

## **SCRIPTING PRAGMATIC INTIMACIES IN SEX WORK, MIGRATION AND INTIMATE-MATERIAL EXCHANGES**

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### **Key implications**

- Intimacy is employed by migrant women in sex work as a resource to manage precarious legal and economic situations.
- Intimate-material exchanges as practices of compensated intimacy are shaped by migration circumstances and infrastructures and marked by pragmatism, agency, strategy and improvising.
- Scripts and narratives operate as moral resources deployed by sex workers as strategies to manage one's structural and situational predicaments.



### **Background**

This article stems from a broader research project aimed at understanding the experiences of ethnically non-Chinese sex workers in Hong Kong operating in emergent sex work spaces. The research, informed by a sex workers' rights framework, explored the links between intersecting forms of marginalization (ethnicity, race, gender, legal and occupational status) and sex work, centering the interactions between multiply stigmatized identities and sex work, an industry marked by stigma and criminalization. The project was designed as a community action effort meant to investigate the new spaces and practices of engagement with sex work and to explore and disseminate the extant institutional support and networks for sex worker empowerment.

### **Research methods**

Thirty-nine in-depth interviews were conducted with ethnically non-Chinese women (n=34) and men (n=5) in Hong Kong between June 2017 and March 2018, in addition to ethnographic engagement with diverse migrant communities. All interviews were integrally transcribed and coded into relevant themes. The focus of this article are the scripts and narratives salient during interviews with sex workers and women engaging in intimate economies.

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## Key findings

The article explores the connections between sex work and intimate economies as experienced by ethnically non-Chinese migrant women who navigate various stigmatized identities. It looks into the role played by intimacy in women's navigation of stigma, devising strategies for safety at work and securing their livelihood. Informed by insights from economic sociology and intimate economy scholarship, it untangles the relationship between intimacy and economic practices by demonstrating that the two spheres are not only not separate and hostile to one another but, rather, intimately linked. In Hong Kong's sex industry and intimate economies, the article shows, compensation, financial exchange and intimacy are related as part of workers' strategy at managing migration, mobility and material survival. The article also emphasized the importance of scripts and narratives by looking closely into how women strategically deployed moralized narratives to further their own and their families' mobility. These scripts were, at once, highly scripted and improvised, marking the paradoxical and intense labor implicated in intimate economies.

## Significance and implications

The study was committed to a sex workers' rights framework, which advocated sex work as legitimate work and recognition of workers' rights. By engaging with accounts from migrant women legally prohibited from taking employment, the study complicates political dichotomies of sex work as either work or gendered exploitation and proposes a nuanced understanding of the links between sex work and intimate economies that would be inclusive and offer protection for women who navigate precarious legal situations whose very classification as "worker" would bring them in legal peril. It also emphasizes the importance of the "intimate economies" framework as an analytic lens in understanding migration processes and everyday challenges of migrants who manage precarious legal and economic positions.

### RELATED PUBLICATIONS

Ham, Julie and Iulia Gheorghiu. 2020. "Scripting Pragmatic Intimacies in Sex Work, Migration and Intimate-Material Exchanges." *Cultural, Health and Sexuality*, DOI: 10.1080/13691058.2020.1785011

### REQUEST FOR MORE DETAILS

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