



Debt, trafficking and safe migration: The brokered mobility of Vietnamese sex workers to Singapore

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ABSTRACT

In popular thinking, debt evokes notions of vulnerability and bondage, while irregular migration for sex work conjures up the hazards of human trafficking and modern slavery¹. These perceptions inform ‘safe migration’ policies aimed at ordering and regulating migration and combating informality to increase migrants’ safety and well-being; the assumption being that illegality puts migrants at risk of abuse. This article challenges these assumptions with an ethnographic study of brokerage practices in the quasi-family networks that facilitate the irregular and circular migration of Vietnamese sex workers to Singapore. In these networks, brokers sell a migration package on credit to their clients, the migrant sex workers, who repay it through sexual labour. This package includes all the services necessary for the women to migrate temporarily and work safely in Singapore. Most crucially, it serves as an entrée into the broker’s business and social network, as a way of forming an enduring relationship. Without denying the power of debt to create inequality, obligation and exploitation, this article shows that debt can also be a profitable, non-coercive and reciprocal device for brokers and sex workers alike, a vector of ‘safety’ which limits some of the risks they encounter in a repressive and uncertain host environment. This finding stems from a novel framework in economic anthropology, the ‘socio-economy of debt’ (Guérin, 2018), which complicates moral views of debt through an empirical examination of the materiality, power dynamics and social and moral meanings of debt arrangements and relationships.

1. Introduction

Numerous sex workers incur debt to migrate through informal networks in Southeast Asia. In the public imagination, debt evokes notions of vulnerability, while irregular migration for sex work conjures up the hazards of modern slavery and human trafficking, understood as the non-consensual movement of migrants into exploitative situations². Exploitation includes debt bondage or the pledge of a person’s labour as a security for a debt, a practice defined as an ‘institution and practice similar to slavery’ if the debtor provides an unreasonable amount of work and time to the creditor according to the 1956 Supplementary Slavery Convention³. Anxieties around trafficking and debt bondage apply to irregular migration for sex work in Singapore (Thuc, 2009; Yea, 2010). This concern includes the mobility of Vietnamese sex workers

facilitated by ‘quasi-family networks’, or small informal structures shaped by kinship ties, a family ethos and a matrix of social relationships that merge hierarchy and intimacy (Lainez, 2019). On the ground, the Vietnamese brokers in charge of these networks sell a migration package on credit to their new clients, the migrant sex workers, who repay it through sexual labour. This package includes all the services necessary for the women to migrate temporarily and work safely in Singapore. Above all, it serves as an entrée into the broker’s business and social network, as a way of forming a lasting and trust-based relationship. This bond allows sex workers to gain critical knowledge on migration and sex work regimes in Singapore, to buy single migration services at reduced cost upon return, to establish new debt arrangements and, overall, to perpetuate circular migration in a context of uncertainty and repression against (foreign) sex workers.

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¹ The term ‘irregular migration’ refers to ‘movement of persons that takes place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the State of origin, transit or destination’, as defined by the International Organisation for Migration. Vietnamese sex workers enter Singapore legally or regularly with a valid Social Visit Pass. However, they break the law by working without a proper working visa and in a sector, the sex trade, that is illegal. As a result, they are deemed irregular migrants by the Singaporean authorities.

² According to the 2000 United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, currently the main legal instrument to fight trafficking globally.

³ The 1956 Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery informs contemporary anti-trafficking legislation including the 2000 United Nations Trafficking Protocol and the 2014 Prevention of Human Trafficking Act in Singapore. However, none of these legislations specify what an appropriate or morally acceptable debt arrangement is. As a result, the legal definition of debt bondage remains vague and contested.

