

I Z A B E L A
Ś L Ę Z A K



SOCIAL
CONSTRUCTION OF
SEX WORK
ETHNOGRAPHY
OF ESCORT AGENCIES
IN POLAND

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Izabela Ślęzak, University of Łódź, Faculty of Economics and Sociology
Department of Sociology of Organization and Management
90-214 Łódź, Rewolucji 1905 r. Street no. 41/43
e-mail: iza.slezak@gmail.com

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PREFACE

This book is the result of a research project that I performed between 2007 and 2013, mostly within the area of the city of Lodz, one of the largest cities in Poland. Its purpose was to reconstruct the social organization of sex work in escort agencies.

Escort agencies have been operating in Poland for a little over 20 years in their present form. They are a “novelty” brought to Poland after the systemic and economic transformation.¹ These venues settled despite the abolitionist provisions of Polish law, which penalize third parties who encourage, organize or derive benefits from prostitution. They have become a part of the landscape of the largest cities, and also of some smaller towns, over time. Although the available statistical data are incomplete, there is no doubt that the agencies employ many women who combine sex work with other paid jobs or who treat it as their only source of income. My purpose, as a researcher, was to become familiar with the work experiences of the women in the agencies, and their everyday routine interactions with coworkers, *bosses*, and clients. I wanted to understand how an escort agency works, as a place for the provision of sex services, where a female worker meets a client according to the principles and rules determined by *the boss* of the venue. Therefore, my analysis of the complex phenomenon of indoor sex work focused on the organizational aspect, on ways the organization – which intends to offer commercial sex services – is created and recreated. Hence, the foreground is occupied by the perspective of the sociology of work and organization. At the same time, I reject the perspective of the sociology of morality, although this aspect of the phenomenon I researched is undoubtedly also interesting and important, not only in cognitive terms.

The choice of the analytical perspective that I adopted in the research was dictated to a great extent by the experiences I had meeting the women who provide sex services in the agencies. They referred to their activity as a job during the interviews and free conversations we had. Adopting this perspective and treating it as something more than just an attempt to rationalize their occupation validates the way in which they perceive their life and choices. Furthermore, it allows them to embrace the phenomenon of indoor sex work within a framework that pro-

¹ The process of systemic transformation began in Poland in 1989. The process of transforming from a socialist into a democratic system was started in a peaceful manner, thanks to the understanding made at the Round Table between representatives of the authorities and the leaders of underground “Solidarity” movement. These changes were also accompanied by economic (the development of a free market based on private ownership), social and moral transformations.

vides new possibilities for interpretation and theorization. It seems that researchers usually focus on the moment when involvement in sex work begins, and on the motives/conditions of this step or threats related to sex work. My purpose was to analyze the everyday life in an agency as this is the place where some female workers who are just beginning become socialized, and practices regarding health and safety are formed. The processes that take place on an ongoing basis in the group of coworkers and during meetings with clients also create a context for decision-making as regards staying in or leaving the work. Therefore, I believe that dynamics of the agency's everyday life is a crucially significant and undervalued aspect of involvement in indoor sex work.

The purpose of the research was to analyze the social construction of sex work in escort agencies. The phenomenon that I wanted to draw special attention to was the interactional work (cf. Strauss et al. 1985) between the female workers and the clients of the agency, but also between the other categories of the venues' workers, i.e., the female coworkers who provide sex services, the security workers, bartenders, and managers of the agencies. I was interested in both the course of the interactional work, its phases and categories, as well as its significance for the course of other processes (e.g., the socialization of new female workers, the development of safe working conditions). I also planned to research the organizational context in which sex services are provided and its meaning for the *work situation*.²

The adoption of this perspective was related to specific theoretical and methodological choices. The focus on the interactions that take place on the micro-scale of an organization made me utilize, first of all, theoretical concepts related to symbolic interactionism. This was also related to the methodological choices that I made. I found it highly significant from the stage of designing the research to familiarize myself with the perspective of the people involved in the world of escort agencies. What is more, I planned to present it in a report summarizing the project to the broadest extent possible. The majority of people in society perceive "prostitutes" and "pimps" as some vague stereotypical figures who, because of their marginal position, have no right to take part in the public discourse about them. Therefore, these people seldom have a chance to speak up about their experiences, or their statements appear only in some sensational media framework. The primary data collection techniques that I employed to create a space for the respondents to openly communicate and present their perspective included observations performed in escort agencies and interviews with their workers and clients. Thanks to the consent obtained from the managers of four escort agencies in Lodz, I was able to perform some ethnographic research there. The workers of the research agencies became my interviewees during unstructured interviews.

