

The Invisibility of Violence Against Women in Prostitution: Hungarian Women's Narrative Strategies Within and Beyond the Industry

FANNI DÉS

ELTE Centre for Social Sciences, Institute for Minority Studies,
Budapest, Hungary

E-MAIL

des.fanni@tk.hu

ORCID

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8774-5202>

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how violence against women in prostitution becomes socially invisible through the interplay of structural inequalities and narrative processes. Drawing on socialist and radical feminist theory alongside world-systems analysis, it conceptualises the prostitution industry as embedded in a capitalist patriarchy structured by relations between semi-peripheral and core countries, where women from semi-peripheral regions are disproportionately exposed to exploitation. The empirical analysis is based on twenty-five qualitative interviews with Hungarian women engaged in prostitution in both Hungary and Western Europe. The study focuses on how temporal, spatial, and emotional distance from the prostitution industry shapes the narration of violence and trauma. The findings show that women still in prostitution tend to normalise and minimise violence, reproducing individualising narratives of control and responsibility. In contrast, women who have exited the industry – often with access to shelters and therapeutic support – articulate more structural interpretations, linking their experiences to gendered and economic inequalities. The paper argues that the capacity to narrate trauma is socially conditioned and that distance from exploitation is a key precondition for making violence visible.

KEYWORDS

prostitution industry, violence against women, trauma narratives, capitalist patriarchy, world-systems analysis, semi-periphery, feminisation of migration

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INTRODUCTION¹

Violence against women constitutes one of the most pervasive yet underrecognised social and political phenomena in contemporary societies in social practice (PATENT, 2019; CHRISTL ET AL., 2024). Within the prostitution industry, violence against women is frequently normalised, privatised, or rendered invisible (MACKINNON, 1989; JEFFREYS, 2009; MOREIRA & MONTEIRO, 2012). This paper examines how such invisibility operates – structurally and narratively – among Hungarian women in the global prostitution industry in Hungary and Western Europe.

Feminist scholarship has long exposed the structural connections between patriarchy, capitalism, and the subordination of women (PATEMAN, 1988; MACKINNON, 1989; VON WERLHOF, 2007; JEFFREYS, 2009; O'NEILL, 2013; FEDERICI, 2012; MIES, 2014). However, the specific mechanisms through which violence against women in prostitution becomes socially invisible – particularly in semi-peripheral contexts – remain insufficiently theorised. Despite extensive debates on “sex work,” neoliberal agency, and trafficking, less attention has been paid to how women themselves narrate or silence experiences of violence within the global prostitution economy (MOREIRA & MONTEIRO, 2012; SUCHLAND, 2015, pp. 163–186) and the reality of women living on the semi-periphery who are involved to a large extent in the global prostitution industry (KATONA, 2020A).

This paper argues that the invisibility of violence against women in prostitution is sustained through both structural inequalities of the capitalist world-system and narrative mechanisms shaped by trauma and patriarchal discourse. By analysing the narratives of Hungarian women who have been involved in prostitution in both Hungary and Western Europe, the study demonstrates how spatial, temporal, and emotional distance from prostitution shapes the articulation of trauma and the visibility of violence. In addition, the given regional position determines whose voices society hears on the subject of the prostitution industry (DÉS, 2024). The paper thus seeks to connect macro-level political-economic processes with the micro-level production of meaning in women's self-narratives.

Immanuel Wallerstein's (1974) world-systems theory argues that the exploitative dynamics of capitalist accumulation can only be adequately understood at the level of the world-system rather than at that of individual nation-states. Uneven geographical development produces

structured relations of unequal exchange between different regions of the globe, which in turn shape their internal class formations (*IBID.*). Social relations within nation-states are therefore embedded in transnational structures of domination. Core countries systematically appropriate surplus from peripheral regions, while semi-peripheral countries occupy an intermediate position, simultaneously participating in both exploitation and subordination within the capitalist world-system (*WALLERSTEIN, 1974*). In this article, Hungary is approached as a semi-peripheral location within the European and global political economy, while Switzerland represents a core context. From a world-systems perspective, the global sex industry operates as a transnational market shaped by structural inequalities and uneven exchanges between core and semi-peripheral regions (*WALLERSTEIN, 1974; SASSEN, 2002*). Within this framework, women's bodies from economically disadvantaged regions are often commodified to sustain the prostitution industries of core countries (*DÉS, 2024*). Mies (*2014*) and Federici (*2012*) have identified the exploitation and invisibilisation of women's reproductive and sexual labour as central mechanisms of capitalist social reproduction.

Empirically, the paper draws on twenty-five qualitative interviews with Hungarian women engaged in prostitution in both Hungarian and Western European contexts. These narratives make visible the ways in which patriarchal and capitalist structures shape not only the material conditions of women's exploitation but also their modes of self-representation. By foregrounding women's voices from the semi-periphery, the study contributes to debates on global gendered inequalities and expands feminist world-systems analysis with an interpretive, narrative dimension.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I will introduce the main theoretical approaches to the prostitution industry, and the next section situates violence against women within the capitalist world-system and feminist debates on patriarchy and sexuality. The following section then outlines the methodological approach of feminist empiricism and narrative analysis and contextualises the position of Hungarian women in the transnational sex industry. The final sections analyse the interviews, comparing the narratives of women who remain in prostitution with the narratives of those who have exited it, before concluding with some reflections on how narrative distance renders violence visible or invisible across semi-peripheral and core settings.

THE PROSTITUTION INDUSTRY, PATRIARCHY, AND VIOLENCE IN THE CAPITALIST WORLD-SYSTEM

KEY THEORETICAL DEBATES SURROUNDING THE PROSTITUTION

There are three dominant discourses surrounding the social phenomenon of prostitution. The first is the abolitionist discourse, which is associated with radical feminism. This approach interprets prostitution as a consequence of patriarchy and as an ultimate expression of the oppression of women (OUTSHOORN, 2004). It does not consider prostitution socially legitimate, viewing it instead as a form of institutionalised sexual violence against women. The radical feminist approach to prostitution is linked to the second-wave feminist movement² and its key figures, such as Catherine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin, and Sheila Jeffreys (O'NEILL, 2013). Radical feminism identifies the inequality between men and women – patriarchy – as the organising element of unequal social structures. It conceives of capitalism as the modern manifestation of patriarchy (FINN, 2015; VON WERLHOF, 2007). Within this framework, prostitution is analysed through the broader inequalities between men and women, the oppression of women, and the unequal sexual relations embedded in social contexts (Pateman, 1988; MacKinnon, 1993). Prostitution is thus traced back to a social belief grounded in women's oppression – namely, that men are entitled to use women's bodies for sexual gratification (GUTIÉRREZ, 2014; MACKINNON, 1993).

The second discourse frames prostitution as a form of work. This approach includes two main positions. The first, the liberal feminist perspective, conceptualises prostitution as just another sector of the market and refers to it as “sex work,” emphasising individual choice and labour rights within existing market structures. The second, the socialist feminist perspective, also uses the term “sex work,” but situates prostitution within broader structural inequalities. Rather than treating it as an ordinary occupation, socialist feminists characterise it as an exploitative labour that emerges from class-based marginalisation, gendered economic dependency, and the unequal organisation of social reproduction under capitalism (CARRIG, 2008; CSÁNYI, 2024B).

