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Sex, Money and Modern Slavery: Trafficking of Travestis and Trans Women from Brazil to Europe for Sexual Exploitation

*Seks, pieniądze i nowoczesne niewolnictwo: handel travestis
i transkobietami z Brazylii do Europy w celu wykorzystania
seksualnego*

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Abstract: While sex and money may appear as subversive notions, attracting easily all the attention, it is also true that the issues raised in this article are, paradoxically, largely invisibilised. This invisibility seems to counterbalance the importance of the phenomena described in this work and justifies it in itself. Indeed, by coming back to the various mechanisms that lead to the immigration, voluntary or not, of Brazilian trans women and travestis to Europe, this article aims to emphasise the social and concrete realities suffered by these victims and related to their sexual exploitation. If, as we will see in our study, this particular migration is explained and driven by a strong desire to accomplish themselves more freely and decently in Europe and thus escape social realities such as discriminations and attacks that are part of their daily lives in Brazil, it is clear that when they arrive in Europe, these victims are confronted with a harsh reality, where their rights are violated and where a return to the past appears sometimes impossible. From a socio-anthropological and legal perspective, the objective of this work is to look at the characteristics of this sexual trafficking, which, as we shall see, can be identified as a form of modern slavery. We will, therefore, discuss the key notions and concepts related to this issue, before analysing the concrete manifestations of this form of modern slavery and attempting to explain it.

Keywords: Modern-slavery, prostitution, human-trafficking, trans women, travestis.

Streszczenie: Chociaż seks i pieniądze mogą wydawać się pojęciami wywrotowymi, przykuwającymi z łatwością całą uwagę, prawdą jest również, że kwestie poruszone w tym artykule są, paradoksalnie, w dużej mierze niewidoczne. Ta niewidzialność zdaje się równoważyć wagę zjawisk opisanych w tej pracy i niejako sama ją uzasadniać. Rzeczywiście, wracając do różnych mechanizmów, które prowadzą do imigracji, dobrowolnej lub nie, brazylijskich transkobiet i travesti do Europy, ten artykuł ma na celu podkreślenie społecznej i konkretnej rzeczywistości, jakiej doświadczają te ofiary, gdy są ofiarami handlu seksualnego. Jeśli, jak zobaczymy w naszym badaniu, ta konkretna migracja jest wyjaśniana i napędzana silnym pragnieniem bardziej swobodnej i znośnej samorealizacji w Europie, a tym samym ucieczki od realiów społecznych, dyskryminacji i ataków, które są częścią ich codziennego życia w Brazylii, jasne jest, że po przybyciu do Europy ofiary te stają w obliczu trudnej rzeczywistości, w której ich prawa są łamane, a powrót do przeszłości wydaje się czasem niemożliwy. Z perspektywy społeczno-antropologicznej i prawnej celem niniejszej pracy jest przyjrzenie się cechom tego handlu seksualnego, który, jak zobaczymy, można zidentyfikować jako formę współczesnego niewolnictwa. Omówimy zatem kluczowe pojęcia i koncepcje związane z tym zagadnieniem, zanim przeanalizujemy konkretne przejawy tej formy współczesnego niewolnictwa i podejmiemy próbę jego wyjaśnienia.

Słowa kluczowe: Brazylia, współczesne niewolnictwo, prostytutka, handel ludźmi, transkobiety, travestis.

1. Introduction

The sexual exploitation of Brazilian cis and trans women, inside and outside the country, is a reality that deserves to be analysed from different perspectives and in different areas of knowledge. This study, in that sense, proposes a reflection on the complexity of this social phenomenon, focusing on Brazilian trans women and travestis¹ who migrate to the European continent. Our intention is to create a discussion based on two axes: (a) the construction of a trans-feminine subjectivity from the production of identities, life experiences and structural transphobia; and (b) the invisibility of the gender and identity discourses on the crime of contemporary slavery in cases of human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation in Brazil.

The aim of this study is therefore to clarify how the international sexual trafficking of Brazilian trans women and travestis to Europe is articulated and what are the main mechanisms of recruitment, coercion, and exploitation of these workers. This article will also seek to establish bridges with the

¹ The word "travesti" refers to a particular Latin American identity, but with no corresponding translation: "transvestite" does not translate its notion well, and "transgender" does not reflect the cultural identity linked to it.

current debates on gender, gender identity and contemporary slavery and the social reality of the above-mentioned traffic mechanisms.

To this end, we have methodologically constructed our approach on the basis of a bibliographical review and on the analysis of national and international documents and data previously produced, fostering trans-disciplinarity. We start from the idea of the relevance of dealing with this issue by interconnecting ethnographic-sociological debates with juridical discussions on contemporary slavery. The aim is to elaborate a legal, racial, class and gender analysis, observing the specificities of trans subjects coming from a particular geographical and socio-cultural context, located in a periphery of the world.

In order to carry out this analysis, we will begin by addressing the conceptual framework of the research, covering the concepts of “women”, “trans”, “travestis” and the notions of “contemporary slavery”, “slavery in the strict sense”, “debt bondage”, “forced labour”, “human trafficking” and “sexual exploitation”. We will then provide some general facts and understandings about the intersection of slavery, migration and gender, before reaching the socio-cultural analysis of the production of specific subjects - in this case, trans women and travestis - identified as clear targets of human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Finally, we will address the mechanisms used by trafficking networks to recruit people and maintain them as victims, as well as the strategies that exist for these networks to sustain themselves.

2. From which conceptual basis we start

First of all, it appears relevant to identify the conceptual framework in which we are working. Our research field is limited to trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, specifically of transgender people who identify themselves as female. In other words, people medically assigned, at birth, as men but who socio-culturally identify themselves as “women” or “female subjects”, or people whose identity is close to femininity, not at the level of gender expression, but rather as a subjective self-identification. Regarding this topic, it appears necessary to define several notions and concepts that will be of particular interest for our study.

