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A Present and a Non-Present Body—Experiencing the Body by Female Sex Workers in Commercial Sexual Relations

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.14.2.03>

Abstract Making women's bodies accessible to men in the commercial context is related to specific ways of experiencing it. The purpose of the article is to discuss the category of a non-present, selectively present, and present body, which refers to ways in which female sex workers experience their bodies during commercial sex acts. There will also be conditions listed that correspond to the occurrence of each of these categories. The article is based on qualitative data (mainly unstructured interviews), which were analyzed in accordance with the procedures of grounded theory methodology.

Keywords Female Sex Workers; Commercial Sex; Body; Qualitative Research

Prostitution is a phenomenon that cannot be completely analyzed in scientific terms when the body, and how sex workers experience and define it, is omitted. At the same time, the body is, in this context, a difficult subject for research. On the

one hand, the researcher faces the same problems that are encountered by researchers into corporeality who carry out their projects among representatives of different social groups and categories (e.g., the disabled, athletes, dancers). The basic difficulty is the fact that experiences related to the body are hard to verbalize. They are beyond linguistic manners of grasping them, as the body is experienced routinely, or in a manner deprived of any reflections (Jakubowska 2009; 2012; Byczkowska 2012; Niedbalski 2015). Therefore, it is hard to describe what happens with the body, as in many situations one does not even realize it (Jakubowska 2012). On the other hand, additional notions emerge in the context of prostitution, hindering the process of researching the body and corporeality. One of them is the taboo that covers the details about any given sexual act.

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We usually do not speak with strangers about experiences of the body in such an intimate moment. In the case of prostitution, which is socially condemned, or at least assessed negatively, the women's experiences additionally serve as a source of shame. Regardless of whether their feelings are related to pleasure or suffering, they confirm the stereotypical image of a sex worker as a whore or a victim. The anxiety from the lack of understanding and stigmatization means that female sex workers are not eager to talk about their body experiences. This phenomenon is even stronger when, in carrying out the sex work, they are accompanied by strong negative emotions (e.g., disgust towards their body). In such situations, the women avoid reflexive consideration of their body, often trying not to think about what is happening with it, so they do not increase their suffering. Invalidation of this topic may be treated as an identity defense mechanism. As a result, female sex workers find it difficult to develop broad statements on experiencing their body. I observed it during my interviews, but this notion has also been raised by numerous other researchers. Here, we can recall a reflection by Maddy Coy (2009), who, while describing her research related to prostitution and (dis)embodiment, noted that,

in the narratives and life stories, inclusion of the women's corporeal reality was characterized by the paradoxical "absent presence" of their bodies. Like a shadow in the dialogue, the body was rarely the subject of explicit reference. Yet bodily practices were referred to frequently, via discussion of the cycles of drug dependency and injuries associated with drug use, injuries from violence and abuse as children and as adults, pregnancy, abortion and childbirth, and

dissociative mechanisms women used to manage the commercial sex encounter. [p. 64]

Despite those difficulties, there are many spheres that are related to the notion of the sex workers' bodies, and which are worth being analyzed in more depth. In order to better understand the actions undertaken by women engaged in sex work, we need to take a closer look at processes such as: the necessity to become accustomed to nudity (one's own and other people's) and to permit strangers to encroach upon your personal space (Hall 2009), the necessity to get used to wearing specific clothes (skimpy, vulgar, associated with porn); the need to develop adequate manners of presenting oneself, taking care of the body, preparing it properly for work (maintaining a specific weight, selecting clothes, makeup, etc.), et cetera. However, quite seldom do these matters undergo scientific reflection. The literature of the subject usually places emphasis on health, hazards caused by sexually transmitted infections, the practice and the consequences of using psychoactive drugs, and the stress, violence, and self-mutilation which are experienced (cf. Choudhury 2010).

It may also be noticed that the literature of the subject mostly describes the bodies of women providing sex services through the prism of suffering that it brings. Attention is drawn to the fact that prostitution is a form of violence towards women, especially in the perspective of radical feminism, and it is identified or connected with experiencing rapes and various types of body damage (Farley and Kelly 2000). Studies carried out among street sex workers and women that were victims of human trafficking suggest that they had difficult and painful experiences related to

their own corporeality. Numerous researchers notice that a significant proportion of sex workers feel estranged from their bodies. This phenomenon was termed “estrangement of bodily experiences” by Maria Epele (2001:165; Coy 2009:68). In order to be capable of remaining in prostitution, sex workers develop different manners of dealing with this destructive situation (e.g., they use illegal street drugs or cause self-harm; Coy 2009:69-70). One of the most radical ones is dissociation from the body. This means leaving it emotionally when it is impossible to leave physically. The phenomenon is a well-documented reaction to trauma, particularly sexual abuse, with violations of both the body and the self, and it is understood as a psychological defense strategy (Scott 2001 as cited in Coy 2009:68; also Farley and Kelly 2000). The notion of dissociation, the separation of the self from the body and the need to distance the thinking, feeling self from the physical body is what researchers often call a coping mechanism during commercial sex exchanges (Coy 2009:68). It is also an index of the psychological damage sustained by prostitutes through prostitution (Hoigard and Finstad 1992:63-74, 106-16).

As suggested by Oerton and Phoenix (2001:398), the narrations of women engaged in prostitution, their strategy of “switching off,” also indicate a body/self demarcation in which the women perceived their “prostitute-selves” as nothing more than a body and as separate from their “real/authentic selves.” Hence, commercial sex acts become mostly “not-sex,” because they are perfunctory physical outlets for men, and secondly, they are “utterly embodied as no selves [which] are involved, only bodies” (Oerton and Phoenix 2001:399).