From this perspective, prostitution is not understood primarily as a freely chosen economic activity, but as a survival strategy shaped by the structurally constrained options available to working-class and marginalised women. Socialist feminism therefore contextualises the prostitution industry within capitalist patriarchy, emphasising how global and local labour hierarchies channel economically vulnerable women into the sex industry (O'NEILL, 2013). Like other forms of exploitative labour under capitalism, sex work is interpreted as rooted in historically produced inequalities rather than in individual preference alone (FEDERICI, 2004, PP. 61–63).

Liberal feminism, by contrast, focuses not on unequal social structures but on reforming the existing social order to ensure equal rights for women (FINN, 2015). Following the postmodern turn, feminist theory and activism began to emphasise women's agency. The concept of agency typically reflects an individualistic approach highlighting the importance of women's freedom of choice (JEFFREYS, 1997). As noted, liberal feminism maintains that prostitution should be treated as any other form of work within capitalism, referring to it as sex work (OUTSHOORN, 2004). From this perspective, voluntary prostitution exists, and therefore, women who choose to sell sex should be guaranteed legal and safe working conditions. At the same time, this approach stresses the importance of preventing and punishing coercion into prostitution (O'NEILL, 2013).

Four major regulatory models in core countries can be analytically distinguished in relation to these discourses (WEITZER, 2012, PP. 3–10; OUTSHOORN, 2004, PP. 1–12). The abolitionist model, associated with the first approach, criminalises the purchase of sexual services while positioning women in prostitution as victims in need of support and exit opportunities through the welfare system (CARRIG, 2008). The legalisation model conceptualises prostitution as a form of economic activity subject to state regulation, typically through licencing regimes, spatial zoning, and administrative control. In contrast, the decriminalisation model seeks to remove criminal penalties for all the parties involved in prostitution with the aim of reducing harm and improving working conditions without instituting a comprehensive regulatory framework. Finally, the criminalisation model prohibits prostitution by penalising both the selling and purchasing of sexual services, thereby framing it primarily as a matter of public order and morality.

The issue of human trafficking began to gain international attention after World War II, particularly through the work of human rights organisations. Trafficking occurs both within and across national borders, and sexual exploitation represents its most common form (UNODC, 2012). The term *sex trafficking* refers to the trade in women and girls for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Since the 1990s, international organisations have increasingly focused on trafficking originating from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (SUCHLAND, 2015, p. 5). Within this region, Hungary ranks among the main countries of origin for victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation (KATONA, 2020A).

Debates surrounding sex trafficking largely revolve around the concept of consent (MESHKOVSKA ET AL., 2015, pp. 382–383). The neoliberal approach – underpinning the decriminalisation of prostitution in core countries – assumes a clear distinction between “forced” and “voluntary” prostitution, proposing that victims of trafficking should be assisted in exiting the sex industry. In contrast, the abolitionist perspective argues that consent cannot be meaningfully applied in the context of prostitution; therefore, sex trafficking cannot be separated from prostitution more generally (JEFFREYS, 2009, pp. 38–61). Shapkina (2014) critiques dominant trafficking discourses for their individualist orientation and calls instead for a structural approach that would consider regional inequalities and the social positions from which women “consent” to sell their bodies.

Taking a position between the three mainstream approaches is not the focus of this study. Rather than adjudicating normative debates on prostitution policy, my aim is to examine how women's narratives of violence become structured and constrained within broader systems of inequality. For this reason, I rely primarily on Marxist and radical feminist traditions when interpreting sexuality and sexual acts. These approaches are particularly suited to my research questions because they conceptualise prostitution not merely as an individual transaction but as a social institution embedded in global relations of power, class, and gender. A Marxist-feminist framework allows me to connect women's lived experiences to the organisation of social reproduction, transnational labour hierarchies, and the semi-peripheral position of Hungary within the capitalist world-system. Without such a structural lens, the recurring patterns of vulnerability, violence, and circular migration documented in my

interviews would risk being interpreted as isolated individual trajectories rather than as outcomes of historically produced inequalities.

My approach is most closely related to the theoretical work of von Werlhof, who analyses unequal power relations between the sexes at the global level and identifies patriarchy as a fundamental organising principle of society (VON WERLHOF, 1980, P. 2007). In analysing my interviews, I also draw on analyses of sexuality and sexual acts by several radical (E.G. PATEMAN, 1988; MACKINNON, 1987, 1989; DWORKIN, 1993) and Marxist feminist authors (E.G. FEDERICI, 2012; MIES, 2014).

PATRIARCHAL SEX AND THE PROSTITUTION INDUSTRY

I approach sexuality as a socially and historically constructed domain that encompasses desire, norms of intimacy, gendered expectations, and power relations (MACKINNON, 1989; VON WERLHOF, 2007). According to feminist scholarship, sexuality is embedded in broader structures of patriarchy and capitalist social reproduction, shaping and being shaped by unequal gender relations (FEDERICI, 1975; MIES, 2014). In the context of prostitution, sexuality appears not as a private or purely interpersonal matter, but as an institutionalised and commodified practice structured by economic necessity and gendered hierarchies (PATEMAN, 1988; VON WERLHOF, 2007).

Within the capitalist world-system, sexuality functions as one of the central mechanisms through which gender inequality is reproduced. The patriarchal organisation of sexuality ensures that sex is oriented around male pleasure and the maintenance of women's subordination in both private and public life (MACKINNON, 1989, P. 318; CSÁNYI, 2020, PP. 31–32). These social expectations of what constitutes “natural” sexuality contribute to sustaining unequal relations within households and society at large.

The patriarchal construction of sexuality is therefore of fundamental importance for understanding the functioning of the sex industry. Pornography and prostitution both rely on the use and commodification of women's bodies, naturalising unequal relations between the sexes and legitimising male domination (MACKINNON, 1989; CSÁNYI, 2024A). Within capitalist patriarchy, violence against women becomes normalized – and often eroticized – as a natural part of sex (MACKINNON, 1989; RODRÍGUEZ-GARCÍA-DE-CORTÁZAR ET AL., 2025). The porn industry plays a key role in this process, shaping social

definitions of sex and pleasure while portraying male violence against women as inherent to sexual enjoyment (DEKESEREDY & CORSIANOS, 2015). The unequal sexual relations constructed by capitalist patriarchy thus permeate not only sexual acts themselves but also broader spheres of social life, where women are continually objectified as sexual beings (VON WERLHOF, 2007, p. 37).

Marxist feminist theory interprets sexuality in the context of the logic of capital accumulation. Within this framework, sex and reproduction are understood as forms of labour indispensable for the reproduction of the labour force and the capitalist economic system itself (FEDERICI, 1975; VON WERLHOF, 2007). Female sexuality is shaped to serve men's needs – both to sustain them in wage labour and to reproduce future labourers (CSÁNYI, GAGYI & KERÉKGYÁRTÓ, 2018, p. 6). Federici (1975, p. 90) further argues that the institutionalisation of heterosexuality functions as a mechanism for maintaining social reproduction, as the reproduction of wage labourers is presumed to occur within heterosexual relationships.

Radical feminism similarly identifies sexuality as one of the central instruments of patriarchal domination. At the structural level, women are constantly sexualised and treated as objects; at the interpersonal level, sexual practices themselves often reproduce male power through coercion and violence (MACKINNON, 1987, 1989; DWORKIN, 1993). Prostitution, pornography, and sexual harassment are thus not isolated phenomena but expressions of patriarchal sexuality that render women's subordination both visible and profitable.