² Categories resulting from the analysis of the collected empirical data are written in italics.

The employed techniques allowed me to have direct contact with the people I was researching and observe interactional episodes in their “natural” surroundings. Thanks to my extended stay in the field, I was able to observe the changes that took place in both the researched agencies and my interviewees. This approach also resulted in providing the book with numerous quotes from the interviews, which are presented unchanged in linguistic terms. I believe that this will allow the reader to better understand the specificity of this social world and the described experiences.

The subsequent research and analytical steps undertaken in the project resulted from the ethnographic character of the research and the procedures of grounded theory methodology (Strauss, Corbin 1990; Konecki 2000; Gorzko 2008; Glaser, Strauss 1967). The logic of choosing the interviewees was determined by theoretical sampling (Gorzko 2008: 107–130; Glaser, Strauss 1967: 45–78). I analyzed the empirical data in accordance with the guidelines stipulated by Barney Glaser and Anselm Straus in *Discovery of Grounded Theory: strategies for qualitative research* (1967) and Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin in *Basics of Qualitative Research* (1990). Adopting grounded theory methodology allowed me to order the course of both the research and the analytical processes. It introduced tools which allow me to focus more deeply on data analysis in the flexible model of ethnographic research. The terms, categories, and hypotheses generated in the course of the analysis form a conceptual grid which can also be helpful for other researchers who have to deal with different kinds of sex work.

Therefore, this book is an ethnography of organizations that offer sex services, where special attention is given to the women who work there. Regarding the adopted perspective, the book has its limits. First of all, it is rooted in an analysis of how agencies in Poland are run. While taking into consideration the differentiation of the world of indoor sex work for readers from other countries, it may be a point of comparison rather than a source of knowledge about how the local market of sex services is run in their country. It is worth emphasizing that during my research I spoke to women who had chosen sex work on their own and who had not been forced to select such a path. The analysis presented in the book also pertains to such a situation. The experiences of women who were victims of human trafficking or who were brought to agencies in other ways, against their will, are not the main area of deliberations (although they are still somehow connected with the chapters describing the oppressive management style and the safety of sex work). The book is a result of ethnographic research. Hence, it focuses on the perspective of the micro-world of agencies and the interactions that take place there. Deliberations on some macro-social conditions of sex work are more a contextual element of the described phenomena. Although they exert a significant impact on how the agencies are run, they are the subject of numerous publications from other authors; thus, they are just a side thread in this book.

When starting the research, and later while writing down the conclusions, I intended to present the perspective of my interviewees, their perceptions of their own actions in escort agencies, in the broadest possible manner. My aim was not to “raise” the image of prostitution or to praise this phenomenon as a trouble-free way to earn money. Furthermore, I did not intend to stigmatize or moralize about what happens inside those agencies. Therefore, while presenting the results from the analysis, I neither defend nor criticize the axionormative order shared by Polish society. I treat the existence of prostitution in its indoor form as a social phenomenon that a sociologist (or a someone from another discipline) can and should consider scientifically, trying to minimize the influence of their own feelings or beliefs (especially those not directly realized or expressed). It is important especially when we research groups that are situated (both by others and by ourselves) on the margins of society, whose members are often stigmatized. In such cases, a researcher should treat the social stigma that they face as an element of the researched reality rather than contributing to its preservation by way of designing and performing the research or presenting the conclusions. The qualitative research is based on long-standing direct contact with the interviewees, which allows us to see those who are labeled as “deviants”, “fallen women” or “members of criminal community” as social actors entangled in various relationships that go beyond simple evaluations and diagnoses.

The book is composed of six chapters and the Annex.