Researchers into prostitution draw attention to the fact that in the case of the women that they researched, distancing strategies had already been “integrated into their lived embodiment at the time that they entered prostitution” (Coy 2009:68). This results from the traumatic experiences that they had during childhood and youth (also Farley and Kelly 2000). This refers mostly to early sexualization, rape, and other forms of physical and sexual assault, which transform the meanings attached to the women’s bodies and their sense of ownership of the body. As observed by researchers, “sexual abuse signifies to women that bodies can be appropriated by others for their sexual gratification, reinforcing both a sense of personal powerlessness, and (dis)embodiment, and wider male entitlement of sexual access to women” (Coy 2009:66-67).

Through switching off from the body, the women that had dealt with sexual abuse in childhood employ the same strategy during commercial sex encounters. Therefore, the processes of distancing from the body had become an automatic response (Coy 2009:68-69).

Julia O’Connell Davidson (1998) draws attention to the fact that analyses should be complemented with an additional dimension of the client’s power of command over the body of the prostitute. This power “is not merely physical but symbolic: that is, the body is bought for the purposes of specific functions. In the commercial sex transaction, ownership transfers from the woman to the buyer who assumes belonging of the body within the parameters of certain (contractual) boundaries” (Coy 2009:66). A similar notion is also raised by Phoenix (1999),

who suggests that “women who sell sex construct perceptions of the sale of their bodies as commodified bodies that are tiered in layers: full ownership and control, a feeling of ownership but no control, and finally, no ownership or control” (Coy 2009:66).

However, it must be emphasized that the scope of the manners in which the women experience the body does not include only clearly negative patterns. As suggested by the results of studies, some sex workers experience their bodies in a completely different manner than that described above. For instance, within Coy’s (2009:71) research project, where the researcher focused on disembodiment experiences, two researched prostitutes declared that they perceive selling sex as enhancing their confidence. According to the author, they redefined their situation by perceiving their body not just as a source of negative experiences but also as enterprising choices. This discourse of empowerment more often occurs within frameworks of prostitution as employment. Then, it is evidenced that women can use constructs of sexualization and femininity for financial gain (Coy 2009:72).

Female researchers that define sex work as a form of work analyze the body experiences of female sex workers from a slightly different perspective. They, first of all, emphasize that women in prostitution, such as professionals who work with bodies and feelings in other occupations, develop strategies to protect themselves (McLeod 1982:40) and manage their own emotions (Sanders 2002:562). An analysis of this process often adopts the concept of “emotion work,” proposed by Hochschild (1983), complementing it with dimensions and strategies that are typi-

cal of sex work. Such research was carried out by, for example, Sanders (2005). She analyzed the emotion work by sex workers, which included “managing their own boundaries, feelings and identities.” According to her,

under certain material conditions, some sex workers are able to exploit the demands of sexualization by engaging in emotional and sexual labor for male clients and emotion work on themselves. These processes produce emotional management strategies that protect individual women from the potential stresses of selling sex while at the same time increase their marketability and financial gain. [Sanders 2005:322]

The literature of the subject presents descriptions of numerous “pragmatic, symbolic and psychological defense mechanisms to manage the tensions of selling sex” developed by sex workers (Boynton 2002:8; Day 1994; Warr and Pyett 1999; Phoenix 2000). An important strategy is to “separate, change and revise one set of feelings that are appropriate during sex work while reserving another set of emotions or feelings for private interactions.” This may be achieved by “emotion management strategies such as: body exclusion zones, the condom as psychological barrier, the preference for providing domination services and the meanings attached to sex as work” (Sanders 2005:325-326), as well as by limiting the contact with the client as far as possible (e.g., not kissing, closing eyes during sex encounter) (O’Neill 1996). O’Neill also describes a technique of “making out” that is realized thanks to emotion work. It is related to separating oneself from one’s own body and minimizing one’s own world of experiences, at the same time “fabricating” the attention and affection

for the client so that the interaction is satisfactory for him. Carrying out this technique is related to re-defining one's own identity as a person that somehow helps the clients, providing them with support. Hence, it is easier for women to come to terms with the provision of sex work.

Sanders also emphasizes that emotion work may be applied to modify feelings that the female workers recognized as too positive. "For example, sex workers who are aroused and attracted to a client may try to turn this unwanted or, in their view, inappropriate emotion into something more acceptable" (Sanders 2005:325).

It is worth emphasizing that, in the case of the two aforementioned approaches (applicable to both the supporters and opponents of perceiving sex services provision as sex work), the phenomenon of experienced or faked sexual pleasure during commercial encounters with clients is described in different manners. When it comes to radical feminism, the experience of an orgasm by women in the context of prostitution is perceived as impossible. However, the literature of the subject offers an analysis demonstrating that faking orgasms during a sex act with a client is one of the dissociation practices. Coy believes, based on her own research, that apart from "archetypal modes of dissociation (the separation of self from body)," there are also other types which are based on acting differently to how the self was feeling. She described the case of Becky, who blocked out the reality of the encounter through "a performance where she disembodied herself by presenting herself as actively deriving pleasure from the sexual interaction with each buyer. In this

context, Becky was still acting to minimize her own embodied subjectivity, through disengaging from her body and locating her sense of self as alienated from the body" (Coy 2009:69).

In turn, the more liberal approaches interpret faking sexual pleasure during meetings with clients as an element of emotion work performed by sex workers. As suggested by Sanders (2005:328), "with some exceptions, most women did not receive sexual pleasure from their clients, but instead faked their arousal and physical stimulation. Shaping their inner emotions through emotion work in this way is the basis of how sex workers manage difficult and risky emotions." It is also worth stressing that, according to numerous authors, "faking orgasms and sexual excitement is a female skill that is learnt through sharing stories, imitation and dramatic performance." Many sex workers learnt it from porn movies (Sanders 2005:330).

An interesting analysis of experiencing the body within the process of professional identity development has been presented by Wojciechowska. She suggests that novices employ a series of actions intended to distance themselves from their bodies. However, along with acquired experience, numerous women change their approach to the body, starting to treat it as an interactional partner—an actor with whom they cooperate, and who they supervise in a work provision situation (Wojciechowska 2012:147).