In the global sex industry embedded within the capitalist world-system, women and girls – especially those from semi-peripheral and peripheral regions – are commodified as resources for profit (MIES, 2014, pp. 137–42; SASSEN, 2002). Pimps and intermediaries, often acquaintances or family members, exploit women's economic vulnerability, profiting from the sale of their bodies (SHAPKINA, 2014; DÉS, 2024). As Sassen (2002) describes, entire communities in poorer regions depend on women's migratory labour or the commodification of their bodies for survival – a phenomenon she terms the *feminisation of survival*. In this way, the capitalist world-system reproduces both gendered and global inequalities, embedding patriarchal violence within the very structures of sexuality and social reproduction.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND TRAUMA IN THE CAPITALIST WORLD-SYSTEM

Drawing on socialist feminist and world-systems analyses, this paper conceptualises violence against women as a socially, historically, and economically determined phenomenon (MIES, 2014, PP. 145–175; DUNAWAY, 2018). Inequalities between women and men, and the subordination of women, constitute a defining structural foundation of the capitalist world-system. Within this framework, violence can be understood as a social practice that maintains gendered hierarchies across institutional and interpersonal domains (YOUNG, 1990, PP. 39–63). Its forms – ranging from sexual violence to domestic abuse – are shaped by class relations and the unequal exchange between core and semi-peripheral regions (WALLERSTEIN, 1974; WALBY, 1990; TOWERS, 2015). Economically privileged women have greater chances to escape violent relationships, while lower-class women face their enduring vulnerability, which often leads to their exploitation within global capitalist structures such as the sex industry (SASSEN, 2002; TOWERS, 2015).

Under capitalism, the nuclear family and the gendered division of labour reproduce women's dependence on men, confining them to unpaid reproductive labour and rendering their bodies and sexuality subject to male control (SECCOMBE, 2018; MIES, 2014, PP. 137–142). Consequently, women's experiences of exploitation, family life, and violence are deeply gendered and classed.

Feminist trauma theory situates the psychological consequences of such violence within these same social and economic structures. Trauma arises when external events exceed an individual's coping capacity and cannot be integrated into a coherent self-image (VIRÁGH, 2011). Yet, trauma does not occur in a social vacuum: its meaning and legitimacy depend on cultural norms and institutional recognition (BENEZER, 1999; AJDUKOVIC, 2004). At the same time, critical feminist scholars caution that the contemporary trauma discourse has increasingly shifted toward medicalised and individualised explanations, often obscuring the structural and gendered conditions that produce trauma (TSERIS, 2013). Feminist scholars such as Herman (1992) and Mies (2014) have shown that the pervasive violence experienced by women under patriarchal capitalism produces widespread yet socially invisible trauma. When institutions fail to acknowledge this violence,

they engage in institutional betrayal (PLATT, BARTON & FREYD, 2009), reinforcing women's isolation and silencing (HERMAN, 1992).

Trauma often resists verbalisation, as it manifests through fragmented memories or bodily symptoms (VAN DER KOLK, 2014). Feminist movements of the 1970s played a crucial role in naming these experiences and reframing them as collective rather than individual suffering (HERMAN, 1992; MIES, 2014). However, the language of trauma has also become a broader cultural framework through which suffering is recognised and legitimised in public discourse (BRITT & HAMMETT, 2024). At the same time, patriarchal narratives continue to trivialise or individualise violence – by blaming victims or depicting male aggression as a mutual conflict (ROSE, 1999; STARK & FLITCRAFT, 1988). Such narratives obscure the structural roots of violence and shape how women internalise trauma, often leading them to minimise or rationalise their own experiences (KATONA, 2017).

THE RESEARCH AIM AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This study draws on feminist empiricism, which seeks to make visible the experiences of women whose lives remain obscured by patriarchal and capitalist structures. Feminist empiricism emphasises the epistemic value of lived experience and aims to transform the realities of lived experience into sociological knowledge (SMITH, 2005; LYKKE, 2010; NAPLES & GURR, 2014; ASHTON & MCKENNA, 2020). The primary aim of my research is to make visible the experiences of Hungarian women and women originating from Hungary's semi-peripheral region who are involved in the global prostitution industry. Feminist empiricism underscores the importance of examining women's everyday lived experiences in order to make meaningful claims about society (SMITH, 2005, PP. 45–146), given that capitalist patriarchy systematically conceals these experiences through the invisibilisation of women's unpaid reproductive labour and violence against women.

Following this framework, my analysis prioritises the perspectives and narratives of my participants, while acknowledging that the interpretation of their narratives inevitably reflects my own analytical positioning. As Skeggs (1997, PP. 1–16) emphasises, researchers have a responsibility to bring the everyday realities of working-class women into public discourse.

In her interpretation, feminist methodology challenges the traditional mechanisms of knowledge production and reveals hidden knowledges that emerge from unequal social relations, as well as the specific realities of different groups of women shaped by historically distinct power relations.

DATA COLLECTION³

My research is based on twenty-five semi-structured interviews with Hungarian women who were, at the time of the interview or in the past, involved in the prostitution industry in Hungary or in core countries. Between 2015 and 2016, I conducted ten interviews with Hungarian women in Zürich who were selling sex illegally on Langstrasse, a central street in the city. Between 2019 and 2021, I conducted a further fifteen interviews in Budapest and in Hungarian women's shelters with women who had been involved in the prostitution industry.

In Zürich, I undertook two internships as a social worker – one lasting one month, and another six weeks the following year – at a low-threshold service⁴ targeting women in prostitution. I conducted my interviews during these periods, namely between summer 2015 and autumn 2016, and also drew on my fieldwork experiences during the internships as part of my empirical material. The low-threshold service where I was based operates in all three zones in Zürich where prostitution is legal. Social workers are permanently present only in the so-called Strichplatz zone, but provide periodic services in other areas of the city where prostitution is illegal.

I was present in the field primarily as a social worker, but the women I interviewed were aware that I was also there as a researcher. Social workers play a significant role in reducing the additional harms women may face in the sex industry – for example, by facilitating access to condoms, lubricants, free health care, and exit pathways from prostitution. As a result, the women may view social workers as figures of authority, which can influence interview narratives and interactions. This dual role – social worker and researcher – may create a perceived need to give “correct” answers in interviews or lead the participants to withhold information for fear of losing access to support. Such sensitive pieces of information might include their illegal presence in certain locations, their relationships with pimps, or situations involving increased health risks, such as selling

sex without condoms due to financial need. My prior professional relationships with many of the participants meant I often knew about aspects of their lives in advance, which sometimes limited the disclosure of new information, particularly on stigmatised issues such as health problems or abortions. However, the related pre-existing trust also facilitated their openness about sensitive topics like exploitation by pimps, with women who knew and trusted me speaking more candidly than those with whom I had no prior contact.