The first chapter presents the research project that was the basis for the book. This is where I explain some of the methodological and theoretical choices that I made when planning and carrying out the research. I present the most important approaches that determine contemporary discourse about prostitution/sex work. I also demonstrate the theoretical framework that I adopted in the research project that I carried out. Later, I present the characteristics of the collected data which the conclusions are based on. I also draw attention to some practical and ethical dilemmas that appeared while carrying out the project. Moreover, I outline the specificity of the Polish indoor sex work sector and the legal context for the running of escort agencies.

The subsequent chapters present the results of the research and analyses of the collected data.

The second chapter is devoted to the category of *constructing the work situation*, which I examine in the context of relationships between the women who provide sex services in escort agencies and the managers of such venues. It demonstrates both the principles of work organization in the agencies as well as the process of recruiting female workers to a given venue. This is also where I present four different management styles of venues and the strategies adopted by the female workers as a response to the actions undertaken by *the bosses*.

In the third chapter, I focus on the relationships between the female workers of the escort agencies, which are permanently centered around rivalry and cooperation. I pay a lot of attention to the process of developing relationships in a workgroup, and to anticipatory socialization, which is crucial for continued involvement in agency work.

In turn, the fourth chapter is devoted to the interactions between the female workers and their clients that take place *in the lounge*. I present two strategies for choosing clients, *selective* and *non-selective*, as well as the reasons why a female worker may opt for one over the other. I discuss the technique of *strategic seduction* in detail, performed both individually and by teams of female workers, as well as *incidents* that lead to the break-down of an interaction.

The fifth chapter is where I discuss the notion of interactional work performed by the female workers *in the room*. It includes some work related to negotiating the range of services, the duration of the meeting, the prices, and the character of the relationships between a female worker and her client. I also present four scenarios for meetings with a client in the room, their characteristics, and the conditions that would provoke these situations.

The sixth chapter, related to work regarding the safety of an agency, covers characteristics of the actions undertaken by the managers of venues, the security workers, and the female sex workers themselves. Furthermore, I also discuss some strategies that the female workers adopt in reaction to the subjectifying behavior of clients.

This book is a revised version of the Polish edition *Praca kobiet świadczących usługi seksualne w agencjach towarzyskich*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2016, which received several awards, among others, the 2017 EGOS Book Award from the *European Group for Organizational Studies (EGOS)* for the best book in the field of organization studies, and the Annual Award of the *Section of Social Anthropology, Polish Sociological Association for the Best Research in Anthropology of the Year 2016*.

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agreed to my presence in the venues and provided me with good conditions for the research work (mainly by not interfering). I would like to thank the people who were my guardians and who introduced me to the world of agencies. My presence in the venues would probably have been impossible (in this scope) without their mediation with managers at the initial stage of the research. I would also like to thank my colleagues from the Institute of Sociology, for creating an atmosphere that contributed to my carrying out this project. I would finally like to express my special gratitude to my husband – Jakub – who supported me at all stages of the project and who was the first reader of the manuscript. Thank you for your understanding and support.

Chapter 1

RESEARCH PROJECT – ASSUMPTIONS, METHODS, CONTEXTS

1.1. CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH – INDOOR SEX WORK IN CONTEMPORARY POLAND

1.1.1. Escort agencies in Poland¹

Escort agencies, as a specific form of providing sex services, appeared in Poland in the first half of the 1990s. That was a time when sudden activity on the market of sex services could be observed (when it comes to both supply and demand). It was a result of the transformations that took place in Poland after 1989 in all spheres of life. In the beginning, it was mainly the forms of prostitution known from the Polish People's Republic² that developed, such as street and hotel room prostitution. However, the liberalization of the law (e.g. the freedom of establishing commercial law companies and registering own business enterprises, gaps in the law, insufficient actions undertaken by offices designated to control economic entities, and the relaxation of police supervision) encouraged various types of "investors." Seeing the opportunity for high profits, they tried to adapt patterns of sex business organization known from Western Europe to the local context. As a result, massage studios, escort agencies, model agencies, etc. started to appear in the urban space. They were often only a facade for actually operating brothels. They were frequently controlled by criminal groups; thus, the safety level of the female workers and clients was rather low. However, according to the individuals who ran or worked in such places during those times, they were very popular. The reason was that they were a novelty for the clients, who had seen such places in movies or heard about them in stories told by individuals who had traveled around Europe. Now, they were accessible to almost everyone, all the more that the rapidly increasing inflation encouraged people to spend the money

¹ The subchapter is based on data that I gathered as a part of a research project that is characterized in more detail in a later part of the chapter.