The research presented above proves how complex processes entangle the bodies of women who provide sex services, and shows the vast number of patterns of ways they experience their own bodies.

From the group of numerous notions that can be further analyzed, the article will focus on the matter reaching the essence of prostitution, that is, female sex workers experiencing their bodies during sexual acts with clients. This is a matter that is relatively seldom raised in the research, and it usually is treated as an element of the emotion work carried out by the women. However, I believe that this notion deserves greater attention. The key element to define prostitution is a sex act with a man with whom the women are not emotionally related, and the sex worker's only motive is the willingness to earn money, while the client desires to fulfill his sexual need. The sex act is perceived as a basic action undertaken by sex workers, even if the practice suggests that it does not always take place during the encounter with the client. The client may expect other services (conversation, drinking alcohol, or using drugs). However, the client strives for a certain form of contact with the body of the woman who is providing the sex services. These might be fondling, touching, or even observing her naked body. Hence, it is highly significant how the women in such moments feel their bodies, and what actions and strategies they implement to facilitate the mental and physical aspects of those interactions. This notion is related to the wider processes of defining one's engagement in prostitution, marking the boundaries when dealing with clients, thus developing one's role as a sex worker and transforming one's identity, as well as emotion work, which must be carried out in order to deal with a multiplicity of often contradictory feelings and experiences. This multiplicity of notions exceeds the framework of a single article. Therefore, the subject of this text is only a fragment of wider analyses, that is, categories related to sex workers'

experiences of their own bodies (disengagement from their bodies and things that interfere with this process; as a result, a non-present, selectively present, and present body emerges).

Methods and Techniques

The article is based on 42 unstructured interviews carried out with indoor sex workers. They were selected from a wider group of interviews gathered within the scope of two projects (regarding the situation of women in escort agencies and the violence that they experience). The criterion for their selection was raised during an interview on matters related to body experience during commercial sex acts.

One of the intentions of the project was to give a voice to sex workers, who are usually deprived of the possibility to speak their mind and reveal their experiences outside the group of persons involved in commercial sex services. Therefore, the interviews were of an open character, to encourage the interviewees to develop narrations regarding notions that are important for them. The questions in the interviews were of a general nature, so they fit various episodes that the sex workers had experienced. As other threads appeared in the interviewees' statements, they were expanded and developed by specific questions.

The interviewees were selected from the group of workers of escort agencies where I carried out my observations, and with snowball sampling. The women were aged 18-60, and had worked in various forms of prostitutions for several weeks to a dozen

or so years. Many of them worked in several or a dozen or so such escort agencies in various cities in Poland and around Europe. Therefore, the group included women with diverse experiences.

The interviews were saved on a voice recorder (if the interviewee agreed), or noted down during the meeting and then rewritten. Transcripts of the interviews were carried out according to B. Poland's recommendations (Rapley 2007).

While analyzing the notion of the sex worker's body, I will also use the data collected during overt observations that I performed in four escort agencies in Lodz. I was a person unrelated to the world of the sex business when I started the research. Therefore, I was an outsider to the potential interviewees, both in the descriptive and evaluative meaning of this word. As a result, the attempts I made to obtain consent to carry out research in the agencies during that time failed. A breakthrough for my research was when I met a person that was trusted by the managers of the agency, in contrast to me. The person had become a guide and guardian in that world. Not until the visit to the premises together with that person and with their help in negotiating the conditions of access did I succeed in obtaining the consent for the research.¹ Based on my own experience, I can say that an outsider, who does not have any connections with the world of escort agencies, would find it very difficult to carry out the ethnographic research if they do not have any support from insiders. It might even be impossible, as it was in my case.

¹ I took analogical actions at other premises.

The scope of observations covered actions undertaken by workers of agencies in restricted areas of the agency (social facilities), and in the lounge, where interactions with clients took place. All workers of the facilities were informed about the observations, only the clients were unaware that research was being conducted. This arrangement resulted from decisions made by the managers of the facilities, who did not want to inform the clients so as not to disturb their feeling of anonymity and not to discourage them from visiting the facility. The observations provided a highly valuable source of data, even if they did not cover interactions between the female worker and the client in the room. They acquainted me (thanks to the observation of their facial expressions, the movements of the women's bodies and their gestures during interactions with the clients and co-workers) with spontaneous ways in which sex workers speak about their body experiences and respond to the corporeality of others, which was not evident during the interviews. The observations provided data for comparisons and allowed me to define the generated categories.

As I have already mentioned, embodiment is not a fully communicable phenomenon. Hence, it is hard to carry out research only with techniques based on narration (Byczkowska 2009:104). While collecting data through the interviews and observations, I noticed various limitations of those techniques. First of all, the interviewees had many difficulties expressing the feelings of their body verbally. They often mentioned their sex work experiences during the interviews in such a manner that their body remained at the margins of their story. Even in detailed accounts from meetings with clients it

occurred only to a minimum extent (cf. Jakubowska 2012:15). And if the interviewees raised that topic, they often stopped talking, took a pause, and then used gestures and facial expressions, suggesting that it was difficult for them to find adequate words to reflect their experiences. Thus, it might be the case that regarding the selected techniques I failed to recognize what is difficult to verbalize. In the case of some women, sharing their reflections was hindered by negative emotions related to experiencing their body in the context of sex work. I think mostly about the shame arising from the experienced social stigma. For some researched women, the notions related to a sex worker's body are especially prone to stereotypical and simplifying interpretations. Therefore, they should be left in a private zone, and not raised during the interview. Some of the women also had some difficulties verbalizing unfortunate body experiences (e.g., related to violence). An element that hindered the conversation about the feelings related to the body was also presented by the character of the research based on interviews and observations, where the respondents put their thoughts into words spontaneously, with no time to think them through deeply. Although this feature is usually seen as an advantage, techniques that require greater involvement of thoughts might bring deeper data. It would be especially interesting to employ visual methods or those based on art. Numerous authors suggest that they are away to overcome methodological difficulties related to research into the body experience (after Byczkowska 2009; Jakubowska 2012). However, the researched women believed that they were too time- and work-consuming. Instead, they preferred to talk when they were waiting for another client. What is more, methods

based on the respondents using video recordings or photos were rejected in advance. That resulted from sensitization to the notions of confidentiality and protecting the image of them, their co-workers, and their clients. Regarding those limitations, all that remained for me were interviews and observations; I attempted to overcome the difficulties that are related to research into the body/corporeality through the triangulation of data collection techniques (cf. Byczkowska 2009; Jakubowska 2012).