Hydén (2008, pp. 8–9) emphasises that when conducting narrative research on sensitive topics, there is always the risk of occupying a position of power in relation to the interviewee, even in the absence of a formal hierarchical relationship – such as that between social worker and client – as was the case between myself and the participants in Switzerland who were selling sex. Power imbalances are also inherent to the interview format itself: the interviewee shares the most sensitive details of her life, while learning little about the researcher in the process. Moreover, in most cases, the interviews I conducted were shaped by power asymmetries grounded in class relations (KATONA, 2017, pp. 83–85): an educated woman living in considerably better economic circumstances was interviewing women who mostly came from working-class or impoverished backgrounds. My own role as researcher revealed how class differences limit the possibility of a shared female experience. Economic vulnerability is a decisive factor in one's entry into prostitution, and lower-class women form the largest segment of the industry (SUCHLAND, 2015). Analysing prostitution and sex trafficking therefore requires an explicit class perspective alongside feminist approaches to violence against women.

Three interviews were conducted with women who were selling sex in Budapest at the time of the interview; I met them through social institutions and carried out the interviews within those settings. The remaining twelve interviews were conducted with women who had exited the prostitution industry and were living in shelters. In Hungary, shelters provide accommodation for women escaping intimate partner violence as well as for victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation. I conducted interviews in two confidential shelters – one state-run, one church-run. The addresses of such shelters are kept secret to prevent abusive partners or pimps from locating the women. Therapy is generally available in these shelters,

and at the time of my interviews, most of the participants were engaged in therapeutic processes to address the traumatic experiences they had endured both in and prior to their involvement in the prostitution industry. The direction of the therapy, as well as the therapist's perspective, can influence the narratives attached to traumatic events, as the therapist and client together assign new meanings to those events (HERMAN, 1992, PP. 236–254). Thus, how my participants narrated their experiences was also shaped by their therapists' views, particularly regarding violence against women.

My interview participants were between nineteen and forty years old. Those who were still involved in the prostitution industry were generally in their early twenties, whereas those I interviewed in women's shelters were between thirty and forty years of age. The majority came from backgrounds of extreme poverty, and the sample was evenly divided between Roma and non-Roma women. Two participants had not completed the eight years of primary education. Twelve had completed primary school, six had vocational training, and two had attended a secondary vocational school (*szakközépiskola*). Three women held a general secondary school leaving certificate (*gimnáziumi érettségi*), which was the highest level of education attained among the participants. In my paper, I interpret the participants' narratives anonymously; when quoting from the interviews, I use pseudonyms. All the participants gave verbal consent to be interviewed prior to the start of each interview.

It is important to note that half of my sample consisted of women living in shelters who were officially recognised as victims of trafficking. In my paper, I focus on one segment of the stratified prostitution industry, namely participants from backgrounds of extreme poverty. Women from such backgrounds constitute the largest population within the global prostitution industry (CORRIN, 2005, P. 546).

I analysed the transcripts of my interviews using the ATLAS.ti software. Consistently with the feminist empirical methodology, the coding process was inductive, allowing themes to emerge from participants' narratives rather than imposing predefined analytical categories (SMITH, 2005). The 25 interviews were coded based on 78 codes, which related to the following themes: life course, traumatic events, violence, sex, the prostitution industry, relationships within the prostitution industry, relationships

outside the prostitution industry, living conditions, housing, attitudes toward Hungary, attitudes toward foreign countries, and future plans. The literature refers to the researcher's shame about using other people's stories for their own professional advancement as an *ethical hangover* (LOFLAND & LOFLAND, 1995, P. 28). This sense of shame is not most pronounced during the process of data collection, when the researcher is present in the situation and engaged in dialogue with the interviewees, but rather later, when the researcher is transcribing, analysing, and writing up the interviews.

HUNGARIAN WOMEN IN THE WESTERN EUROPEAN SEX INDUSTRY

The directions of global sex trafficking are likewise shaped by the dependent relations between former colonies and core countries. The main routes of sex trafficking originate in Asia, Africa, South America, and Eastern Europe, and lead to Western Europe, North America, and Australia (REINARES, 2014, PP. 16–56). As a consequence of colonisation, distinctions based on women's origins became entrenched, and these are also reflected in the sex industry: in countries where prostitution is legalised, the bodies of women from economically disadvantaged countries are typically those available for purchase.

After the fall of socialism in Hungary, with a drastic impoverishment of women and the more pronounced gender segregation in the labour market, lower-class women began to be channelled into the sex industry in increasing numbers. The number of businesses related to the sex industry and the rate and visibility of prostitution increased rapidly in the country in the 1990s (WATSON, 1993; EINHORN, 1993). As a result of the feminisation of poverty, the sex industry and prostitution became much more prominent and visible in post-socialist countries than before (WATSON, 1993, P. 472). In Hungary, regulations on businesses related to the sex industry were much less stringent than the corresponding regulations in other countries in the region, so in the 1990s, Western investors primarily targeted Hungary in this regard (GREGOR, CSÁNYI & DÉS, 2020, P. 64). The impoverishment of women in all segments of the sex industry provided a good basis for easily channelling lower-class women into selling their bodies. In addition, the film industry had the necessary infrastructure to shoot high-quality

pornographic films in the country (SZOVERFY MILTER & SLADE, 2005; GREGOR, CSÁNYI & DÉS, 2020). Watson (1993, p. 472) goes so far as to say that the sex industry that flooded Hungary in the 1990s was a symbol of the freedom that came with the change of regime in those years: *“no longer the cross, but the porn star”*.

Eastern European women began to appear in the sex industries of core countries in the 1990s. During this period, however, the prostitution industry was not yet defined to the same extent by migration processes between Eastern and Western Europe as it is today. After 2008, women living in poverty in Hungary, mostly Roma, began to appear en masse in Western European countries where prostitution had been decriminalised (ISLER & JYRKINEN, 2018; KATONA, 2020B). The literature attributes the mass appearance of Hungarian women in the sex industry in Western European cities to Hungary's accession to the European Union in 2004 and the resulting liberalisation of migration and labour market policies, and the following mass impoverishment that accompanied the 2008 global crisis: in the years following the 2008 global crisis; for example Molensteeg Street in Amsterdam's red-light district became known as “Nyíregyháza⁵ Street” (Siegel, 2011), and it was then that women commuting from small Hungarian towns and deeply impoverished Hungarian settlements began to flood the Swiss and German sex industries (FINGER, 2016). Hungarian women were overrepresented in the prostitution industry in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and Austria during these years (SIEGEL, 2011; CLARK & MCARTHUR, 2014; KATONA, 2020B). Hungarian women involved in prostitution often follow a commuting pattern between Hungary and Western Europe, staying abroad for weeks or months before returning home. This form of circular migration is largely influenced by the prostitution regulations in Western Europe. Regulatory differences across countries shape not only the women's mobility patterns but also their experiences of the prostitution industry. In Hungary, prostitution occupies an ambiguous legal position: although formally legal for adults, the legal framework establishes “protected zones” where prostitution is prohibited while allowing municipalities to designate tolerance zones, which in practice are rarely implemented (FEHÉR, 2009, p. 218). Consequently, women engaging in prostitution are frequently subjected to routine fines and penalisation despite the formal legality of prostitution (BETLEN, 2013). By contrast, Switzerland regulates prostitution through a legalisation model based on designated zones and administrative oversight at the cantonal level (BÜSCHI, 2014, p. 725;

(DIEGMANN ET AL., 2012; ISLER & JYRKINEN, 2018). Because of this mobility, combined with the women's limited language proficiency, the legal precarity of prostitution, and the control exercised by pimps, the women's interactions with Western European welfare institutions tend to remain superficial (DÉS, 2024; FÁBIÁN ET AL., 2017; SEBHELYI, 2012). These regulatory differences shape the women's encounters with authorities without eliminating the structural vulnerabilities associated with poverty and a semi-peripheral position.