The first point that seems necessary to clarify is the idea of “women”. “Women” is understood here as a historical and political gendering category, highly subjective and interrelated to a social and cultural reality. By historical

category, we mean that it always considers variations and changes; not as if history were a conscious entity, but as if it were subject to interference. Also basing our work on the notion of gender as performativity, as articulated especially by Judith Butler (2007), “women” are individuals who identify themselves as such and who socially and publicly assume this identity. They, therefore, do not attach any importance to the traditional biological boundaries imposed by a self-referential discursivity and its “natural/nature” paradigm. In this sense, with the category “women”, we will be referring to both cis and trans women.

The second important concept that needs to be mentioned is the notion of “trans”. We use the term “trans” as a way of encompassing different definitions (in any case, inclusive and for which it would be impossible to make a strict and closed definition) of transsexual, transgender, travesti, etc. This category could also include different trans-identities, such as non-binary people, i.e., genderfluid, agender, etc. However, in this study we will focus on feminine identities. When we will be referring to transsexual or transgender women, we will use the term “trans women”, and when we will be discussing travestis, we will use the term “travestis”.

And why don't we also use the term trans women to refer to travestis? Despite embodying specters of femininity, travesti generally reject the term “woman” to refer to their own identity. Taking the Brazilian context as one of the backgrounds here, it would be inescapable to speak of the category “travesti”. This is because it is a Latin American identity. In other environment, such as in Spain, the term “travesti” is much closer to the biomedical fetishist definitions of transvestism, that understand “travesti” as a cis man who dresses and presents himself - generally in private spaces but it is also possible to make a public appearance - as a “feminine creature”². In that way, following this understanding, “travesti” would correspond to “crossdresser”, “drag queen” etc.

² Magnus Hirschfeld, a German sexologist, defined "transvestism" as the desire to wear clothes of the "opposite" sex, understanding it as a marker or facet of homosexuality. In contrast, Harry Benjamin, a German-American psychiatrist who studied the "trans phenomenon" in detail, developed conceptual frameworks that had a significant impact on the medical protocols and treatments applied to trans people for the purpose of "correcting their sex and gender non-conformity". Benjamin followed Hirschfeld's definition, but went even further; by differentiating, for example, transvestites from transsexuals. He believed that the latter wanted to undergo sex reassignment surgery, while the former were comfortable with their genital attributes. See Hirschfeld, 1992 [1910] and Benjamin, 1966: 10-31.

This definition, however, does not correspond to the definition we use in Latin America.

In Brazil, travestis constitute a self-declared community that experiences a feminine identity and displays an expression of gender that is also feminine, without defining themselves as women. In other words, they are people who, having been assigned as males/men at birth, before questioning this imposed identity and putting into practice a feminine performativity without claiming the category “woman” (being, therefore, also trans people). Thus, they express themselves in terms of gender in a feminine way, they identify themselves through feminine linguistic markers, they may wish (or not) to surgically modify their sexual characteristics, but they do not recognise themselves as “women”, but as “travesti” (Cunha, 2021: 268). This is why we can understand them as a self-declared community with respect to gender. In this sense, Jacqueline Gomes de Jesus (2012) defines a “travesti” as someone who experiences female gender roles, but who does not recognise herself as either a man or a woman, but as a member of a third gender or a non-gender.

With this said, we understand “travesti” as a gender identity enunciated by self-image and going beyond the binary categories of male and female. In this way, it is possible to see it more clearly³ as a performative gender construction: the self-designation and self-declaration of that group, not only verbally, but also bodily, through repetition, will shape and confer “existence” to it. Moreover, some studies point out that the idea of “travesti” carries with it a radicality and is linked to a peripheral and marginalised social reality (Bento, 2008: 12; Kulick, 2008: 24). As such, it would be impossible to understand *travestility* without considering an intersection with class.

Still, it is frequent to see the vestiges of pathological classifications that differentiate travestis and transsexuals according to whether or not they are willing to make permanent modifications to their bodies. In some situations, the transsexual category is still associated with body/genital modifications, and the travesti category with the use of clothes attributed to a different gender. However, trans experiences, identities and lives are multiple: trans women who do not want to undergo surgery and travestis who want to undergo

³ We underline the adverb “more clearly” because this is not to say that the gender construction of cis women and cis men is not performative, but only that, because it is embedded in the discourse of “nature” and “biology”, its performativity is hidden, assimilated into the socio-cultural normality of sex and gender.

not only a mammoplasty but also a vaginoplasty must be considered in order to build a comprehensive and inclusive definition of these notions. In other words, travestis, as an identity category, overlap the hermetic definitions constructed by the biomedical sciences, which also informed the pathologising paradigm that imposed the need for “bodily normalisations”. Not because, by any means, they do not make or do not want to make modifications to their bodies, but because they maintain through their own life experience that this is not an essential criterion for moving from one gender to another.

The pathologising scheme generates the idea of trans-identities as “mistakes” for which treatments are indicated, in order to normalise trans people. We identify this as a consequence of transphobia, which attributes everything that does not follow the cis-sexual paradigm as inferior, harmful, unnatural and anti-natural.

The third notion that is important to define is the concept of modern slavery. We understand it as a term that encompasses a series of violations of human rights and specifically labour rights, including slavery in the strict sense, but also forced or compulsory labour, slavery-like institutions, systems and forms of slavery, and human trafficking. It, thus, refers to “men, women and children living at the limits of what is bearable, forced to work in unchosen activities or conditions, under constant coercion and threat” (Goldman, 2014: 10).