The gathered data were analyzed via the procedures of grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). Taking into account the undisguised character of the researched phenomenon and the numerous difficulties with getting access to the subjects (resulting from lack of trust from the potential interviewees), implementing those procedures (first of all of theoretical sampling, but also constant comparison) was difficult and time-consuming. What is more, it was not always possible (especially in terms of those facilities which were managed in an oppressive manner, and sex workers who had extremely negative experiences from prostitution). However, these procedures posed a signpost for my research actions, and I took every effort to complement them.

The transcripts and notes from the interviews and observations underwent open coding. The selected categories were encoded in a selective manner, also via the coding paradigm.

The article presents selected analytical categories related to experiences of the body by the escort agencies' workers, in the context of commercial sex

encounters with clients. It is a non-present, not-feeling body, generated as a result of the process of disengaging from one's own body; a selectively present body, which results from failures within the process of disengaging from the body; and the present body, which feels, and does not undergo the disengagement process, or is subjected to the opposite process, that is, integration with the previously disengaged body. These categories may form phases of the process (*present body—non-present body* or the opposite), but they can also describe a certain longer and stable predisposition of a given woman to feel the body during commercial relationships in a specific manner.

Experiencing the Body in Commercial Sexual Relationships

The Non-Present, Not-Feeling Body

The category of a non-present body is of a paradoxical character. On the one hand, the body of a female sex worker is a basic condition of the meeting with a client. It must be emphasized that the body (its attributes, size, appearance, sex appeal) was usually the reason why the client was willing to meet a particular woman, selecting her from other workers of the facility. Touching a woman's body and observing its reaction provides a very strong sexual stimulus for men, and it seems to be a necessary condition for a satisfying interaction, also in the commercial context (Collins 2011:262-263). Therefore, the body is present and engaged in the course of the interaction by definition. The female sex worker should manage her body's impressions and reactions. It is nec-

essary to secure and to carry out the meeting in an effective manner (i.e., with as little effort and high earning potential as possible).

At the same time, many sex workers that participated in my research projects found the disengagement process a basic procedure related to experiencing their bodies. This means that during the encounter their bodies are present physically, but from the sex worker's perspective, she loses a connection to that body for the time of the sex interaction. Hence, despite the fact that the client may do various things with the woman's body, the female worker tries not to feel it. She becomes a creature deprived of her body, which comes back when the sex act is completed.

The source of this phenomenon should be sought in the specificity of sex work, which is based on physical and sexual contact with a stranger with whom the woman has no deeper relationship nor feels sexual drive about. The interviewees spoke, on the one hand, about the experienced constraint² of "going to the room," even if they clearly felt reluctance—sometimes disgust, indifference at best—towards a given man. This constraint resulted from their perspective that if they wanted to make money (and the financial motif was the basic reason for taking up the job in the escort agency for almost all of them), they cannot "go to the room" only with those clients that they find attractive or pleasant.³

² It was usually an internal constraint, as during the interviews none of the women was forced to provide sex services, and it was not a frequent experience in the past, in other facilities.

³ A more detailed explanation of the process where female sex workers selected men who they agreed to have a meeting with is included in the book (Ślęzak 2016).

Negative experiences by the women were also enhanced by the unpleasant, vulgar, or aggressive behavior of certain clients. The workers distanced themselves from their bodies in such situations, so it did not act as a source of suffering for them.

While analyzing the category of a non-present body, there are several dimensions that can be differentiated.

First of all, the level of disengagement from the body in the case of various female workers was different. Some of the interviewees reported their experiences as indifference, feeling what happens with the body, but freezing those emotions, so they become indifferent, not causing any suffering. In the case of other women, this experience adopted a form of dissociation—a feeling that it is not their body that is taking part in the sexual act, that is the body of somebody else, and the whole situation does not refer to them. The degree to which women disengage from their bodies seems to be a consequence of conditions related to the social context of their involvement in prostitution and psychological processes. An explanation of the various levels of disengagement from the body requires further and interdisciplinary research.

Secondly, the manner of awareness and volitionality of that process was shaped differently. Some interviewees spoke about their conscious actions in order not to feel their bodies.⁴ Other women stated

⁴ In this context, it is worth recalling the case of one of the interviewees in the research project implemented by Sanders (2002). The woman said that she had made a conscious effort not to feel pleasure from sex at work: “If I let my mind go, then I would enjoy it, but I can’t. I have to be in total control and I have to blank it” (Sanders 2002:562). It means that separation of one’s own body may not only be related to the willingness to avoid suffering, but also to avoid pleasure.

that the process takes place outside their awareness and control, “it just happens,” as it was an automatic response to conditions of the sexual interaction with the client. The adoption of purposeful and planned actions that are intended to allow them control of self-body experiences was interpreted in moral categories by some interviewees. According to their interpretation, the body acted (or did not act) properly, responding to the situation of commercial sex in the way it should, that is, it ceased feeling, it just turned off. A different bodily response could be a clue that “there is something wrong” with the woman, that it might not be an unpleasant experience for her, as it should (I will come back to this notion later in the text).