A large proportion of the women who enter the prostitution industry due to economic disadvantage come from Roma ethnic backgrounds (CORRIN, 2005, P. 546; PELLEGRINO, 2023, P. 23). In the case of Hungary, a key reason for this is that being of Roma ethnicity significantly increases the risk of poverty (BASS ET AL., 2007, P. 13; HAVASI, 2024, P. 64). Even before the regime change, Roma groups in Hungary belonged to the most vulnerable segments of the lower classes (KÓCZÉ, 2016, P. 46). Roma women living in poverty face not only gender- and class-based inequalities throughout their lives but also continuous discrimination from social institutions in Hungary (LADÁNYI, 1996; LADÁNYI & SZELÉNYI, 2002; SZALAI, 2002; BERNÁT, 2014). As a result of their economic and social disadvantages, Roma women often find the sex industry to be their only means of economic survival; moreover, due to their economic vulnerability, they are at much greater risk of becoming victims of sex trafficking (KÓCZÉ, 2011, P. 139). This confirms that prostitution is closely linked to inequality, poverty, and unemployment in society. The majority of women in prostitution come from conditions of extreme poverty, and most of those trafficked from Eastern Europe belong to minority groups, primarily Roma (CORRIN, 2005, P. 546). Due to poverty and racism, Roma women forced into the sex industry are further sexualised by stigmas commonly imposed on women of colour – wildness, impulsivity – which evoke associations with a “primitive” and tribal way of life (HANCOCK, 2008, P. 188).

MAKING VIOLENCE INVISIBLE: NARRATIVES FROM WITHIN AND BEYOND THE INDUSTRY

ISOLATION IN THE PROSTITUTION INDUSTRY: CONSTANT FEAR AND LACK OF PROTECTION

In the prostitution industry, women are exposed to a risk of violence from almost all the actors involved (SASSEN, 2002, P. 518; BÜSCHI, 2014).

My interviewees spoke of violence perpetrated against them by their pimps and partners. They also talked about violence from their users and how they often felt constantly threatened by other women. Anita said that she was thirteen when she was first beaten by her pimp, and that after this she was continually abused. Meanwhile, Liza reported violence from her users.

It was serious when Lacika jumped on the car. It was like a scene from the movies. It was 52 Earth Road. That was the most serious beating. I ran around the car. Obviously he couldn't catch me. He was fucking stoned, out of his mind. He jumped on top of the car, Fanni. And then he was kicking me like in the movies. I was thirteen at the time. I was beaten after that too, but that was the hardest. Then on the tractor wheel, he kept going. He threw me so hard on the tractor wheel that it is a miracle I didn't break my back.

Two of my clients⁶ outside (abroad) tried to strangle me and one tried to rape me.

In the women's narratives, violence often occurred when clients were dissatisfied with the sexual act or did not enjoy it, and when the women did not return the money they had been paid in such cases. Later, I will quote Sara, who, when asked if she had experienced violence in the prostitution industry, replied that she had, describing a man who had not ejaculated and became angry. This attitude illustrates a neoliberal logic within the prostitution industry: the sexual act is framed as a mere contract between two persons detached from the wider social context and from the woman herself (PATEMAN, 1988, PP. 189–218; JEFFREYS, 1997; EKMAN, 2013). When the sexual act did not occur as expected, the clients felt entitled to commit violence against the women. This was reinforced by a strong sense of patriarchal entitlement and the total subordination of women, which caused the clients to become violent when they did not get what they wanted for their money.

Liza also spoke of her constant fear of other women in the prostitution industry. The competition between the women is not merely an interpersonal rivalry but is often actively produced by pimp-controlled systems that rely on dividing the women and preventing solidarity to maintain the pimps' control and maximise profits (SHAPKINA, 2014).

My pimps mostly, and the girls. What you have to know about this industry is that there is always rivalry between the girls. If they see that you impress the pimp

on some level, or they just see that he likes you, then the girls will make life hell for [you]. By any means necessary, at any cost. No one can be above it and I have learned that. Like when they saw that my runner liked me, when they saw that she was happy with me, they made sure that it didn't happen. So it's quite a messy way of life. (Liza)

Anna recounted a story of being abused by other women's runners for standing in a place on the road that was "reserved" for women who belonged to them:

Once, just before Christmas, I was going to work at night, in the evening, and they had already noticed that I was walking alone. I had walked a lot during the day. If I missed the bus, there was no one to pick me up, and there were no customers. At the bus stop I went to see when the bus was going home from Félégyháza⁷, and as I walked through, each section was marked, so to speak, as belonging to someone⁸. And one came along, Sanyi, a little Gypsy kid, whose woman was standing on the corner, so to speak. I walked over to their place, and he drove over with the car and got out. By then I had a year and a half of experience of how to talk to people like that. He said: 'What the fuck are you doing in my spot?' And I said: 'Who the fuck are you?' And as soon as I said it, within two seconds he threw me to the ground, kicked me all over, and I literally peed myself.

A typical experience of the women I interviewed was that they were not protected from the violence perpetrated against them in the prostitution industry. They generally reported that the police in Hungary did not protect them, whereas the women who had been abroad tended to have more trust in the authorities. The authorities usually preferred to punish the women for selling sex outside of designated zones. However, there are very few such zones in Hungary, and when municipalities do designate them, they are typically in remote areas without infrastructure. This means that the women are even less safe in these zones than they would be in the city (BETLEN, 2013, P. 11). In contrast, women who work legally in the decriminalised prostitution industries of core countries are more often protected by the authorities there (KILVINGTON, DAY & WARD, 2001, P. 82).

Liza was taken to the police to be fined for providing sexual services in an illegal zone, which is prohibited and punishable under Hungarian prostitution regulations. She pleaded in vain to be detained at the police

station because she was being forced into prostitution by her pimps, but the police did not believe her:

For example, I stood outside at a bus stop and was fined 10–20,000 forints⁹. When I told the policeman that I was standing there against my will, he sarcastically replied, ‘So am I.’ Yes, that was the Hungarian police. Then they took me in for 72 hours, gave me a bill, and released me. I kept saying the whole time that I didn’t want to go out. I literally teased the policeman. I said I didn’t want to go out because my driver was waiting outside. And they didn’t believe me. This was Baranya County, near Pécs. They don’t really want to help girls like that there. When they found my best friend under the bridge, they realised that what I was telling them was not so silly. And then I was rescued by the police in Pécs from one of the families who were running [women]. Well, it’s almost like mafia fraud. They get away with everything.

In contrast, Kata had better experiences with the police in Zürich:

Yes, yes, I did [report what happened]. Everything. The police told me not to be afraid. That’ll get you 10 years. They’ll arrest you. Because he beat me so badly that I was hospitalised. He was punished for attempted murder. (Kata)

My interviewees were sometimes defended against abusive clients by men who themselves had abused them, such as pimps or landlords. Andrea told me that her pimp (her “boss”) defended her against clients who wanted to abuse her. Having him in the other room gave her a constant sense of security in Germany:

Well, quite often [I was mistreated]. By guests, I mean. Some of them came in drunk. [They] had to be thrown out. There was one that tried to be violent, but the boss was in the other room. So if something had happened, he would have seen it and he would have beaten him up. Because one had already done that. He came in, he took his shoes off, and then he changed his mind. He was drunk. He wanted to come back. The boss went down and beat him up.