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This empirical finding challenges popular accounts of debt-financed migration as inherently harmful, and the central assumption in ‘safe migration’ narratives that irregular migrants are more exposed to abuse than regular ones, hence the policy suggestion to regulate and order migration to increase migrants’ safety and well-being (see Steinmayer, 2018). The concept of ‘safety’, which is often “defined and measured more by its absence than its presence”, refers to “the ability of individuals or organisations to deal with risks and hazards so as to avoid damage or losses and yet still achieve their goals” (Reason, 2000, pp. 1, 3). According to the ‘safe migration’ advocates, workers who migrate and incur debt through irregular means run the risk of being coerced, exploited and bonded. Without denying the inherent power of debt to generate hierarchy, obligation and, in some cases, exploitation, this article shows it can also be a profitable, non-coercive and reciprocal device, a vector of ‘safety’ which limits some of the risks that brokers and sex workers may encounter in a volatile environment. In Vietnamese quasi-family networks operating in Singapore, the benefits of debt stem from favourable economic and power arrangements agreed upon by brokers and sex workers and its capacity to hold them together through webs of interdependence and reciprocity. These features make debt critical to sustain circular migration and brokerage operations amid transience, uncertainty and repression.

This argument contributes to migration theory in the following ways. Liberal thought, which informs global labour migration and anti-trafficking policies, makes a sharp distinction between freedom and unfreedom (O’Connell Davidson, 2013, 2015). While the former refers to regulated, impersonal and voluntary debt arrangements leading to acceptable constraints on debtors, the latter involves unregulated, personalized and coercive arrangements that restrain the debtor’s freedom and generate extreme dependency. Numerous studies on migration for sex work approach debt through the lens of trafficking and modern slavery. They stress how informal networks impose heavy debts and coercive labour to vulnerable migrant sex workers. This view applies to the irregular migration of Thai sex workers to Japan at the turn of the century (Caouette and Saito, 1999; Dinan, 2002; Patterson, 2003) and of Nigerian sex workers to Italy (Baarda, 2016; Kara, 2009; Mancuso, 2014), and the regular migration of Filipino sex workers to Japan (Parreñas, 2011). In these cases, debt flows from recruiters to trainers, travel facilitators, escorts, placement agents, employers and migrants. The prevailing view is that indebted sex workers are bonded to and exploited by their creditors, therefore the correlation with ‘trafficking’ (Baarda, 2016; Patterson, 2003) and ‘modern slavery’ (Dinan, 2002; Kara, 2009). In brief, debt leads to coercion and contemporary forms of debt bondage. Deconstructionist scholarship complicate this argument by revealing the gap between narratives on trafficking and debt bondage on the one hand, and debt practices and arrangements on the other. From this viewpoint, sex workers are not trafficked because they migrate, work and incur debt knowingly and willingly, although structural forces may limit their choices. These works delve into subjectivities and the social dynamics of debt (Busza, 2004; Sandy, 2009; Sobieszczyk, 2002; Testa, 2008) and argue it can also be a legitimate – albeit risky and costly – way to improve one’s future (Chin, 2013; O’Connell Davidson, 2013; Parreñas, 2011; Peano, 2013; Plambech, 2017).

To mitigate the risks of disorderly, irregular and ‘unsafe’ migration, states, policy-makers and labour markets promote orderly, regular and ‘safe’ labour migration (Steinmayer, 2018). However, regulations do not necessarily improve migrants’ safety. Migration scholars document vividly how labour migration regimes limit migrants’ rights, impose restrictions on their freedom and compel them to incur substantial debts to cover hefty migration costs. Many female domestic workers, whose expenses are advanced by their brokers and deducted from their salary by their employer, become trapped in ‘indentured mobility’ (Parreñas and Silvey, 2017), contemporary forms of ‘indentured labour’ (Killias, 2018; Le, 2010) and are labelled the ‘new indentured’ (Halley, 2017). Likewise, many male construction workers who borrow funds from (in) formal sources to pay fees and expenses upfront and recoup them

through remittances face ‘resource backwash’, or the deprivation of critical assets mortgaged for funding migration (Moniruzzaman and Walton-Roberts, 2018; see Buckley, 2012; Hoang and Yeoh, 2015; Rahman, 2013; Wang and Bélanger, 2011 on labour migration; Bylander, 2019 on cross-border migration). In short, debt in regular labour migration can be as detrimental as debt in irregular migration.