² According to the ideology, prostitution was meant to disappear on its own in socialism, along with the removal of the economic exploitation of the proletariat (Karpiński 1997: 166). But it did not happen, and prostitution kept developing intensively in subsequent years (especially in the 1960s and 1970s) in both the outdoor and indoor sectors.

quickly, including on such forms of entertainment. Hence, my interviewees often remembered the 1990s as a “golden age” of prostitution in Poland.

The increased demand for (indoor and outdoor) services was also accompanied by an increased supply of female sex work. One of the reasons was provided by the structural conditions: rapidly growing unemployment,³ women’s education which was inadequate for the new labor market, and the general feeling of loss in the realities of the neoliberal capitalism (Warzywoda-Kruszyńska, Grotowska-Leder 1996). Many women thought that work in the sex services sector was a very interesting temporary solution to their financial problems.

In the first years of 21st century, the market of places offering sex services underwent professionalization and differentiation. Increasingly more effective police actions meant that some of the clubs related to criminal groups ceased to exist. The places owned by individuals who did not invest in infrastructure and personnel lost their clients and closed as a consequence. New ones emerged as a replacement, meeting the expectations of increasingly more demanding clients to a greater extent, offering varied working conditions for the women who provide sex services there.

Currently, sex work in Poland is most intensively developed in the indoor sector while the scale of outdoor prostitution is systematically decreasing. An increasing proportion of the sex services market is occupied by people (of all sexes) who provide sex services in rented apartments, and working for themselves. The popularization of the Internet and its use at the stage of winning customers and performing sex services (cybersex) was crucial for this transformation.

The dominant form of indoor sex work in the research city, but also in the region, is provided by so-called *apartments*, which can be compared to cathouses from the 19th century. They are organized in private flats whose owners or renters welcome the customers, providing them with sex services. They are usually located within housing estates, developments with large blocks of flats, near their potential customers. However, they can be hard to find by those who are not very aware, as there are no visible banners or ads. Men find the women through recommendations from other clients or advertisements published in the press or on the Internet. *The apartments* operated most of all during the day, in order not to disturb the peace (thus causing conflicts) with the other residents of the block of flats. They are usually not a registered form of business enterprises, and they change their location very often. Hence, they are often not tailored to the specific requirements of the sex business. Despite their unique function, they look like “ordinary” flats, with particular rooms used for accepting clients. A kitchen or one of the bedrooms plays the function of a staff room. The same bathroom is used

³ Unemployment was especially tough for the female residents of Lodz, where the textile industry, which previously had constituted a pillar of the local labor market, was in decline.

by both the clients and the female workers. These flats usually do not have any additional attractions (a bar, a pole for dancing). It is also harder here to maintain standards related to gathering, storage, washing and drying of bed linen and towels. Because of the small number of rooms, usually, only a few women work in *the apartment*. Prices for meetings are lower than in agencies, and the scope of the offered services included in the basic prices is usually more comprehensive.

There are some unprofessional venues that can be stressed within the group of *apartments*. They are organized by the women who work there or one of them who does not provide sex services on her own but who hires other female workers for that purpose. There are also semi-professional or professional *apartments*. These types of venues (sometimes creating a chain) are planned as a cozier competition for escort agencies. They differ from “regular” *apartments*, with higher standards and prices.

There are also escort agencies within the sex service market (Wojciechowska 2012). They are a kind of brothel, providing their visitors with the possibility of using sexual services on the premises, at the client’s place, or in a hotel. Such places were established initially only in agglomerations, tourist cities and resorts in the first half of the 1990s, however, over the course of time, they also began to appear in smaller towns. This was related not only to the development of the market and the demand for such services, but also with the police forces’ actions at the beginning of the 21st century, which resulted in eliminating the largest organized crime groups. This led to an increase in security of such venues, which resulted in the emergence of many small agencies in blocks of flats and tenement houses.