My interviewees told me that they were afraid of almost everyone in the prostitution industry, which made them feel isolated and lonely. They rarely received protection from violence, and when they did, it was usually provided by actors in the industry who also abused them. They were

rarely able to build trust or solidarity with other women in similar situations, as the competition for the pimps' favour typically undermined such ties. The pimps often employed deliberate isolation techniques to make the women more dependent on them and easier to control. For instance, abroad they frequently ensured that women who spoke the same language were not placed together (CF. SHAPKINA, 2014, P. 196). By failing to protect the women even when they asked for help – and with Hungarian law allowing women to be punished for prostitution – the authorities, especially those in Hungary, played into the hands of the pimps, reinforcing the women's isolation from the outside world and from sources of support. These differences may also reflect the distinct structural positions of the countries involved. Switzerland, as a core country with a regulated prostitution sector, provides a more institutionalised framework for policing and oversight, which may shape the women's encounters with the local authorities (ISLER & JYRKINEN, 2018, PP. 6–9). By contrast, in semi-peripheral contexts where institutional protection is weaker, the women may rely more heavily on informal actors within the industry for forms of protection, even when these actors are simultaneously involved in their exploitation. These accounts therefore reflect not only individual experiences but also broader differences in regulatory and structural contexts (DÉS, 2024).

NARRATING VIOLENCE: SILENCING AND STORYTELLING

Research has shown that a high proportion of women in prostitution suffer from symptoms of PTSD (FARLEY ET AL., 2004; FARLEY, 2010). Dissociative disorders and anxiety symptoms are also overrepresented among women in prostitution (ROSS, FEARLY, & SHWARTZ, 2004). Hydén (2008), in his study 'Narrating Sensitive Topics', distinguishes between experiencing traumatic events and having knowledge of events that happened to oneself. In order to have knowledge about one's own experiences, it is important to have the space and opportunity to reflect on events and be able to put them into context. Until we can give meaning to our experiences, and until we have the opportunity to do so, they are difficult to narrate. This process can be particularly relevant for cases of traumatic events (BENEZER, 1999).

The women I interviewed while they were still involved in the prostitution industry often interpreted violent events as a natural part of life, as incidents that had no particular impact on them. Thus, a patriarchal

narrative of violence against women (ROSE, 1999) emerged in their accounts. In addition, the narratives of the women then active in the prostitution industry about violence and trauma were typically very brief. Rita recounted that once “a Serbian guy tried to shoot [her]” in Zurich, but she downplayed it, suggesting that it was a misunderstanding because her roommates had robbed him. Her story came across more like a gripping anecdote than a traumatic event:

Well, once a Serbian guy tried to shoot me. But it was a misunderstanding because I was in a room with two other girls and then, while I was in the shop, another girl stole from this man. I didn't even know about it because I didn't hear him come into the room. And this guy came back the next day. I let him come up to the room because I didn't know there was any problem and he pulled a gun on me and told me to give him his money back immediately. I said, 'What?' The best thing about it was that I didn't really understand German because I had been here for only a few months. And the other girl said, 'No problem, we'll call the police.' But I told her, 'Man, I've got a gun to my head, my God, and you're telling me there's no problem?' But actually, there was no problem after that. (Rita)

Sandra and Móni, when asked whether they had ever experienced violence in the prostitution industry in Zurich, responded with just one or two sentences. They confirmed that they had, but did not go into detail or express their feelings about the events:

- And did you have a violent experience here?
- Last year. Well, I didn't give the money back to the man, he was drunk and then he beat me up.
- And have you experienced violence since you've started working here?
- Well, I've had one or two [such experiences].
- And can you give me an example?
- Well, that they asked for their money back, or they really had to throw you out, or they didn't enjoy it and that's why they were angry. Things like that.

The women I interviewed in the shelters were much more capable of narrating the events that had happened to them. Sometimes they mocked my questions, and sometimes they framed their experiences of violence in a cynical way, thereby emotionally distancing themselves from the events. They also often verbalised that they did not want to talk about something

or could not find words to describe it. Kitti mocked me when I asked her if there was a downside to selling sex in the prostitution industry:

My main problem was probably being handcuffed to the edge of a bed all the time. Specifically. And if I didn't earn the daily limit, which was at least 1,000 euros, I ate my wages, which was quite often. (Kitti)

For Juli, cynicism was her way of narrating violent events that had profoundly shaped her life:

My father, apart from being an alcoholic, also had a hobby of molesting children, so my life, among others, fell into that category. (Juli)

Viki expressed that she was unable to articulate the disadvantages of the prostitution industry in Germany or to highlight specific incidents because for her, all the circumstances were so overwhelmingly bad:

Everything. I cannot express it. The circumstances themselves, everything was there. But no, I just [...]. I didn't know anybody, not to mention men, so everything, in all areas, everything. I didn't eat for those two weeks. I was very ruined. I wasn't happy with the money, but I knew that my family needed it and I did my best. (Viki)

Hydén (2008, pp. 11–18) also emphasises the importance of space in narrative research based on her work with battered women. She notes that when abused women leave their abusive partner, they not only leave the relationship but also move into a new space where they have the opportunity to give new meaning to their life stories and the experiences they endured. This may also hold true for narratives of violence in the prostitution industry: women who remain in the industry are at constant risk of further violence and are not given the space to reinterpret their experiences. Shelters provide not only a space free from violence but also the possibility of therapy, which can help the women verbalise their trauma, integrate violent events into self-narratives, and ascribe meaning to them (HERMAN, 1992, pp. 163–276). This facilitates the narration of trauma and the articulation of events. While the women in the shelters expressed emotions when recounting their traumas, the women still involved in prostitution at the time of the interview, even when they spoke about their violent experiences at length, typically did so without emotion. The relative absence

or brevity of explicit trauma narratives among the women still involved in prostitution should not be interpreted as evidence of an absence of trauma. Rather, the difficulty of the articulation itself may be understood as part of the traumatic process. Trauma can disrupt narrative coherence and affect the capacity to assign meaning to experiences (HERMAN, 1992; VAN DER KOLK, 2014). In contexts where violence is normalised or structurally embedded, an inability – or refusal – to elaborate on violent events may reflect the person's ongoing exposure to violence, survival strategies, or the absence of a safe interpretive space. Thus, silence and minimal narration are not indicators of insignificance, but forms of situated response shaped by both psychological and structural conditions (HYDÉN, 2008, PP. 11–18). The capacity to articulate trauma is itself socially structured, as the access to interpretive frameworks and safe spaces for narration remains unevenly distributed (BRITT & HAMMETT, 2024).