Slavery in the strict sense refers to the exercise of the attributions of the right of possession of one person over another in order to exploit them economically, for example through the purchase, sale, transfer, donation, violation, use, management and/or transmission by inheritance of one person over the others. As a result, the “civil and social death of the enslaved person” is observed, who is thus relegated to the lower social classes in a given society, and who sees his or her status as a degraded human being (Alonso, 2017: 334-335).

In the case of forced labour, there is an imposition of labour on the worker through “unjust, abusive, oppressive or humiliating” coercion, such as the withholding of documents or wages, denunciation to the local authorities due to irregular status and/or expulsion from the country, confinement, denial of basic needs (food, water and visits to toilets), threat or submission to physical, psychological or sexual violence practised on oneself, a family member or a loved one (Morales, 2017: 294-295). In addition to the violence listed above, among the coercive mechanisms found in the context of human trafficking and slavery, we can also mention mistreatment, imprisonment, induced

debt, confiscation of documents, cultural and language isolation, etc. (Goldman, 2014).

Debt bondage consists of the abusive and illegal collection by the employer of alleged amounts – mostly beyond the commercial value – from the employee for expenses related to transport, accommodation, food, clothing, work objects, protective equipment (when available), medicines and other consumer goods. The intention is to create a relationship of economic dependence in which, no matter how hard the worker will work, he or she will have an eternal and unpayable debt with the employer (Repórter Brasil, 2015) and will be tied to the place of work, thereby depriving him or her of the free availability of wages. From the attribution of prices of products or expenses, the value of work and the system of payment of debts, the domain of financial control is exercised by the employer or by the captor (Oliveira & Anjos, 2019: 116). The information is omitted from the worker, who does not have access to their finances and expenses, or if the worker does, sees the total payment of debts as something almost unattainable.

However, the modalities of contemporary slavery are not static. They are extremely interlinked; they can coexist and even be merged with each other. There is an attempt to establish differences based on the seriousness of the offence, which would start with forced labour, passing through servitude until reaching slavery, which would be the most extreme form among them (Morales, 2017: 294). There is still a relation of complementarity between the modalities, that is, in situations of servitude, the presence of forced labour would be noted, and, in the hypothesis of slavery, elements of forced labour and servitude would be verified (Alonso, 2017: 350).

According to the definition of Article 3 of the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime, of 2000, human trafficking refers to:

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.

In this way, human trafficking can be understood from three stages: (a) the acts, related to recruitment, transport and accommodation; (b) the means, that is, the use of some kind of violence (physical, psychological, economic, among others) to maintain control over the victim; and (c) the purpose: labour exploitation, sexual, physical etc. (Bronstein, 2019: 15). It is assumed, therefore, that trafficking involves the exploitation of the person to carry out some activity, which is considered a merchandise.

Finally, we understand commercial sexual exploitation as “any activity aimed at promoting, facilitating, developing or benefiting a third party through any form of sexual commerce”, including prostitution, pornography and sex tourism (Goldman, 2014: 65)⁴.

3. Crossing the Atlantic in the reverse direction

In this section, we will work on different issues that underpin the debate that concerns our purposes. First, we will present a broad overview, based on key statistics and ideas about contemporary slavery, migration and intersecting gender. Next, we will problematise the socio-cultural context in which subjects are most easily exposed to the recruitment networks of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Finally, we will analyse the history of the trafficking of travestis and trans women (from Brazil to Europe) for the purpose of sexual exploitation, as well as the mechanisms of these networks, their strategies, articulations and the consequences on the victims’ lives.

3.1. Slavery, migration and gender: facts and general notions

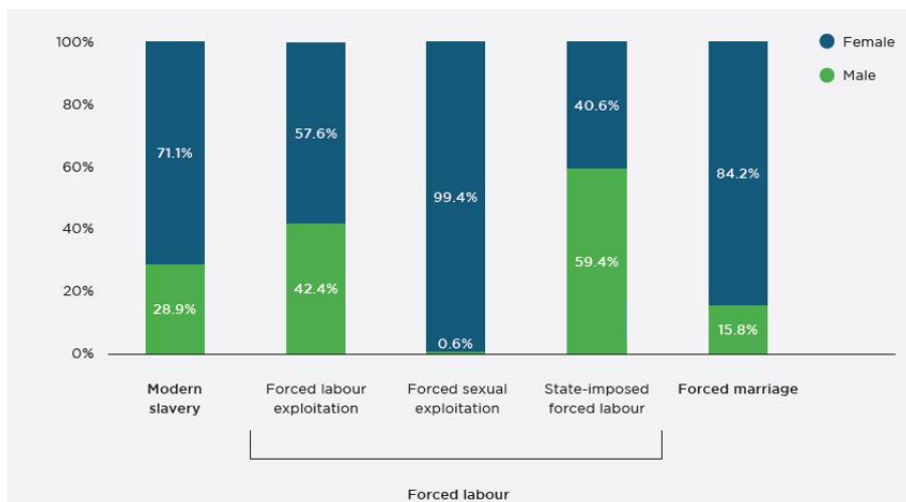
From a hermeneutic study of the main decisions of European, American and African international courts, we can outline a general profile of the enslaved worker: migrant from an underdeveloped country, who began to be exploited in childhood or adolescence, mostly of the female gender and completely unassisted in terms of their fundamental rights and guarantees. This information regarding the qualitative analysis developed is consistent with the existence of a socio-sexual, racial and ethnic division of labour and corresponds with the data systematised by international organisations (Mesquita, 2022).

⁴ It should also be noted that the legal definitions that built this concept are related to the human rights conventions promoted by the United Nations (UN) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries, as well as the actions of non-governmental organisations, States, intercontinental human rights tribunals and other international actors.