Thirdly, some of the interviewees described this disengagement from the body as a permanent disposition, a manner in which they always felt their bodies in the commercial context. Other female workers highlighted that it was a strategy that they had developed along with getting experience in sex work. Distancing oneself from one’s own body also is an acceptable manner to deal with difficulties of interactions with clients, which is communicated within the group of workers. It is suggested as one of the mechanisms that facilitate the provision of sex work. In this meaning, it can be suspended if the female worker stops needing it anymore, for example, she will adopt other manners that might facilitate her sex work.

A key matter which allows these women to separate themselves from their body is not feeling sensual experiences (both the pleasant and unpleasant ones). Thus, a non-present body is a not-feeling body. The

female workers disengaged from their own body with a set of actions of various levels of intensity, aimed at leaving behind thoughts and awareness of the sex act.

One action that was popular among the researched group was *the selection of acceptable sexual positions and actions*. Two sub-types of that action can be differentiated: *removal of the client from the worker's field of perception* and *minimization of bodily contact*. In the former, they preferred and encouraged the clients to choose those sex positions during which the women do not need to look at the partner, especially at his face.

It's not pleasant, not at all...I'll do something with that man, always the best from behind, because I don't see him, I look at the radiator. [w, 30 years old, 9 years of work in the agency]

It is worth highlighting that in such a situation the client also does not see the worker's face, so she does not need to become engaged in the performance (Goffman 2000) to the same extent as she would need to if she saw his face. With her back to him, she does not need to make the proper facial expressions suggesting emotions that the client expects (e.g., excitation). She may present her real feelings, for example, clenching her teeth or closing her eyes. In the case of numerous female workers, it was crucial for the course of the interaction with the client not to look into his eyes, or to close her eyes during the sexual intercourse. In our culture, eyes are a special part of the body, and there are numerous cultural beliefs that are interconnected (e.g., the eyes reflect the soul). Research shows that the eyes are a me-

dium for communicating emotions. Observing the other person's eyes allows one to find out whether that person is feeling positive or negative emotions, along with their intensity (Leathers 2007:79). This also refers to sex contact, as pupils widen as the sexual excitation grows (Leathers 2007:75). Maintaining eye contact is also a signal that they are engaging in the interaction (Goffman 2006; Leathers 2007:74). When they close their eyes, the workers suggest, consciously or not, that they do not want to carry on with that interaction. They also symbolically prohibit the client from accessing them and the information about their emotions. Closing one's eyes is a direct response in a situation of stress and pain. Therefore, it also proves that disengagement from the body is based on strongly negative feelings and emotions:

A guy sees your body, but there is one thing: you do everything with your eyes closed, IT'S NOT THAT⁵ you agree to it with the girls, it just happens, it doesn't matter what the guy does to you, whether he fondles or touches you, your eyes are closed all the time, even if he asks you to open them, you are unable to do it, and you just tell him that you can't. Because you cannot look at a strange man that you DON'T LOVE, DON'T KNOW, DON'T LIKE, you don't feel anything towards the guy that is fondling you. You are unable to look at this face. JUST NO! This is a mechanism as you close your eyes. As simple as that. So, during this whole act, you don't see it, but you know mentally that he is touching your body. [w, 28 years old, 6 years of work in the agency]

⁵ Capital letters have been used to highlight those words and statements that were expressed by the respondents with emphasis.

I'm with a lot of men here, I do what I do because of my strength, just mechanically...you close your eyes and you want it to end as soon as possible. [w, 40 years old, 3 years of work in the agency]

In the second sub-type, *minimization of bodily contact with the client*, this is about selecting a position where bodies touch as little as possible, and preferably when it is more likely that the intercourse will come to an end. The women also avoid actions that they define as intimate, which they reserve for their partner in their personal lives (e.g., kissing, sexual intercourse without a condom).

I don't kiss, they already know that it's not an option. It's best when I don't even need to undress. I just, you know, pull my panties down for a moment and that's it. No touching or lying on top of one another, or bathing together. Not at all. Such stuff I can do with my husband at home. [w, 30 years old, 1.5 years of work in the agency]

It is worth emphasizing that analogical strategies are described by other researchers. The one that is most often encountered in the literature of the subject is limiting the type of sex acts that are sold, so they involve the least amount of energy, often reducing contact to minimum. In many situations, sex workers take off as little clothing as possible, making only the bare minimum of their body parts available (Sanders 2002:562). The female sex workers also try to control the sexual position and many sex acts are not offered as they are seen as too time-consuming, too painful, disgusting, or are simply reserved for their own private pleasure (O'Connell Davidson 1998). However, a dominating action is to use condom in all commercial sex actions. As highlighted

by Sanders (2002:563), "respondents found comfort in the fact that the condom prevented the flesh of the client touching their own body, particularly internally. This division between their own flesh and that of the client meant that emotional barriers were strengthened and sustained."

Another action that is intended to lead to disengagement from one's own body is to *provoke thoughts that take the "here and now" away*. These are: *comforting thoughts* (counting the money that the woman earns on a given client, during a given day, in a given week, et cetera, and imagining the things she can buy with it); *thoughts focusing attention on another action* (counting the elements of a radiator or the flowers on the bedspread, looking at a movie on TV, listening to a song on the radio); *counting time to the end of the meeting*—this actually combines two previous categories, however, regarding the specificity of interactions in the room, limited by the time that the client paid for, the interviewees differentiate this action in their narrations:

It's certainly not pleasant, is it? Sex with your partner, or sex with a man who has just arrived. You think about something else, at least your try, and you look at the time, at your watch, you wait until it ends, because there are hours and half-hours, right? And the greatest joy comes when it ends. Everyone will tell you that...There's no difference, everyone sees it the same way, even if it's God knows who, a perfect model. [w, 33 years old, 2 years in the agency]

While having sex, we "treat ourselves," we see THE MONEY. [w, 32 years old, 2 years of work in the agency]