PATRIARCHAL SEX AND THE PROSTITUTION INDUSTRY

My interviewees typically experienced sexual acts in the context of the sex industry as traumatic events with long-term effects on their lives. The women who left the prostitution industry said that their experiences had lasting effects on their self-image, sexuality, and relationships with men, making intimacy and sex difficult even long after their leaving (DÉS, 2024). In capitalism, patriarchal sex appears as a consumer good whose production is the coerced responsibility of women (VON WERLHOF, 2007). My interview participants described sexual acts within the context of the prostitution industry as often accompanied by violence – sometimes so normalised that they did not explicitly define such acts as violent. They spoke of the commercial transactions in the industry as deeply distressing experiences that evoked feelings of disgust and required the use of psychoactive substances for them to endure them. Contrary to the neoliberal framing of the prostitution industry – which depicts these transactions as a selling of sex based on a mutual contract or free choice (CF. JEFFREYS, 1997, PP. 128–160, 2009, PP. 173–197; EKMAN, 2013) – the women's narratives described their feelings of revulsion toward men and toward themselves, their discomfort with touching strangers, and their discomfort with being touched by strangers. They experienced each transaction as involving their entire body and person, as acts in which their bodies, and they themselves, were used.

Several described the first transactions as the most emotionally shattering – the point at which they entered the prostitution industry and confronted what sexual acts mean in that context. The literature also observes that women often become aware of the abuse and violence present in the prostitution industry only upon their entry into it (SASSEN, 2002, P. 518). Gabi had to support her family through prostitution from adolescence. The first transactions left her with intensely negative feelings:

The first time I did this, I ran home crying and wanted to pour bleach over myself. I cried. It was bad. Someone touched me; I didn't understand what he was asking for. I would rather have killed myself, changed my life that way. But I told myself I could endure anything. I had to endure everything, even like this. (Gabi)

After Anna had agreed with her boyfriend that she would enter the prostitution industry temporarily to improve their financial situation, she later discovered that her boyfriend and his family routinely pimped women. She spoke of how, at the outset, she was terrified and felt unable to protect herself:

So we agreed on this, and the first two days were terrible, and then I found out that my godfather was also a pimp. Practically the whole extended family – when you looked further up – were all pimps. I didn't believe a lot of things until the first slap landed. It was enough when they first put me on the street to work: my hands and legs were shaking, I couldn't protect myself, and I had to deal with strangers, touch them, and do what they asked. Each one wanted something different – some smelled bad, and some were dirty. (Anna)

The interviewees who had already exited the prostitution industry described in their narratives how their experiences in the sex trade had long-term effects on their relationship to sexuality. They also spoke about how, more generally, their experiences in the prostitution industry continue to shape their relationship to themselves to this day. Anita, for example, after leaving the prostitution industry, felt sick even at the thought of sex. She expressed disgust at the fact that so many strangers had touched her.

So much time had passed, my mind opened up, I started going to school, and so on, and so on, but I couldn't love men because there had been so many. So many men had gone through me that it's disgusting. I can't even count them, Fanni.

I don't know. I can't even estimate. You understand? To actually say out loud how many people have touched me, have gone through me – it's sickening. It's better now that I might have my child, that I went two years without being with anyone. I just couldn't stomach it. (Anita)

None of my participants described any sexual acts in the prostitution industry as pleasurable. They cited coercion or economic necessity as the reason for their involvement in the industry and their engaging in the transactions (DÉS, 2024, pp. 83–104). The acts were typically described as producing distressing or negative feelings or, in a few cases, as emotionally neutral. The most common feelings associated with sexual acts in prostitution were exploitation, disgust, fear, a sense of dirtiness, and shame – emotions clearly visible in the narratives cited above. The presence of shame and disgust is characteristic of trauma narratives; shame can also appear when one is narrating personal experiences that are socially taboo or subject to judgment (BENEZER, 1999, p. 30).

Although most of my participants entered the prostitution industry under physical or material coercion, they felt shame about their past and had internalised the stigma the industry—and society more broadly – places on women in prostitution (JEFFREYS, 1997, pp. 152–172). Women tend to experience shame more frequently than men in society, and in the context of sexuality, women's shame is even more prevalent (BROWN, 2006). Moreover, in cases of violence against women, victim-blaming by society is common, and victims often internalise this blame, holding themselves responsible for the violence committed against them (ENANDER, 2010). My interview participants lived with ongoing shame about the transactions – shame that, for many, continues to shape their lives – despite the fact that they were generally coerced into the prostitution industry and into the specific transactions in which men used their bodies.

LINKING LIFE COURSE AND TRAUMA

The most significant difference in the ways the women who were still selling sex and those who had already left the prostitution industry framed their reasons for entering prostitution was that the women who were still in the prostitution industry almost exclusively cited poverty – i.e. economic necessity – as the reason. In addition to economic coercion,

some also mentioned pimps, the men who had “manipulated” them into the prostitution industry (DÉS, 2024, PP. 83–104). Economic coercion was also present in the narratives of almost all the women I interviewed in the shelters, but they also identified prior trauma as a reason for their entering prostitution. This difference in the narratives may also be explained by the fact that shelters typically house women who are victims of trafficking, i.e. women with a documented history of being trafficked by a pimp who forced them into the sex industry. However, one's proximity to or distance from the prostitution industry may also explain the differences in how women narrate their entry into the industry. Emotional distance and the therapeutic support available in shelters can help women give new meaning to their experiences of trauma (HERMAN, 1992, PP. 236–254). Vera articulated that she believes she would have had more opportunities in her life if her family had been supportive and her childhood less difficult.

I could have achieved a lot more in life if I had a family that really supported me and pushed me and didn't pull me back. (Vera)

Kitti cited her history of childhood incest as the reason for her entering the prostitution industry and explained how it influenced her to seize every opportunity to escape from home:

Well, I got into it in the first place because my father raped me when I was ten and I ran away from home. And I was always looking for a partner who would be there for me, who would provide me with some kind of security, and they really liked to take advantage of that. (Kitti)

There is evidence from a range of research that women who have been traumatised in the prostitution industry are over-represented among women who have experienced prior trauma, particularly victims of childhood sexual abuse (COUNCIL OF PROSTITUTION ALTERNATIVES, 1991, PP. 139–155; STARK & HODGSON, 2004). As discussed above, the narrative of trauma can only truly become possible when the victims of a traumatic event feel safe. It is then that they gain experience in narrating the trauma, in finding a place for it within a new self- and worldview. In general, what we remember most are the events that were significant in our lives and that profoundly shaped our self-narratives and worldviews. These events often involve tragic and traumatic experiences. However, when our entire self-image and worldview

are challenged by an event, our memory functions differently (VAN DER KOLK, 2014, PP. 172–199). We often try to avoid or suppress traumatic events and the memories associated with them. In the case of violence against women, these processes are even more difficult because of society's sexist attitudes, which reinforce the non-verbalisation of violence and trauma.

VIOLENCE AS A PERSONAL FAILURE OR STRUCTURAL CONDITION

Social institutions (such as the police, the courts, the social care system, and child protection agencies) often frame violence against women as an individual problem, placing responsibility on the victim rather than on social structures. They question, relativise, and blame the victim for the violence that has happened to her (FAST & KINWESQUAO, 2019), especially in Hungary (PATENT EGYESÜLET, 2019). In doing so, they disconnect the responsibility of society and unequal social structures from the phenomenon. In the narratives of the women still involved in the prostitution industry, the patriarchal narrative of violence against women (ROSE, 1999) often appeared even when they recounted violence experienced by others. Hanna claimed that even if someone was violent to her, she could handle it:

The man was not violent to me. I could handle it. (Hanna)

The illusion of control appeared in the narratives of most of the women still in the prostitution industry. Just as victim blaming was a common narrative for women who were themselves victims of violence, so too was the idea that they had failed to take good enough care of themselves. Acts of violence against others were often framed as resulting from those women's failure to protect themselves or their having done something wrong. Esther expressed this view about other women:

Actually, I don't think the problem here is the circumstances. The problem here is that there are so many stupid girls and they make the problem for themselves. (Esther)

Victim blaming, according to attribution theory (HEIDER, 1958), is rooted in the individualistic belief that individuals are responsible for their own experiences of violence, including sexual violence, rather than social

structures. This self-protection mechanism allows individuals to feel they have control over what happens to them. By contrast, naming social structures as responsible for the violence implies that individuals who belong to groups at higher risk of victimisation (e.g. women in the case of violence against women) have no control over whether or not violence happens to them (GRUBB & HARROWER, 2008). Victim blaming thus contributes to the structural process of rendering violence against women invisible in society.