According to the International Labour Organisation, the Walk Free Foundation and the International Organization for Migration (2022: 1), there are currently 50 million people subjected to modern slavery in the world.

Within this population, the crime directly affects the female population, as 71.1% of the victims are women and girls. Gender appears as a risk factor for slavery, especially when analysing the activities in which the female gender predominates, as shown in the following graph. In this sense, 99.4% of illegal workers in the commercial sex industry are women, slaves of the sex trade (ILO, Walk Free Foundation and IOM, 2017: 10).

FIGURE 1 - PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF VICTIMS OF MODERN SLAVERY, BY GENDER AND CATEGORY



Source: OIT, Walk Free Foundation and OIM.

Within the verification of the proportional prevalence of women and girls, there are important variations that should be studied and applied in public policies by States, such as the fact that, in the case of forced labour, there are activities that concentrate more female labour, such as domestic work and sexual exploitation, and others that exploit men more, such as agriculture, manufacturing and construction. Furthermore, when analysing the reasons for coercion in the context of slavery, it was found that women were more likely to suffer violence, especially sexual violence, and to have their passports withheld, while men were more likely to receive threats against their families, withholding of wages, confinement, denial of food and other legal intimidations.

tion, such as reporting their irregular status to local authorities (ILO, Walk Free Foundation and IOM, 2017: 35). Gender differential violence, particularly sexual violence, in the context of contemporary slavery, will appear as a factor of control over women in most violations of labour or other rights.

However, Brazilian indices seem to contradict this logic as, according to data from the Observatory for the Eradication of Slave Labour and Human Trafficking, 94.9% of the slave labourers rescued in the country between 2003 and 2021 were men. However, this predominance does not necessarily imply that contemporary slavery in Brazil is predominantly masculine. It is incredible that, of the total number of enslaved workers in the whole country, only 5.1% are women, given that the majority of the national population is made up of women and that globally gender appears as one of the risk factors.

It can therefore be affirmed that there is an invisibilisation and under-recording of contemporary female slave labour, either because of the lack of inspection, the non-recognition of some activities carried out by women or the difficulties in inspecting professions considered by the sexual division of labour as more feminine, such as sex workers or domestic workers⁵.

Female slave labour is generally only visible “when women assume the universal labour roles assigned, according to the sexual division of labour, to the male subject”, hiding the importance of other work more directly related to reproduction and the global chain of care in the domestic sector (Pereira, 2020: 8). In the specific case of sex workers, there is a strong stigmatisation, attribution of blame and lack of recognition of their vulnerability to slavery due to the work they do (Suzuki, 2020: 16). As for transgender women and travestis, another possible reason for this statistical invisibility may be the non-recognition of their true gender, institutional transphobia and the low number, or ineffectiveness, of public policies aimed at guaranteeing the rights and protection of this population.

3.2 Trans women and travestis as victims of human trafficking

The fact that socio-economic vulnerability resulting from class, racial and gender inequalities is the main risk factor for trafficking and slavery has to be highlighted. When we talk about modern slavery, one point that articu-

⁵ Rescued cis and trans women often do not benefit from unemployment insurance, which makes them more vulnerable to revictimisation (Plassat, 2020).

lates the intersectionality between gender identity and migration is the trafficking for sexual exploitation of travestis and trans women. In this case, the feminisation of poverty is intertwined with issues of race and gender identity, where specifically structural male chauvinism, transphobia and racism are evident (UNODC, 2021: 12-13). The constant family, social⁶ and labour⁷ reject and marginalisation seem to be a strong cause for seeking migration as a survival strategy, so that in another geographical space they can exercise their gender identity without such barriers and have a more decent quality of life.

In the case of trans women and travestis, whether they are deceived with work promises or convinced and aware that they are going into prostitution - mainly in European countries - they can end up being victims of human trafficking, submitting themselves to exhaustive days of sex work, in a system of debt bondage in which they are excluded from any legislation and social protection and are vulnerable to a series of types of violence (psychological, economic and physical, for example).

In this sense, "most travestis come to trafficking with a very similar background: they were expelled from home, they were unable to finish school, they did not have access to jobs. They, therefore, see trafficking as the great hope for a new life" (Marilac & Queiroz, 2019: 91). Moreover, the ideal of trans/travesti beauty promoted in Brazil is an important axis in the construction of their identities. The search for the "perfect body", as travestis themselves say, seems to compose largely a process understood as fundamental for them, which is, ultimately, a demanding work of embodiment (Vartabedian, 2018: 7-8) in order to become subjects with a better social status. In other

⁶ Brazil is the country with the most LGBTQIA+ deaths in the world, demonstrating how it is a hostile and extremely LGBTI-phobic environment. In 2020, "237 LGBTQIA+ deaths were counted in the national territory, of which 224 were homicides and 13 suicides. In addition, data from the National Association of Travestis and Transsexuals (ANTRA), which has been producing a report on murders for years, indicate that in the same period there were 184 deaths of travestis and transsexuals and 175 female homicides" (ABGLT, 2021: 5). These murders are considered hate crimes because, in addition to manifesting violence directed at a specific community, they are materialised through specific features of cruelty such as "the use of bladed weapons, asphyxiation/strangulation, prior torture, drowning, stoning, charring, brutal trampling, dismemberment, mutilation, genital mutilation, pierced eyes, sexual violence and the very way in which the criminal agent 'disposes' of the body" (Lins Júnior & Mesquita, 2019: 176-177). In addition to the data presented, another one attracts a lot of attention: Brazil is "the country that consumes the most pornography of trans women in the world" (UNODC, 2021: 15).

⁷ The National Association of Travestis and Transsexuals, ANTRA, estimates that 90% of trans women and travestis in Brazil are engaged in prostitution (Kometani, 2017).

words, having a certain body can give them another social recognition, it can make them “seen subjects” and more dignified.