Scholarship on (ir)regular debt-financed migration focuses on vulnerability and exploitation, two notions encoded in the DNA of the trafficking, modern slavery, indentured mobility and labour migration frameworks (Lainez, 2020). If these concepts and frames are useful in highlighting the unfavourable conditions inflicted upon migrants by states, labour markets and brokers, they are less suited to providing comprehensive examinations and nuanced assessments of debt, in particular its beneficial effects in informal migration networks. This intrinsic ambivalence of debt is reflected in the etymology of ‘debt’ and ‘credit’, two morally loaded terms. While the former comes from *debitum* (something owed), past participle of *debere* (to owe), and refers to notions of ‘sin’, ‘fault’, and ‘guilt’ in various languages, the latter originates from *creditum* (loan, what is lent), past participle of *credere* (to believe, to trust), and conveys ideas of ‘reputation’, ‘honour’ and ‘means’. Social scientists debate the moral valence of debt and credit which “stand as an inseparable, dyadic unit”, and the fact that debt is often perceived as imprisoning, destructive and weakening whereas credit is regarded as liberating, productive and empowering (Peebles, 2010, p. 226). Joe Deville and Gregory Seigworth (2015, p. 621) support and challenge this claim by arguing that “there cannot be any one-size-fits-all definition for neatly distinguishing credit from debt,” with the former being “associated with the positive production of social relations in contrast to the constraining obligations of debt.” For Chris Gregory (2012, p. 386), moral assessments of debt and credit do not always apply to debtors and creditors as “[v]aluations of this kind are historically specific and must be investigated on a case-by-case basis.” Similarly, Jean-François Bissonnette (2017, p. 118) argues that “the material effects of a debt regime are inseparable from ethical considerations and related moral debates that are located in specific social and cultural contexts.” Regarding temporality, these authors suggest that credit propels people to the future whereas debt keeps them in the present and the past.

Isabelle Guérin (2018) translates and extends these reflections in the ‘socio-economy of debt’, a framework which acknowledges that debt is destructive when it leads to exploitation and domination, and emancipatory when it generates solidarity and belonging (Guérin, 2018, p. 77). Here, debt conveys “no universal meanings but a variety of meanings and formulations within particular contexts” (Guérin, 2014, p. S40), and its interpretations are constantly debated, reconfigured and negotiated in situated contexts. These subtleties become apparent with an examination of the materiality, power dynamics and social and moral meanings of debt. The materiality of debt refers to its economic properties, notably the cost of a loan and its profitability if any, repayment modalities and the debtor’s ability to repay. These economic traits are shaped by temporal features, in particular the duration of a loan, its interest rate and repayment schedules. The next aspect to consider is power differentials between creditors and debtors. These differentials often depend on their pre-existing relationship – which may be strengthened, weakened, muddled or reverted by debt – and the degree of legal and customary protection a debtor enjoys in a specific context. Lastly, the social and moral meanings of debt refer to how a given society or group perceives indebtedness in relation to rights, obligations and interdependence, but also the political economy of reproduction, mobility and aspirations. Overall, a contextually-based, fine-grained ethnographic study of these aspects illuminates the social embeddedness and multidimensionality of debt. It also invites us to challenge standard rationality used in mainstream debt-financed migration research, which views debt as positive if it brings profit within the timeframe of repayment or negative if it does not. As such, the socio-economy of debt appears as an effective antidote to pessimistic and economically-informed perceptions of debt-financed migration.

I support this argument with data from an ethnographic study carried out in Vietnam and Singapore in 2010, with follow-ups up to 2014. In Ho Chi Minh City, I conducted in-depth interviews with six sex workers who had worked in Singapore and one broker who operated in Hong Kong and Singapore. Peer educators from Alliance Anti-Traffic, an NGO I collaborated with, introduced these informants. In Singapore, I embedded myself for five months in the apartment of a Vietnamese broker – I will refer to her as ‘Oanh’⁴ – who facilitated the migration of sex workers from Vietnam. I rented a room at her apartment located in Joo Chiat, a vibrant Vietnamese red-light district situated a few blocks away from Geylang, the largest red-light area in town. Oanh rented the unit from a Vietnamese businesswoman and permanent resident of Singapore. In this environment, I conducted in-depth interviews with ten sex workers and had discussions with ten more. I then tracked down Oanh’s whereabouts in Singapore and Vietnam and kept in contact with two of her clients until 2014. The sample also includes another Vietnamese broker who operated adjacent to Oanh’s location, a Vietnamese permanent resident who provided safe addresses for use on disembarkation cards by sex workers, a Singaporean visa sponsor who accompanied sex workers to Malaysia for visa runs, and a Singaporean recruiter for karaoke outlets. (See Figs. 1–2)

