories of being involved in prostitution and discuss further instead of adopting a homogenised approach. I tried to organise my results partly on these discussions. It necessarily involved selecting narratives, so I tried to include both typical and different stories in narrative constructions of reality, and not to represent any one tendency. For example, I selected different stories of how women became involved in prostitution in order to show different consent-building processes, deception and women's agency within certain conditions. Furthermore, I did not include some biographical data such as detailed description of previous work experience, number of kids, names of home towns or detailed explanation of living environments. I was trying to be careful about how much information to include in the analysis in order to protect and not to cause any trouble to the Ugandan migrant group. For example, I chose not to write some details, both personal and spatial, as they might serve to stigmatize the Ugandan community as well as the participant women. Instead, I focused on stigmatisation against Ugandan (and other) migrant women as 'voluntary' prostitutes, gender-based inequalities within and outside of the community, and structural

restrictions on migrants in Turkey and systematic male violence against migrant women. Otherwise it would be contradicting with the aim of my research which was to improve women's lives by using the research.

Concluding remarks

This paper focused on methodological and ethical concerns arose during my fieldwork with Ugandan migrant women selling sex in Istanbul, and the possibilities of building a non-hierarchical research process in the light of feminist methodology discussions. It has discussed and illustrated how difficult it was to challenge the hierarchies and the complex nature of the power relationships in the fieldwork. It argues that complex political and social relationships in the research process cannot be easily accommodated in a feminist research paradigm. During this research, I experienced how gender hierarchies not only shape community relationships but also the research processes. Men's advantageous position in the community and in the society creates a hierarchical position among migrant community and in Turkey, a male-dominated society. These male dominated relationships can affect the access to potential respondents, the meeting environment, the content of testimonies and, eventually, the result of the research. Therefore, it is important to adopt a critical approach to gendered and power relations in the field of study, and to avoid using these power relations in order to access potential interviewees. My fieldwork also shows the importance of questioning the position of the researcher and 'the researched' hierarchy, and the complex hierarchical relationships in the field. The discussions on feminist methodology argue that not only women's individual experiences but also the researcher's experience and the gendered hierarchies are important factors in the knowledge production. The differences between the researcher and the researched such as gender, class, ethnicity, access to social and economic resources, education and language knowledge create significant hierarchies that impact knowledge production. It is also difficult to understand complex hierarchical relationships among fragile groups based on gender, age, the length of stay, economic and social resources, education etc. Although it is not possible to completely eliminate these hierarchies which can affect the research design, process and analysis significantly, being aware of these power relations and seeking the possibilities of non-hierarchical relationships in the research processes is an important tool that the feminist methodology offers to researchers.

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