In the narratives of the women who had already exited prostitution, other women with whom they had sold sex appeared more frequently as part of stories of community and solidarity – even though rivalry was mentioned by nearly everyone as a constant element of the prostitution industry. For the women who had left, violence appeared much more as something inherent to prostitution itself: a phenomenon in which all women involved in prostitution, by virtue of their involvement, are victimised. Kata and Berta could not identify a single specific “wrong” within the prostitution industry; instead, they described the very fact of being in it as traumatising:

You must know now, though I might be stupid to think it, that a whore is a whore. It's very difficult to get out of it. Because if someone has it and can forget it – well, not me, because I really suffered with it. I was psychologically exhausted, I was ruined, and physically I felt like I was being taken advantage of. And I think I can work it out because I forgot my past, but I still remember and will remember this whoring and... anyway, that's it.

What? Nothing. Bitch, bitch. Whatever. Whatever. The downside is the spiritual stuff that's going on inside.

Thus, the relationship between prostitution and violence was not narrated as a one-off event affecting only some individuals in the sex trade, but as a social phenomenon that is inherently violent and psychologically destructive. The fact of the women having once been involved in prostitution meant that the trauma endured would forever remain part of their identity.

In Juli's narrative, a sense of guilt was added to a sense of solidarity with other women: These girls are just passing through Hungary. There were one or two who

were specifically Hungarian; the rest were Romanian, Transylvanian, or from neighbouring countries such as Slovakia. They chased big dreams. There would be a lot of money from this. Many of them got hooked. Not necessarily physically, but mentally. I lived through and saw a lot of abuse. And I did nothing. (Juli)

In Juli's account, violence is described as something she and many other women in prostitution had suffered. She also expressed guilt for not being able to protect other women who were victims of violence, or for failing to intervene. This guilt often surfaced when violence and deaths were discussed in the interviews. It was reinforced by the competitive dynamics of the sex industry – where women were pitted against each other by pimps to maximise profits rather than forming alliances of solidarity. Among trauma survivors, guilt for not being able to help others in the same situation is common. Even if it was materially impossible, they often feel responsible for not having protected others. Similarly, van der Kolk (2014, pp. 184–203), in her therapeutic work with war veterans and survivors of violence against women, repeatedly encountered the persistence of guilt over peers who had been killed or had suffered violence.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper has been to compare and analyse the narratives of violence and trauma among women involved in prostitution and those who have exited the global industry. The analysis highlights how violence is rendered invisible in the prostitution industry. My conclusions are based on interviews with women from lower-class backgrounds from semi-peripheral countries who typically sold sex in both semi-peripheral and core contexts. Their exposure to violence did not vary by region. The women I interviewed faced the risk of violence from almost all actors in the industry. They lacked protection from and trust in authorities, especially in Hungary, and were often “protected” by those who also abused them, which reinforced their isolation. Even those who did not report direct experiences of violence described their constant fear, while many avoided verbalising this fear due to the unspoken norm that it should remain hidden.

The women still in prostitution often recounted violent events briefly, without emotion, framing them through patriarchal and individualistic

narratives: they invoked an illusion of control and blamed themselves or other women. By contrast, the women who had exited prostitution adopted more structural interpretations, situating their experiences within unequal social relations and integrating prior traumas into their accounts of entry into the industry. This divergence reflects the dynamics of trauma: individuals often suppress or trivialise traumatic experiences when they cannot integrate them into their self-image (HERMAN, 1992; VAN DER KOLK, 2014). A temporal and spatial distance from violence – especially in the supportive environment of shelters – enables emotional distancing and the creation of new meanings. Safe spaces and therapy provide conditions under which trauma can be verbalised and integrated into a coherent self-narrative (HYDÉN, 2008).

The non-verbalisation of trauma also contributes to obscuring the structural inequalities that underpin the prostitution industry. Patriarchal norms reinforce silence, victim-blaming, and relativisation of violence, keeping women's experiences invisible in both the industry and the capitalist world system more broadly (PLATT, BARTON & FREYD, 2009). At the same time, the women in shelters often expressed stronger solidarity with others who had shared similar experiences. While rivalry in prostitution is shaped by patriarchal power and men's demands (YOUNG, 1990; FEDERICI, 2004), the shelters offered opportunities for solidarity, which helped the women reframe their individual trauma as part of collective structures of inequality (HERMAN, 1992; MIES, 2014).

The invisibility of violence in prostitution does not signal an absence of harm but rather the success of patriarchal capitalism in transforming women's trauma into silence. Recognising and politicising this silence is essential for feminist analyses that seek to expose the global hierarchies sustaining the sex industry.

ENDNOTES

- 1 This article is a revised version of one chapter of my doctoral dissertation, defended at Corvinus University of Budapest in 2024 (Dés, 2024).
- 2 The second-wave feminist movement began in the late 1960s and, according to the academic literature, lasted until approximately the 1980s. During this period, the movement focused on issues arising from the structural oppression of women. Such issues included violence against women, female solidarity (sisterhood), the androcentric nature of society, and gender inequalities in both the private and public spheres (Finn, 2015).
- 3 Some research materials presented in this article have been already analysed in an earlier publication and my dissertation (Dés, 2020; Dés, 2024).
- 4 Low-threshold services are support services designed to be easily accessible to marginalised populations, offering assistance without strict entry requirements or formal procedures.
- 5 Nyíregyháza is a city in northeastern Hungary with approximately 120,000 inhabitants. The city contains several segregated neighborhoods – such as Huszártelep – where socio-economic indicators are significantly below the urban average (Fábián et al., 2017). During the 2010s, women from these marginalised areas were disproportionately represented in the prostitution industry in Western Europe.
- 6 The women frequently referred to the men who purchased sexual services in the prostitution industry as “clients.”
- 7 Kiskunfélagyháza, a Hungarian town in Bács-Kiskun County.
- 8 On streets where the women stand, each runner typically has their own section(s).
- 9 25–30 euros.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Fanni Dés is a sociologist and researcher at the ELTE Centre for Social Sciences, the Institute for Minority Studies. She received her PhD from Corvinus University of Budapest in 2024, where she examined the commodification of Hungarian women in the transnational prostitution industry. Her research focuses on violence against women, the prostitution industry, and feminist political economy, with particular attention to sexuality and global inequalities. She is currently involved in several research projects, including those on the moral economy of the prostitution industry, the relationship between social mobility and structural inequalities, and forms of transformative solidarity. Since 2016, she has also worked with the NANE Association, supporting victims of violence against women through helplines, support groups, and local programme development.