During my first two months at Oanh’s apartment, I accompanied her daily to build trust. I interacted with them in the apartment, had meals together, joined them on trips to pagodas, churches, malls and casinos, helped them remit money to Vietnam and top up their telephone cards, translated their text messages from customers, and taught them English. In the third and fourth months, while continuing to follow them, I conducted interviews with the help of a Vietnamese research assistant. Undoubtedly, my class and gender affected data collection. The fact that I was a young male Caucasian student with limited means as opposed to the more affluent middle-class Chinese men who wandered the bars of Joo Chiat, and devoted to ‘understanding’ (*tim hiếu*) my informants’ lives, made me an object of curiosity and seduction, accessorially the women’s confidant, translator, guide and language instructor.

My analysis will predominantly focus on Oanh’s operation. In Joo Chiat, a small number of brokers competed for the custom of a limited number of sex workers. Since they operated at the margins of legality, they were difficult to access and discreet about their activities. This



Fig. 2. A Vietnamese migrant is walking on Joo Chiat Road (2013).

made it difficult to embed myself simultaneously in various quasi-family networks. As Oanh told me, “if you come to me, you stay with me.” I compensated for this sampling limitation by triangulating the data from her network with data from brokers and sex workers from other networks, seven lawsuits involving Vietnamese nationals retrieved from the Singapore Academy of Law (lawnet.sg), and 140 news clips about sex work in Singapore covering two decades. My ethnographic data covers the social, financial, migratory and sexual lives of the sex workers and their brokers, including the transactions that took place at Oanh’s apartment. I expect this data to offset the ‘double disadvantage’ in smuggling and trafficking research, especially the scarcity of hard evidence due to methodological and ethical challenges, which results in a lack of theoretical cohesion and innovation (Baird and van Liempt, 2016). The following sections provide an ethnographic examination of the materiality, power dynamics and social and moral meanings of debt,



Fig. 1. The Blue Zone stretch on Joo Chiat Road. The popular Blue Lagoon pub closed its doors in late 2010 (2010, all photos from author). (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)



Fig. 3. Oanh leaves food and incense sticks at the entrance of her apartment during the hungry ghost festival. The members of another quasi-family network sith and chat in the background (2010).

⁴ All names are pseudonyms except for those on legal records.

the three pillars of the socio-economy of debt. (See. Figs. 3–7)

2. The materiality of debt: The economic benefits of the package

The study of the economic and temporal features of the migration package that the sex workers purchased on credit from their broker shows that this transaction was rational and profitable for both parties, and thus economically ‘safe’. This transaction took place in a context of circular migration and repression. The chief pull factor for Vietnamese sex workers to migrate to Singapore was the expectation of high earnings. Their goals were to earn money themselves and for their parents, to repay personal and family loans, and to save to invest in small business ventures in Vietnam. Other reasons included the desire to find a generous patron after a marital dissolution and to travel and ‘have fun’ (*đi chơi*) abroad. The city-state was for them an Eldorado as encapsulated in the saying ‘going to Singapore, easy to earn money’ (*đi Singapore dễ kiếm tiền*). All the sex workers from my sample (except one to which I will return) knew their migration to Singapore would involve sex work. Their situation could be described as ‘indentured mobility’ (Parreñas, 2011), as it entailed structural coercion caused by poverty and limited skills and options, but also choice and agency as they migrate knowingly and willingly without being lured, coerced and trafficked.