This embodiment’s work, which often requires a great deal of effort, patience and financial resources⁸, is characterised by a complexity of factors: idealisations of femininity, high esthetic standards, race and class intersectionality. Firstly, commenting on the idealisations of femininity and these high esthetic standards that are raised, it is common to hear from travestis that they do not want to be “women” because women have “ordinary” bodies; they want to be more than that, i.e. they reflect themselves in specific people, usually fashion stars, television stars, who are in a high socio-economic position (Jarrín, 2015: 542). According to Vartabedian (2018: 83), they “seek to materialise in their bodies a gender that is defined, mainly, by the fact of feeling like women (...) [T]hey seek to resemble them through the construction of a constantly negotiated femininity. But this imitation is not based on any type of woman”. They are inspired, as mentioned above, by powerful and successful women who have voluminous and shapely bodies. Moreover, they may consider themselves more “perfect” than women because they have a more cultivated and desired conception of femininity that fascinates men, in addition, to the possibility of sexual penetration. It is understandable that the desire to keep their penis, which most travestis express, may be due to the fact that they have a more “perfect” conception of femininity⁹ gives them a uniqueness that empowers them and attracts bisexual or heterosexual men who seek sexual services with the intention of being penetrated by female figures. Thus, for travestis, the need for plastic surgery to achieve a level of beauty that they consider perfect (influenced by an idealisation of a super feminine corporeality) seems to be much greater than, for example, vaginoplasty.

⁸ As, according to the limited data available, the vast majority of travestis are engaged in prostitution, earning money means working more and, in order to work more, it is necessary to have more desirable, more idealised bodies, which almost always involves plastic-esthetic surgeries, in addition to the classic transformations of the MtF (Male to Female) transformation processes. However, this embodiment of beauty ideals does not occur for the mere reason of attracting clientele, but also to gain social recognition (see Jarrín's concept of "cosmetic citizenship", 2017: 156-187).

⁹ This distances travestis from the pathologising and normalising biomedical model, which sustains a kind of predetermined path to correct bodies according to the dominant understanding of gender/gender identity, namely: living a full experience for a certain time as a person of another gender, taking hormones and undergoing sexual reassignment surgeries (Cunha, 2020: 367). Moreover, from an institutional and structural point of view, this makes them more invisible and ignored (Jarrín, 2016: 360).

Secondly, the intersections of race and social class are very relevant to address the question of the construction of the beauty that one wants to embody. According to Duque (2011), darker skin tones are not part of their ideal of beauty. Although recent mobilisations of Brazilian black movements have contributed to a revalorisation and empowerment of black features and markers of black identity (Gomes, 2006), and despite the complex diversity of the Brazilian racial reality, cosmetic and esthetic strategies in order to whiten blackness are still common:

smoothing and brightening their hair, showing off the tan lines from their bikinis when they sunbathe so that people can see how 'white' they are, using blue or green contact lenses, as well as a lot of foundation and face powder to hide imperfections and look lighter (Vartabedian, 2018: 76).

Finally, it is important to note that these processes of trans/travestis embodiment are intertwined with a question of class: the people who display these body, esthetic and beauty standards are those who occupy a privileged position, a place of respect, legitimacy and power. In this sense, in a neoliberal context in which beauty is in a power circuit to access goods and the fight against social exclusion is understood from a perspective of participation in the consumer market (Edmonds, 2007: 371), beauty procedures carry with them the illusion of being useful instruments of social mobility. Also following this perspective, Jarrín (2017: 156-187) articulates the concept of 'cosmetic citizenship' to refer to the demand of working-class people for 'citizenship' through notions of beauty, corporeality and contextual perceptions of the importance this has in networks of legitimacy and social prestige. Thus, it is as if beauty is interpreted as an indispensable element of socio-cultural legibility. However, it seems not to be observed that this legibility through beauty and femininity does not necessarily transform them into more attractive subjects for the formal labour market (Kulick, 2008: 192-193).

It should be noted that these ideals of beauty, esthetics and embodiment are not a trans/travestis heritage but are reflected in the Brazilian social structure. According to 2015 data from the International Society for Plastic Surgery, in the ranking of the number of plastic surgeries and facial procedures, Brazil occupies the second place: behind the United States (ISAPS, 2016).

Correlating the idea of trans/travesti migration, from Brazil to Europe, with the discussions we outlined on embodiment, femininity and beauty, several issues can be highlighted. First, there is a belief, fostered by a colonial

ideology that proclaims the radical difference (and measured in terms of superiority and inferiority at all levels) between Brazil and Europe, that the best technologies of body modification (esthetic and gender) can be found abroad¹⁰. Moreover, Brazilian trans women and travestis are considered, “among (...) other Latin American travestis - as the most 'beautiful' and 'feminine' ones” (Vartabedian, 2018: 2). This fetishisation, and sexualisation of their bodies, observed in Europe with respect to Brazilian bodies, provides an appreciated distinction in the international sexual market that, in a way, keeps trans women and travestis in a particular place and status in this competitive environment. In this way, the search for the perfect body and for the social mobility associated with it, and the power it entails, drive Brazilian trans women and travestis to migrate to Europe because they see in it a possibility of socio-economic “triumph”, as well as access to the best surgical techniques to satisfy the pressure for bodily perfection and the idealisations generated by it.

In this way, the picture of a fruitful scenario for migrating to Europe is depicted to them: it would be possible to flee a social space hostile to trans-identities and impregnated with constant violence (in institutions, families, the medical-health fields, the streets, with the police, etc.); earn large amounts of money through the sexual market (and thanks to the stereotypes of Brazilian beauty and the fetishisation and sexualisation of Brazilian femininity); perform plastic surgeries, esthetic procedures¹¹ and trans-specific MtF surgeries¹² with the best professionals; to finally gain access to circles of power and wealth that they were never able to occupy.