I count the flowers on the bed, the number of petals, or the number of elements in the radiator, or I count how much money I earned, and I turned him on so he can finish quicker and get out. [w, 30 years old, 9 years in the agency]

Some female workers carried out other actions, trying to *think about nothing*. They tried to turn off their thinking completely during the sexual intercourse, falling into a kind of apathy. They focused only on carrying out subsequent actions that the client paid for. While describing this action, the interviewees often used the metaphor of “work at a production line,” to highlight the mechanical and automated character of the intercourse, deprived of any emotional components:

I have no pleasure. None at all. It's like a production line...It's like working at a production line. You open your legs. “Let it start,” you think, you look at the ceiling, and goodbye. Production line. No pleasure at all, but a really handsome guy can come here, so what? I don't love him, he may be handsome, but he won't do me any good and I don't like him as much as my husband. It's a guy that's just come in. And that's it. He pays me and goodbye, I wait for the next client. I have no pleasure at all. [w, 30 years old, 9 years of work in the agency]

Another action employed quite often by the researched women was *taking psycho-active substances*. It was usually alcohol, less frequently drugs, designer drugs or psychotropic medicines (Ślęzak 2012). This was the way in which women tried to weaken their emotional reactions, to not be aware and to not remember what happened with the body during the

commercial sex, or simply to feel that they are freeing themselves from their body:

You know, when I start my shift, I drink a little. And it's different. I feel differently and I can go to the room with a man. Because otherwise I couldn't stand when he touched me or something. And now I don't care anymore, it feels different when you're a little drunk. [w, 28 years old, 10 years of work in the agency]

The actions described above were applied in combination, interchangeably, or female workers found such solutions that were especially functional for them.

It must be emphasized that this manner of experiencing one's own body also impacts the clients' experiences and their satisfaction with the meeting. They usually expect the female sex workers to engage in sexual intercourse, at least on the level enabling them to reach and maintain sexual excitation.⁶ A partner that lies there like a corpse is not what most of them expect from such a visit. In turn, such behavior is a frequent consequence of disengaging from the body. For some of the researched women (especially the novice ones), it was impossible to act differently. However, over the course of time, a significant number of the interviewees learnt strategies which allow them to fulfill the client's expectations while disengaging from their own body. A dominant strategy was to treat the meeting with the client as a performance, where the female worker plays the role of an involved lover. Thus, these dramatic metaphors dominate in the interviews: the sex worker as an actor, the

⁶ Some expected much more involvement from the workers (cf. “The Girlfriend Experience” [Weitzer 2005:224]).

interaction as a performance, a game, pretending. The main point of the performance was to fake orgasms (with facial expressions, body movements, and voice) and feigning symptoms of deriving satisfaction from the meeting, at the same time undertaking actions that disengage the workers from their bodies:

For me, sex is a neutral experience. I try to show that I already had like 4 orgasms if the client, for example, cannot come. I scream, maybe not scream, but moan, I simply help to satisfy him even QUICKER. But, I don't care...I HAVEN'T HAD any orgasm with the client over these several years. But, I pretend I HAD, I pretend like: "Yes, of course, honey." I moan on request, but it's just pretending. Like an actor. [w, 38 years old, 5 years of work in the agency]

It's usually like, you know, if a client has money and he comes here, we try not to be discouraging, for example, if he insists on me having an orgasm too, then it's obvious I need to fake it so that he comes back. [w, 39 years old, 3 years in the agency]

There are girls that have orgasms here. I, for example, don't have orgasms. You know, everything comes from the pituitary gland. I don't dwell on it, you know, I don't need it. I try to make it pleasant for the guy, so he comes back, so I fake it, et cetera. If you spoke to the others, you'd hear that I can be heard often here, like "moan, moan," he says, "please help me at least," so I moan and it, you know. [w, 38 years old, 10 years of work in the agency]

It's worth emphasizing that some paraphernalia, for example, lubricants, can be helpful in faking authentic involvement.

It [sex] doesn't bring any pleasure, you know, it looks different with a stranger and with your own man, so we need to use lubricants, everything is dry, the woman is not excited because the man doesn't excite her, so she needs to use different enhancers. Otherwise there's dreadful pain, the women's skin is irritated, which is why these lubricants are applied. [w, 40 years old, 3 years in the agency]

If the act is credible enough for the client, it fulfills his expectations, but it also enables the female workers to realize the strategy of disengaging from the body.

This manner of presenting one's corporeal experiences (i.e., disengagement from one's body and faking sexual pleasure) was a dominant feature within the collected material. It is worth emphasizing that the literature of the subject mostly discusses such experiences. Although these actions were undertaken by the majority of the researched women, I separated several conditions that hindered or made it impossible to carry out the process of disengagement from one's body. They will be discussed below.

Failure of the Process of Disengaging from One's Own Body: The Selectively Present Body

In the case of the narrations of the researched sex workers, apart from experiences, which I called disengagement from one's own body, there is also a possibility to reconstruct other feelings related to the failure of this process. They take place although a female worker did not usually feel her body during the interaction (or at least she tried not to feel it). In particular interactions (incidentally, in

single cases, or regularly), the body started to feel, thus becoming present again. I will present this process through two categories.

The first one is *selectively present body, feeling negative emotions*. This category refers to situations when, despite attempts to disengage from one's body, the worker felt all the interconnected unpleasant experiences within a given interaction. It mostly referred to women who consciously tried to carry out actions allowing them to separate from their bodies, however, regarding specific conditions, they were incapable of doing so effectively. The interviewees looked for reasons in actions undertaken by clients which attacked their corporeality so strongly that they hindered or made it impossible to disengage from their body. It referred to all clients using physical and sexual violence. Also, exhaustion after a previous, difficult interaction with the client influences the effectiveness of body disengagement during a subsequent meeting. The abundance of intensive and negative experiences meant that the women became somehow vulnerable to their bodies, not being able to control and mute their emotions.