However, serious challenges stood in their way like the strict enforcement of migration and sex work legislation. At Changi Airport, border officials routinely refuse entry to suspected foreign sex workers considered as ‘Prohibited Immigrants’ according to the Immigration Act (see Vietnam News Agency, 2015). They use profiling criteria such as nationality, gender, age, physical appearance, frequency of visits, the location of the ‘address’ (*địa chỉ*) for the disembarkation card, and the presentation of S\$800–1,000 in ‘show money’ (*tiền xách tay*) as proof of solvency. Once in Singapore, sex workers can also be arrested. The act of selling sex is not prohibited. However, public soliciting is an offence under the Miscellaneous Offences Act and so are procuring and trafficking under the Women’s Charter. On the ground, the government enforces a containment policy (Bin and Gill, 2014). It allows a small number of brothels to operate in four designated red-light areas and to recruit women from China, Thailand and Bangladesh (and Vietnam since 2016) under a ‘Work Permit for Performing Artist’ scheme. However, the authorities persecute sex workers who solicit outside designated areas (Asia One, 2013; One, 2012; Khoo, 2011). If the arrested sex workers are foreigners, the police confiscate their passport, provide



Fig. 4. The entrance of Oanh’s apartment (2010).

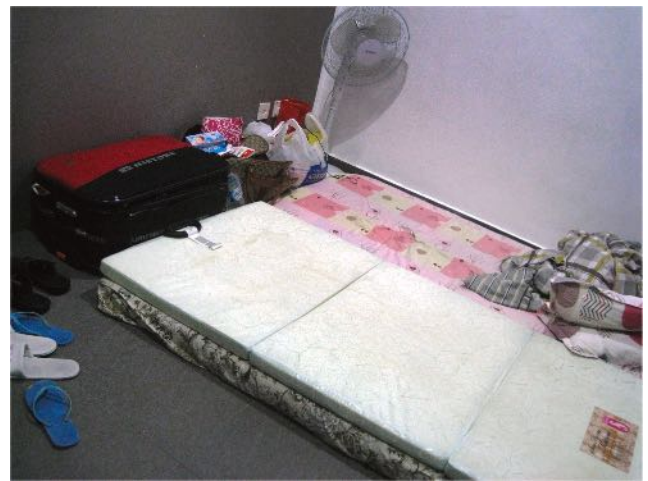


Fig. 5. A sex workers’ room in Oanh’s apartment. Two women shared a single mattress. They placed their belongings at the bottom of the bed (2010).



Fig. 6. My research assistant chatting with a sex worker after having had dinner with Oanh and some of her network clients (2010).



Fig. 7. The Immigration police conducting a raid in the Blue Zone stretch. Two sex workers from Oanh’s network were arrested and expelled from Singapore (2010). (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

them with a notice explaining they are required to leave Singapore at their own expense, and prohibit them from returning. Altogether, these obstacles compelled Vietnamese sex workers to engage in circular migration despite their desire to remain in Singapore for months or years. They all entered and work in the city-state with a 30-day Social Visit Pass, and returned to Vietnam upon its expiration with the intention of returning a few weeks or months later to defuse the suspicions harboured by border officials. This pattern of back and forth migration was their only available option to fulfil their familial obligations and pursue different economic empowerment projects.

To secure this transient mobility, the sex workers relied on informal networks to arrange their transportation, lodging and employment in Singapore. In Joo Chiat, these networks were small and unconnected to the criminal world. They adapted to the vagaries of the sex marketplace by maintaining a silent siege in the district and by staying away from criminal activities such as drug trafficking, gambling, racket and loan-sharking, which are actively repressed by the Singaporean government. At the time of the investigation, the social organisation of the sex trade in Joo Chiat, a relatively small and recent red-light area, stood in contrast with that prevailing in Geylang, the main red-light and oldest sex district in Singapore, where larger and more organised ethnic networks controlled specific areas, sex outlets and the sex trade of women from particular countries. In Joo Chiat, brokers proposed a small array of migration services to their clients. Oanh, for instance, offered single services but also a package costing around S\$1,000 to newcomers, or the ‘money for sponsorship’ (*tiền bảo lãnh*). It included a return ticket from Vietnam, the ‘show money’, the ‘address’ away from a red-light area, reception at Changi airport and taxi transfer to Joo Chiat, and board and lodging at an extra cost. According to thirteen sex workers, the sale of the package to new clients was standard practice in Singapore (for media accounts, see [Law, 2015](#) on Joo Chiat; [Thuc, 2009](#) on Joo Chiat and Clementi). Upon subsequent returns, however, the sex workers only purchased single services at a reduced rate from the broker. Anh, a 22-year-old sex worker from Ho Chi Minh City, bought a package the first time she travelled to Singapore. She explained,