Brazilian trans women and travestis, being in a social position that constantly suffers countless forms of discrimination, having been historically relegated to the sexual market as they have been systematically excluded from the formal labour market, who so strongly assume the desire to ascend socially and be seen as intelligible, legitimate and respected subjects, end up becoming easy targets for human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation. It is essential to observe, therefore, how the Brazilian socio-cultural environment effectively produces subjects who will soon become potential victims of these international networks.

¹⁰ Vartabedian (2018: 89) also notes this imaginary in her research through the stories of the participants she interviewed.

¹¹ Such as botox, peeling, hair straightening, permanent laser hairs removal, etc.

¹² By trans-specific MtF surgeries, we mean breast augmentation, walnut removal surgery, facial feminisation, etc.

In this way, the category “trans migration” can be very useful to understand trans crossings as survival strategies. It demonstrates, on the one hand, the assimilation of Brazilian trans women and travestis as fetishised and sexualised subjects who fabricate specific bodies and esthetics. On the other hand, it also shows the economic networks that are built from migration according to the social circumstances in the geographic space of origin, the inequalities - as well as the possibility of social mobility that is pointed out - and the above mentioned corporeality and sexualisation of bodies, the economic networks that are constructed through migration according to the social circumstances in the geographical space of origin, the inequalities - as well as the possibility of social mobility that is pointed out - and the aforementioned corporeality and aesthetics that acquire more value in the transnational sexual market.

The pursuit of survival eventually leads them into the traps of an elaborate network of trafficking and sexual exploitation involving pimps, organised crime, police and border inspector corruption, debt and death, directly related to contemporary slavery and debt bondage. On top of this, we must also consider that:

Those trying to prevent international sex trafficking face a big problem when it comes to travestis and others who defy traditional gender norms. They can't even realistically know how many of us are rescued victims: in some police stations we are counted as men; in others, as women. Sometimes as “undefined”. In Brazil and in most countries that provide data to the UN on trafficking, there is no training of staff to count the heads of those who should not exist socially. We disappear, invisible in the statistics (Marilac & Queiroz, 2019: 102).

3.3 In the nets of sexual slavery

The period of Brazil's military dictatorship, which began in 1964 and lasted until 1985, placed LGBT people, and especially travestis, in a situation where they had to face the consequences of the military dictatorship¹³, as an object of police persecution, and outside of any legislative legitimisation. According to Hutta and Balzer (2013: 75), the military government saw travestis as enemies of Brazilian family morality, which also contributed to the

¹³ At that time, the term transsexual was not yet common in Brazil. The notion of “transsexual” began to become known and spread socially from the 1990s onwards, with the strengthening of the biomedical pathologising discourse, which identified trans identities as a mental illness and proposed as a treatment the correction of the body through body modifications. This logic, inherited from the European and American medical-discursive tradition, was gradually incorporated into non-Western local dynamics; this was the case in Brazil in the 1990s (Nery, 2019: 32-40).

profound desire for travestis to migrate to other countries. Being linked to the world of entertainment, nightlife and drag, travestis saw an opportunity in this medium in the European market. This is how, in the early 1970s, some travestis migrated to France to work in Parisian cabarets (Kulick, 2008: 180). However, according to Kulick, they saw in the European context an opportunity to gain fame, feminise their bodies and they therefore lived as travestis all day long (and not only at night, in show houses).

Then, due to the much higher profitability, they started working in the sex market: initially in France, in the late 1970s, and then in Italy, since 1980, when more requirements for entry into French territory were established (Kulick, 2008: 180-181). Thus, after the crossing of the Atlantic, they made another crossing: from the stage to the street. However, the obstacles they had to face would only become known later.

Between 2012 and 2014, it is estimated that more than 60% of the victims of human trafficking were migrants (ILO, Walk Free Foundation & IOM, 2017: 31). In this context of immigration, the arrival in a new country, the language and social integration difficulties, including between themselves, are already elements that diminish the glamour of the migrant's life. Moreover, this can be amplified by the increased vulnerability to the hyper-flexibility of their work to racism, human trafficking, illegal labour exploitation, kidnapping, ransom demands, extortion, physical and sexual violence, given the lack of social protection, especially when considering irregular migration situations (ILO, Walk Free Foundation & IOM, 2017: 30).

All this variability of violent and precarious situations is what trans women and travestis, when migrating to Europe, only know in practice after the fact. Many of them will live these years of immigration in fear of being deported, considering the expiry of the tourist visa; subjected to the bad weather of the streets and the fear of the police; or to the loneliness of a flat in which they spend all their time looking for clients in order to work and get more and more money (Vartabedian, 2018: 11).

In Brazil, although the trafficking of transgender women and travestis for sexual exploitation is well known, there are no official datas that provide an overview of the scale of the problem. Thus, the quantity, main flows and demands are still unknown and the main sources of information are still qualitative studies. The operations “Fada Madrinha” (Fairy Godmother) and “Cin-

derela” (Cinderella) can be mentioned as examples of cases where the police have managed to break up part of the trafficking network.

The first one was held in 2018 and resulted in the arrest of five people in the states of São Paulo, Goiás and Minas Gerais. The victims were lured with proposals to participate in beauty pageants in Italy but were actually exploited both in that country and in France. In addition, the criminal agents themselves applied industrial silicone (a toxic substance) on the victims, as a method of esthetic procedure (G1 Ribeirão and Franca and Tavares, 2018).