The second category is *the body selectively present, feeling positive emotions*. It refers to a situation when, despite efforts to disengage from one's body and to not feel what happens to it during a meeting with a client, the worker not only had experiences but these experiences were of a positive nature. Taking into account the conditions of sex work, many interviewees did not imagine sexual pleasure during interactions with a client. Such a situation was perceived as degeneration, an indicator that there is

something wrong with the women feeling her body in such a way, that she is a nymphomaniac, not a decent girl.⁷ Therefore, one of the key actions was to justify oneself and to explain why such experiences "came" to a given woman. The interviewees often stressed that they were of an incidental character, exceptional among the experiences in sex work, which can usually be described in the category of a non-present body:

It's hard to talk about these experiences, there are actually no experiences in my case. I'd be lying if I said that it has never been pleasurable, you know, so many men, it can happen, it can happen. It can happen that it's pleasant, but it's not very often. You usually think about doing and finishing it, so it's the end. [w, 41 years old, 2 years of work in the agency]

While explaining the incidental experience of sexual pleasure, the researched women mostly emphasized the radically different features of a given client that interfered with the process of disengaging from the body. The interviewees stated that such a client was different than the others—nice, kind, very handsome, "their type":

Sometimes girls come back from a meeting and they are satisfied, because he was nice, charming, kind, it even happens that she felt good. [w, 35 years old, 2 years of work in the agency]

⁷ It must be stressed that despite the social perception of prostitution as a "fall" and the indicator of moral degeneration, according to the researched women, you could remain a "decent girl" or not. One of the indicators of such a state was the manner of perceiving one's own body and its experiences during commercial sexual intercourse.

A special sub-type of such a situation was provided by interactions with special clients that let them suspend the definition of the situation as commercial sex. These were usually meetings with regular clients whom the women treated as a partner, or at least a good friend. It was easier to stop controlling the emotions during such meetings, and to start to feel what the body experiences:

But, you know, I can say that it's not always bad, it's sometimes fun, sometimes nice, if you know the client, spend some time with him, even cuddle. [w, 38 years old, 10 years in the agency]

An interesting manner of explaining the sexual pleasure is *to blame the body and its "nature."* According to the women, it is biologically shaped in such a way that it feels pleasure in specific conditions. This is one of the mechanisms that allows for the survival of the species, determined by the interviewees as "chemistry," "attraction," and "matching" sexual partners. Hence, the biological nature of the body in certain situations leaves no space for the conscious introduction of a strategy for its desensitization. In such explanations, the body is presented as autonomous to a certain degree, not subjected to mechanisms of control and steering by the brain:

It happens that the girl feels something towards the client, if he's handsome, and even in bed he's like, you know, the guy is compatible with the girl, and they feel nice. And, you know, she doesn't need to think like that during sex, it just goes on, with this feeling, and it helps in such a situation. [w, 28 years old, 10 years of work in the agency]

It's like when I was alone, I had no man around me, because I didn't always have someone, and if I got a client that I liked in terms of hygiene, I don't know, appearance, touch, I'm not a piece of wood. Yeah, this is what I'd tell you. But, when I'm bound to someone somehow...you simply do it, you're like a corpse. But, I never say never, so there might be a man, there might be this moment. Despite the fact that I do it with a condom, you might not touch each other, it may be from behind, I can lay on him, you know what I mean...it will be purely physical, nothing more, because if you don't have an orgasm for, let's say, a month or two... you know what, I don't believe it that a woman didn't have an orgasm, because it's not real for me. If there are women that say they are with a man for 2 years, and they have nothing out of it, it seems a little sick for me mentally, but that's my opinion. [Pause] Because, that's the way we're made, constructed, to get some pleasure out of sex, aren't we? I don't say it must be here, God forbid, no, if you have this sex, you have those clients, one, another one, the third one, the fourth, the fifth, the tenth, the sixtieth, at some point you simply must finally meet a man that you'll find pleasure with. [w, 43 years old, 10 years of work in the agency]

In this understanding, the "normal" bodily (and psychological) reactions of a woman are selective, limited to particular "adequate" conditions, the feeling of sexual pleasure, even in the context of commercial sex.

It is characteristic that women who experienced their bodies in such a manner presented sex as an issue of bodies, chemistry, or compatibility. Although they usually need to struggle with a client, trying to mute their bodily sensations, sometimes there is

“something” between them, a sexual attraction appears, and there is no need to pretend anymore. The meeting takes place in an almost natural manner—if we assume that sex with a stranger is natural.

The Present Body

The situation that was referred to by the interviewees least often was feeling their bodies during work in the agency exactly as it happens in other contexts. Hence, this body is a present, feeling body, not subjected to (or not prone to) the process of disengagement. Two sub-types of that category can be differentiated.

First of all, *the present body that feels at first positive experiences*. This was the situation that was described by the interviewees least frequently. This may prove its relatively seldom occurrence and difficulties with openly expressing such experiences. As I have already mentioned, experiencing sexual pleasure in commercial relationships is related to the specific labeling of a woman who reported her sensations to her co-workers in such a manner.

In contrast to the interviewees who reported the experiences described in the category of the *selectively present body*, in this case, the respondents did not focus on finding justifications for the incidental experiencing of a body. They rather described their experiences as *a conscious strategy that facilitates sex work*. At least three meanings through which it can facilitate the work can be specified.

First of all, focusing on oneself and one’s sensations, and striving to make them as pleasurable as possible is a certain “bonus” that the woman receives

during sex work. Apart from financial remuneration, the woman can also derive pleasure, which is an additional perk:

You can make money here and have pleasure at the same time [laughter], that’s my opinion, because, as I said, I also have pleasure from it. [w, 35 years old, 3 years of work in the agency]

Secondly, the orgasm or positive sensations are intended to neutralize the negative emotions related to that job; thus, it is a defense mechanism which allows a female sex worker to deal with negative thoughts or emotions related to a socially condemned activity.