“I paid Oanh the money for sponsorship. This money pays the one who takes us here to work. When I came here, first, I had to work to pay it back. In a week, I earned enough to pay the debt. All of the girls who come here have to pay this money too. It is just a rule you have to follow. If you come here, you pay this price.”

The popularity of the package lay in the economic benefits and limited constraints it generated for brokers and sex workers alike. The former made a profit – Oanh earned around S\$500 on each package which comprised a return ticket (S\$250), the ‘show money’ (S\$100), and the ‘address’ (S\$100) and taxi transportation from Changi airport (S\$50). Besides, she gained new clients in a competitive brokerage market. The latter bought an all-in-one solution on credit to travel and work safely in Singapore, and at no risk because the broker did not hold them liable in case of rejection at Changi airport or arrest while working. Regarding temporal considerations, the sex workers who bought the package from Oanh usually repaid it within seven to ten days. They could earn S\$750 in 30 days by combining tips (S\$20/unit × 20 clients = 400) from sitting with customers and the provision of sexual services (S\$100/unit × 20 clients = 2,000), after subtracting the cost of the package (S\$1,000), the rental of a shared room in the broker’s apartment (S\$5 × 30 days = 150), food (S\$10 × 30 days = 300) and miscellaneous expenses (S\$200). The returnees were not requested to purchase a package. Instead, they organized trips by themselves and bought return tickets (S\$250), the ‘show money’ (S\$100), the ‘address’ (S\$100) and taxi transportation from Changi airport (S\$50) from the broker, totalling S\$500. Within a month time, they could make S\$1,250. The S\$750–1,250 range is consistent with the popular belief that Singapore is a place where virtually any Vietnamese sex worker can earn around S\$1,000 per month. This income level was substantial compared

to the monthly earnings sex workers could expect in the low-and unskilled labour sectors in Vietnam, such as factory work (S\$120) and sex work (S\$250–500). On this matter, Tam, a sex worker from Ho Chi Minh City, claimed, “In Vietnam, I can earn only two million *đồng* per month. Working in Singapore, I earn 20–30 million *đồng*. I earn ten times more here than in Vietnam.” The package was thus beneficial for brokers and their clients who manage to repay it in the 30-day window of the Social Visit Pass. This quick repayment package challenges one of the attributes of debt bondage in popular narratives, namely that debt cannot be repaid, thus making the condition of debtor permanent.

My economic data also highlights the attractiveness of irregular circular debt-financed migration for sex work compared to regular debt-financed labour migration. In Singapore, sex workers who were newcomers to a quasi-family network bought the package once and spent two-thirds of their earnings to repay it. The majority worked as freelancers under flexible conditions for a small number of hours per day and earned a relatively high income. However, they only worked a few months per year and faced severe legal risks. For their part, Vietnamese labour migrants paid S\$1,300 to secure a three-year contract in a factory in Malaysia in the late 2000s. With a monthly salary of US\$190, the repayment of travel debts absorbed 11 months of labour ([Le, 2010](#), pp. 883, 892). In Taiwan, Vietnamese migrant workers were charged US \$6,124–7,461 for a two-year contract, which required 15 months of labour with an annual income of US\$5,760 ([Wang and Bélanger, 2011](#), p. 326). In short, labour migrants in Malaysia and Taiwan allocated between one and two-thirds of their total earnings to secure a two- or three-year contract, a cost they had to incur again if they re-migrated. Moreover, many endured poor working conditions and freedom restrictions, which forced them to return home with unpaid debts before the completion of their contract. For [Hong-zen Wang and Danièle Bélanger \(2011, p. 331; see also Bélanger, 2014\)](#), the high fees that Vietnamese labour migrants paid to migrate to Taiwan put them on a costly path which “leads to the debt-bondage of workers caught in a vicious cycle, having to pay back a large debt rather than accumulating capital.” Thus, indebtedness “is an important factor that explains why international remittances fail to convert to upward socioeconomic mobility for many migrant families” ([Hoang and Yeoh, 2015, p. 284](#)). In a nutshell, irregular migration for sex work to Singapore is more lucrative on a monthly basis – but also riskier and limited in terms of income a migrant can expect to earn on a yearly basis – than debt-financed labour migration to Malaysia and Taiwan, which is more profitable in the long run, but also more expensive and riskier in terms of freedom restrictions. While of limited value due to considerable differences in terms of market, regulation and scope, the comparison of these two migration regimes shows that informal practices may be more economically beneficial than formal ones, or that irregular migration for sex work may be a safe alternative to regular labour migration.