Operation Cinderella deals with a case of internal trafficking of trans women and travestis, most of whom were recruited in the North and Northeast regions of Brazil and trafficked to the city of Ribeirão Preto, in the state of São Paulo. The promises of body transformation, feeding, lodging and a better life were present in the recruiter's offers. However, many of the mechanisms presented throughout the article were detected by the police, among which can be highlighted the submission to reproduction of contemporary slavery (exhaustive journey, degrading working conditions, debt bondage and limitation of freedom of movement), the existence of a criminal court that punished the victims with physical punishment, fines and other penances and the recidivism of some of the criminal agents, which demonstrates the impunity of the crime. Occurring in 2019, the operation managed to rescue about 38 people (G1 Ribeirão Preto and Franca; Carvalho, 2022: 69).

The absence of “information disaggregated according to gender identity”, in addition to representing a deliberate state omission, was recorded by the UNODC in its general national report on trafficking of human beings (UNODC, 2021: 42). Another relevant factor highlighted by this document is the existence of a network of trafficking and international sexual exploitation of Venezuelan transgender women in Brazil, mainly in the state of Roraima (UNODC, 2021: 25).

We could ask ourselves whether, for the classification of trans women and travestis as victims of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, it makes any difference whether or not they are aware of the sex work they will be doing in the country of destination. Firstly, without imputing a status of guilt (in the broadest sense) to the subjects in question, it is necessary to abandon the generalising discourse that they are fooled by the recruitment networks, that they are not aware that they are going into prostitution (Piscitelli, 2008: 45). Many studies indicate that this is not plausible (Piscitelli, 2008;

Teixeira, 2008; Patrício, 2008). After all, it would even be illogical to have to hide this for people who, in their country of origin (in this case, Brazil), are already in prostitution or have internalised prostitution as a way of getting out of the margins and occupying an advantageous socio-economic position. Therefore, it is necessary not to infantilise these individuals. Most of them are aware that they will use their bodies and their sexuality to satisfy a great demand in the European market (some may even see this migratory opportunity, given by recruiters, as a help to them¹⁴). However, this does not mean that they are fully aware of the conditions they will be subjected to, the debts they will contract and the exorbitant hours they will have to work.

Here, we will not engage in a moral (or moralising) debate about the element of awareness or non-awareness in relation to the type of work to be performed or whether sex work is - ontologically - undignified work, or whether conditions of dignity can be inferred. We seek now to offer a legal perspective on this question.

In doing so, it should be noted that the argument that, being aware of the work they will be doing on the other side of the Atlantic, this group would not be victims of human trafficking or of sex slavery itself cannot be advanced. This affirmation is linked to the fact that contemporary slavery is verified independently of the voluntariness of the victim, especially when it is evident that the victim has been deceived to some extent and does not fully exercise their freedom of choice (Vallejo, 2020: 48); and here the socio-cultural, historical and political circumstances of each context may come into play.

But, as we wanted to anticipate, a cautious analysis must be made when studying the cases, avoiding stigmatising generalisations. There is a migration of trans women and travestis to the European continent that is not related to prostitution. There are also migrant sex workers in Europe who are not slaves. Thus, it is necessary to differentiate the groups and to understand that, within the universe of travestis and trans women who migrate for prostitution, there are different degrees and mechanisms of subjugation and exploitation, including those that lead to slavery.

One of the mechanisms that deserves to be highlighted is the rotation of these migrants through various European cities, partly in order to have contact with a larger clientele and avoid problems with the police or migration

¹⁴ See research conducted by Piscitelli, 2008.

control agencies (Castro, Rosado & Fernández, 2009). And, on the other hand, as they are subjected to a network of sexual slavery, so that they do not establish a residence and, therefore, do not take root anywhere and do not build support networks. It seems even a subtle mechanism, but it certainly creates a very favourable environment for those who profit from sexual exploitation.

Several other mechanisms can be articulated to make the migrant a victim of contemporary slavery: deprivation of liberty, precarious and unhygienic accommodation, which makes her right to privacy vulnerable (Goldman, 2014: 71); subjection to exhaustive working hours to pay for the expenses involved in the journey (Kulick, 2008: 186) - issuing passports and visas, tickets, bribes from border inspectors, etc. -, in maintenance - accommodation, bribing police officers to avoid complaints or inspections, paying “*ponto* [point]”¹⁵ (Piscitelli, 2008: 45), etc. - and in MtF surgeries and esthetic procedures (which shapes at least the notion of debt bondage); drug addiction and the incitement of clients to become addicted as well (Goldman, 2014: 101); among other mechanisms.

The complexity of these networks and the multiplicity of strategies employed to keep these trans women and travestis in criminal dependence on their abusers is remarkable. Moreover, the capacity for feedback to these networks from other women (cis and/or trans) and travestis, including those who had previously been enslaved, is noteworthy.

Goldman, for example, highlights the incidence of women in this criminal branch: “In brothels, there are usually women in charge of the premises, tending the cash register or the bar, exercising direct control over the exploited girls” (Goldman, 2014: 84). It also highlights the fact that there are several pimps running these businesses and many women who are “recruiters, transporters and intermediaries, [...] chosen because they inspire more confidence in the victims than the men” (Goldman, 2014: 84). There are also recurrent accounts of women and travestis who have somehow gained prestige and/or socio-economic recognition in this environment, have seen it as a lucrative business opportunity, and have subsequently become recruiters,

¹⁵ Brazilian travestis and trans women who are not in prostitution houses as such need to pay pimps a kind of rent to stay at a certain point on a street and be protected from police raids (Vartabedian, 2018: 209-2011) or from violence from other groups (with a transphobic, whorephobic, xenophobic or robbery character).

transporters or pimps of future victims¹⁶. It can be seen that this is an even more elaborate strategy: women (cis or trans) and travestis mutually recognise each other (Teixeira, 2008: 279); there is, therefore, a facilitation of contact and communication between them, of the work of convincing and attracting them to trafficking.