The differences between agencies and *apartments* can be described with words uttered by the owner of one of the escort agencies, who said that “this can be compared to a factory that manufactures jumpers on a production line and a grandma who knits them [W1].⁴” Numerous agencies operate legally as massage salons, matchmaking offices, service companies or simply as escort agencies. They are located near the outskirts or in the center, wherever the clients can get to quickly and conveniently.⁵ The agencies operate within the same location for numerous years, although the people who manage them can change. On the one hand, it arises from the investments made, which tailor the places to the specificity of the sex business and which incline the next owner/tenant to use the ready infrastructure. On the other hand, it is about using the effect of embedding a given address in the clients’ awareness when they are searching for commercial sexual services. Agencies usually occupy whole detached houses, apartment buildings or whole floors of a building. They are often marked with a neon sign, although it is not always immediately

⁴ Codes refer to subsequent interviewees. Detailed characteristics of the interviewees are presented in the *Annex*.

⁵ The clients are often provided with special parking spaces, covered from the street with high fences and gates, to get the higher feeling of intimacy.

obvious to passers-by what the purpose of the place is. The interiors are specially prepared for such activities, and they are larger than in *the apartments*. The center, and at the same time the representative part of an agency, is *the lounge*, where the clients start their visit. There are poles for dancing, used by the female workers, and a bar with alcohol. Apart from *the lounge*, there are also from a few to a dozen or so rooms (out of which each should have a separate bathroom with a shower or bath) devoted to the intimate meetings between the clients and the women. The rooms and *the lounge* are the only places in the agency to which the clients have access. The remaining part of the agency is reserved only for the workers: rooms for the women (where they wait for clients, get dressed, or simply live), the bathroom for the employers, a kitchen, and a room for the security guards and the agency's *manager*.⁶ The establishment is characterized by a distinctive interior design, with warm, dark colors, mirrors, accessories made of glass, metal, marble, and leather, as well as images of an erotic nature. Agencies usually hire from a few to several dozen women. These agencies operate mostly at night; however, some accept clients only during the day. They usually hire *resident* security workers who are on site all the time. They also cooperate with security companies that intervene when required. The cost of a visit to an agency is higher than in the case of *an apartment* (but a lot depends on the venue's quality). Despite the relatively high price for the company of women, additional expenditures are appreciated (e.g. the purchase of cocktails, tips for the female worker).

There are also nightclubs within the sex services market. When compared to the agencies, they put greater emphasis on the entertaining function, offering – apart from the meetings with women – various other possibilities of spending free time (e.g. lap dances, a swimming pool, billiards, a sauna). Thanks to that, the club obtains a wider range and is seen by the clients as a place for varied, not only sexual entertainment, fun, and relaxation, but also adventure (Ślęzak 2010b). Some clubs are open (egalitarian), while others are exclusive, for only verified and recommended guests, who are provided with special VIP zones with a higher quality of service.

The described types of venues create a continuum: from places where (quick) sex is seen as the only need of the clients (underfunded *apartments*), through venues where the clients are also provided with additional attractions that enhance their experiences (agencies), to premises where access to commercial sexual relations is only one of a high number of possibilities that create this special atmosphere of luxurious and exclusive clubs for men. The basis for the differentiation of the premises that offer commercial sex services are constituted by the different assumptions of their owners about what men seek in such places, and thus what they should offer.

⁶ Regarding the square surface that particular agencies have at their disposal, they differ in the number and layout of rooms. However, the basic functions are still performed there.