I try to treat it as pleasure because if I treated it as a constraint, I would really GO MAD. [Sighs] [w, 39 years old, 2 years of work in the agency]

Thirdly, signals or symptoms of authentic excitation or satisfaction from a sex worker facilitate the client’s orgasm. Therefore, they help to finish the meeting quicker, rendering it less exhausting for the sex worker. Apart from that, it is more probable in such interactions that the client will assess such a meeting as successful (he may leave a tip, come back).

I have it [an orgasm] almost every time. It’s my very nature that I have it almost every time, if I have an hour, I have it...Girls said that they turn off, I don’t. Or, if I really wanted to get rid of someone quickly, then I don’t think of myself. Otherwise I think of myself most [laughter] and the guy will get excited himself [laughter] this is my beauty [laughter]. [w, 35 years old, 3 years in the agency]

Those clients usually want the partner to feel good, too. It's usually like that if the guy is normal, he also likes when she feels good, she comes first, before him. And it's like that most often. At least it happens often to me, that he'd also like me to feel good. They are sometimes very delicate: "What would you like, what do you like? What kind of fondling?" like that, "Tell me what you like," and he tells me what he likes, so I try to agree on something in that room... he'd also like the woman to have pleasure. [w, 39 years old, 2 years of work in the agency]

In the described situations, the female workers consciously make an effort so that the body feels something, to make it present in the sex interaction. This strategy was usually realized by women who did not have many meetings with clients during a single day, and who declared that they seldom encounter aggressive clients or those under the influence of psychoactive substances. A small number of selected meetings made it much easier to carry out this strategy. Within the researched group, it was more often done by the older women, regardless of their experience in prostitution.

Another manner of feeling sexual pleasure in a commercial context was to present it as *an uncontrollable side effect of the body's biological nature*. In contrast to the women who felt their bodies in a selective manner, in this case, the interviewees did not point to any specific conditions responsible for matching with a client. They usually stress that it is a constant disposition, "this is how we are made," it is abnormal not to experience positive feelings during sex, not deriving pleasure from the body:

I approach men with feelings, not like the girls who said they turn off. But, how can you turn off? I can't turn off in any situation. I live it, so how could I turn off? I don't know how you can turn off. I can't do it. [w, 35 years old, 3 years of work in the agency]

In this case, the interviewees seemed to equalize various contexts of sex (commercial and intimate), treating them as equal.

The second category of a present body is a *body that mostly feels negative emotions*. This manner of experiencing the body, contrary to that which might be expected taking into account the specificity of sex work, also seldom appeared in statements made by the interviewees. It was not usually the main topic of the narrations, and it was not a subject of wide descriptions. The women would rather allude to their deeply negative experiences with clients while describing other notions. Their silence about negative feeling may be explained by the fact that experiencing the body in such a manner was hard to describe or to verbalize. The interviewees more often used short and casual phrases ("unbearable pain"), pointing to their actions, not feelings ("he fucked me so hard that today he would be kicked out for such behavior"), or described the consequences of such interactions for their body ("irritated skin," proof of violence—bruises, scratches, wounds). One of the interviewees called her experiences a half-rape, referring to the definitions of rape, although not expressing them directly.

What happens in the room may be called a half-rape... At least for me it's a half-rape. Listen, here he comes, you don't know him, you see him for 10 minutes and you go to bed with him, what is it then? You have to,

it's not like you want to. You don't need to, but you do, what is it then? Almost a rape, but without defense. It's the same. Exactly. It's not different. This is how I feel it. I don't know what the opinion of others is, but this is mine. [w, 25 years old, 2 years of work in the agency]

This manner of experiencing body was mostly typical of novice female workers, in the first period of their work. This is a time when numerous adverse conditions for a novice female sex workers build up: a negative image of self, feelings of guilt and breaking social standards after taking up the job, the inability to deal with clients and respond to improper (e.g., aggressive) behaviors on their part, and no defense mechanisms that would enable them to deal with such a situation.

Regarding extremely negative experiences, it is probably impossible, in a longer time horizon, to carry on the sex work by experiencing one's body in such a manner. Therefore, another step is either to leave prostitution or develop a different manner of experiencing the body (mostly the aforementioned disengagement from the body).

Conclusion

The body is a crucial notion in occupations where the body is on display and is the central focus of the job task, in group relations, and bargain exchanges (Sanders 2005:330). It is especially visible in prostitution.

The manners in which female sex workers experience the body are varied—from disengagement from the body, being violated and estranged from their bodies, to pride, empowerment, and feeling power-

ful by using their bodies for profit (Wesely 2002:1185; Coy 2007:71). Experiencing the body as a source of suffering is described mostly by female researchers inspired by radical feminism, conducting research among women from the outdoor sector who are victims of human trafficking. Experiencing one's body as a source of positive emotions was more often related to women working indoors, in safer and more controllable conditions, defining their actions as work. However, research results suggest that both patterns can be found in both contexts. Their realization is possible thanks to sex workers performing emotion work on themselves in the classic sense of "deep acting" (Hochschild 1983; Sanders 2005:325). The distancing strategies that they employ are related to the process of retaining their sense of self (Sanders 2005:325).

As my research results suggest, sex workers try to disengage from their bodies in order not to feel what happens to them during sexual acts with clients. Thus, the body becomes not-present in such an interaction. It refers to both positive and negative sensations. However, this process is not always realized without any interference. In specific conditions, certain respondents were incapable of muting their body's experiences and separating from it. Selectively, in certain interactions, their bodies became present, feeling. Some of the women declared that they often feel sexual satisfaction during meetings with clients. Some of the respondents also spoke about feeling the body through the prism of suffering and pain. These experiences may be described as a result of a general failure or negligence of the process of separating from the body and, as a result, feeling it as the present body.

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