In addition to the possible physical consequences of this type of slavery, such as vulnerability to “infectious diseases, especially sexually transmitted diseases” (Goldman, 2014: 71), as well as the lack of prevention and treatment of other diseases, due to the difficulty of access to health services, there are other possible psychological consequences. These include depersonalisation (i.e. the person does not see him/herself as a victim, but as something that happened to someone else), altered perception of time or memory loss, indifference/insensitivity to violence, and fragmentation of perception of reality.

It is curious how the prejudice suffered by this group, as well as stigmatisation, means that, instead of being treated as victims, they are seen as threats to the country to which they migrated. In fact, the contradictions that exist between the “free” exercise of their identities in the face of sexual exploitation and the constant risk in their lives, mean that, for them, this vision of victims of contemporary slavery is called into question (Marilac & Queiroz, 2019: 91). Thus, enslaved travestis and trans women often do not even see themselves as victims (Teixeira, 2008: 289-290).

4. Conclusions (and some last words)

Finally, and considering the various discussions presented here, certain conclusions which appear to be particularly important in the course of our reflection should be highlighted. First of all, when we discuss such topics, it is the great variety of personal situations taken at the individual level that must be reaffirmed. It appears really important to analyse these problematics from an inclusive and comprehensive paradigm as there are as many realities as there are trans women and travestis who have immigrated. This wide variety

¹⁶ Goldman elucidates that this shows that it is “a perverse machinery that feeds back on itself, with the triumph of hopelessness” (2014: 84). See also: Vartabedian (2018: 56), where she mentions the idea of ‘godmothers’ as ‘pimps’. According to the same scholar (2018: 17), “*madrinhas* (godmothers) is the term travestis employ to name those with more experience and economic means who protect, guide, and advise younger travesties in exchange for respect and money”.

of situations can be illustrated, for example, by the different manifestations that modern slavery can take. While we have focused on the issue of trans women and travestis, another point highlighted in this work is the clear and so called “gender differentiation” of these multiple forms of violence. Moreover, and still linked to the multiplicity of individual situations that can be observed, it is also by addressing the reasons for migration or, more generally, the factors that explain this phenomenon in a certain way, that a wide variety of reasons are illustrated. Largely linked to the situations observed in the Brazilian reality of transphobia (it is important to memorize that Brazil is the country where we observe the highest number of murders against trans women and travestis), and, specifically its historical environment, prone to violence, rejection and strong discrimination, the reasons motivating such immigration can be varied, voluntary or not, and motivated by economic reasons (prostitution as a means of earning a living), family and/or social rejection. Moreover, some factors are related to the search for a decent life, better social status and through a certain esthetic and physical achievement.

It is demonstrated that the traffic and the sexual exploitation are a modality of slavery, with networks constituted by pimps, policy corruption and among quantity of money provided for this purpose. Another aspect of the matter addressed in the work is the fact that often, the victims are not considered as such, whether by the political institutions and public authorities, by the civil society or by and between themselves. This biased vision of their situation as victims, as well as their structural and systemic exclusion of the ‘traditional’ labour and professional market, also lead them to become, more easily, concretely involved in the recruitment processes, and take part as perpetrators of these illicit activities, making them enter in a ‘viscous circle’ logic.

Still in the victimization process, it appears also necessary to understand the issue of trafficking for sexual exploitation as a problem that is not moral, but political-economic. When looking at the reality of trans women and travestis in prostitution, it is necessary to abandon the binarism that is often applied to them, which divides them into good victims - those who are trafficked and abused at the most diverse levels - and guilty subjects - those who sell their bodies and thus “perpetuate” male power.

According to Lewis (2020), it is crucial to understand human trafficking, whether for sexual or non-sexual purposes, as a problem of political economy because the people who fall into these networks go to satisfy a transnational

market demand that generates more wealth for a few. Lewis (2020: 120) clarifies that:

[t]he euphemism of women selling themselves is complicated because all working people sell themselves. The distinction between the labour market and global human trafficking is the difference between selling your labour power and being sold as a commodity'; thus, to 'move from alienation and exploitation to dehumanisation' is only a fine line to cross.

Bringing other perspectives into the debate, Aizura (2014: 130-131) understands “transphobia as imbricated in transnational circuits of reproductive labour and biopolitical control: the same gender variant bodies on which violence is visited also circulate as valuable within global capital”. In this sense, questions arise about whether a possible regulation of prostitution could favour a more dignified migration and work environment for these workers. However, we understand that this discussion is still very initial and that the transnational characters of both the crime of slavery (and consequently of prostitution networks) and migration increase the degree of difficulty for those who should monitor and make solutions, which must be multilevel and therefore more complex.

The function of this work, at first, was to explain the phenomenon of modern slavery, trafficking, and sexual exploitation of trans women and travestis. After having discussed these different aspects of our problematic, and in particular, the motivations that encourage this human displacement (economic and social reasons); it appears clear that one of the ways to reduce this ‘dehumanizing migration’ and its consequences continues to be the proposition of public policies of equality, employment and income for trans women and travestis.

According to Carvalho (2022: 78):

The dismantling of labor legislation and public policies for work and employment, as well as the non-recognition of quotas in universities for travestis and transsexuals and the dismantling of public policies for diversity, represents a double death sentence for this part of the population that has a life expectancy of 35 years. Without taking into consideration a (trans)sexual division of labor and, not exhaustively, public policies in the sphere of education and health, the scenario that inevitably lies ahead is the maintenance of necropolitics for travestis and transsexual bodies.

Even if the Brazilian State does not currently practice it, resolving the problem at its source appears as the more efficient and sustainable mechanism to directly reduce the need for these people to flee their own countries and their family and social circles.

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