1.1.2. The provision of sex services in Poland and legal regulations

The Polish legal system is constructed on the basis of abolitionist assumptions. In 1952, the Polish People's Republic ratified the UN Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others. According to its provisions, Poland was obliged to revoke all rights, regulations and legal provisions that required the registration of people dealing with prostitution (or those who were suspected). It also concerned the requirement to hold particular documents and undergo specific control procedures. Therefore, in 1952, Poland officially stopped the official monitoring of prostitution. Furthermore, sections and offices for fighting prostitution that functioned within the bodies of the militia were liquidated (Antoniszyn, Marek 1985: 37). However, in reality, the people who provided sex services still underwent some intensive surveillance from the militia. This was not only for social or moral reasons, but it was also caused by the desire to gather information on Polish and, most of all, foreign clients and exchange transactions. Hence, it is hard to state that the Polish People's Republic met the requirements of the abolitionist convention. As a result of system transformations related to the process of democratization and the introduction of free-market principles, the interest of the police⁷ in prostitution declined and changed in character. Therefore, there was a field for the actual introduction of the Convention's principles.

Pursuant to current Polish law, prostitution is not illegal. However, the deprivation of liberty for a term of between 1 and 10 years is applied to everyone who by force, illegal threat or deceit, or by abusing a relationship of dependence or by taking advantage of a critical situation, subjects another person to practice prostitution (Art. 203 of the Penal Code). Furthermore, whoever, in order to derive material benefit, induces another person to practice prostitution or facilitates it (Art. 204 § 1 of the Penal Code) or just derives material benefits from prostitution practiced by another person (Art. 204 § 2 of the Penal Code) shall be subject to the penalty of deprivation of liberty for up to 3 years. The presented legal provisions criminalize third parties, which has a substantial impact on how the working conditions of people who provide sex services are organized. It is especially visible in the indoor sex sector. In Poland, it is not possible to legally carry out a business that would offer sex services (even if the sex workers' rights were respected). Escort agencies operate despite that, because some managers can take care of the artificial fulfillment of legal provisions. This is how they are left undisturbed by the legal enforcement bodies. It happens through, e.g., the registration of a business enterprise, for example, in the form of a trading and service company, a motel,

⁷ The police were designated with a package of acts in 1990, replacing the militia. Therefore, the structure of the police apparatus was adapted to the standards of a democratic state.

the provision of lonely hearts services, or performing massages. Officially, these agencies are legal companies that also hire employees. Agreements include positions typical for the above-mentioned branches, so the women work as cleaning ladies, receptionists, bartenders, dancers or masseurs, and they officially do not provide prostitution services. In some cases, they even sign a statement that they will not provide sexual services at work (Ślęzak 2017: 241).

However, it needs to be emphasized that the agencies pose an object of interest and controls of various bodies, especially the police (Wasilewski 2007: 95). Police officers control them in terms of the legality of the operated activity, the possession of drugs, the trafficking of alcohol, cigarettes, or weapon, the prostitution of minors, the prostitution of illegal immigrants, connections with criminal organizations, and procuring or facilitating prostitution, pimping, holding someone against her will and forcing her into prostitution, as well as violations of the order, and sanitary or fire prevention regulations in the operation of a business enterprise. The inspection takes place with the cooperation of representatives of the authorized bodies, including, among others: the Fire Service, Border Guards, the Tax Office, representatives of local government bodies, the National Labor Inspectorate, the District Sanitary and Epidemiological Station, or the Construction Site Inspector. However, it needs to be kept in mind that while the agency is run pursuant to legal provisions, and the female workers do not make testimonies confirming the facilitation of prostitution or procuring, handing out penalties for the crimes is impossible. Thus, often the only consequence from the performed inspection is posed by the difficulties in operating an agency (e.g. the order to carry out some renovation work adapting the premises to fire protection regulations), reflected in its financial loss.

There are also agencies within the Polish sex business that do not even try to meet the legal regulations (e.g. by registering their enterprises as a massage salon). Their operation in a given city is possible until the police collect evidence against the people that manage them.

1.2. THEORETICAL INSPIRATIONS FOR THE RESEARCH

1.2.1. Prostitution versus sex work

The complexity of the prostitution phenomenon and its organizational forms means that there are analyses based on the traditions of various scientific disciplines and different theories. Regardless of this variety, the contemporary discourse around the provision of sex services is determined by two opposing perspectives. One of them is the abolitionist position, formulated by radical feminists.