3. Debt and power: The conundrum of hierarchy and exploitation

Another benefit or marker of ‘safety’ that made the package attractive to newcomers was its ability to create hierarchy and dependency with the broker throughout the repayment period, but not coercion and trafficking. This insight leads us to the key topics of debt and power in both trafficking studies and the socio-economy of debt. In Joo Chiat, sex workers repaid the package by working as freelancers, a standard practice in this red-light district, meaning that brokers had no control over their client’s sexual labour. Oanh, for example, never took a cut from her (indebted) clients’ earnings or threatened them to speed up the recovery of the package. Neither did she restrict their freedom by keeping their passports, a risky practice if the police were to arrest them. On this matter, the sex workers lived reclusively at her apartment for fear of being arrested, relying on their broker for necessities ([Lainez, 2019, p. 1641, 2011a, p. 55](#)). They were also discouraged from ‘breaking the debt’ (*trốn nợ*) due to the strong social pressure within their broker’s

safe house and the small community of Vietnamese sex workers in Singapore. As one sex worker pointed out, “everyone knows everything there.” As a result, any attempt to break the debt would irrevocably tarnish a sex worker’s reputation and possibly provoke her exclusion from a quasi-family network, thus reducing the possibility of returning to Singapore.

Nevertheless, Oanh’s relationship with her indebted clients was grounded in hierarchy based on a disparity in experience and socio-economic capital, and on the intrinsic inequality which debt creates among creditors and debtors. As David Graeber (2011, pp. 120–121) puts it, debt is an “agreement between equals to no longer be equal (at least for a time)”, knowing that “[d]uring the time that the debt remains unpaid, the logic of hierarchy takes hold.” Like her next-door colleague, Oanh did not use her power as a creditor to pressure her clients to repay the package. Instead, she simply encouraged them to repay quickly so they could start earning money for themselves. It was in the interest of both parties to be respectful to one other, to honour their commitments and to cultivate an enduring bond that would provide a steady income to the former and security to the latter within the 30-day window of the Social Visit Pass. This bond was vital to ensuring circular mobility. The package was designed not to hamper, but to initiate this process that would be consolidated upon the return of the migrants to Singapore. These findings dispute well-entrenched assumptions in trafficking tropes about debt being fundamentally coercive, when what matters in evaluating a debt arrangement are the contractual conditions and their application (Weitzer, 2015, p. 226). They also contrast with research findings on more organised and unsafe irregular (Caouette and Saito, 1999; Dinan, 2002) and regular migration for sex work regimes where brokers and employers exploit indebted sex workers. In Japan, for instance, Filipino sex workers organize their regular migration through a web of talent managers and promoters who charge overpriced commissions, inflate debt and make them sign blank checks that employers can later fill in with expenses if conflict arises (Parreñas, 2011, pp. 40–53).

In Singapore, anxieties about trafficking and debt bondage are justified when deceitful brokers act as procurers. I found a single case of trafficking during my investigation. In 2004, a woman named Linh was asked by an acquaintance to work for three months as a waitress for S \$1,200 per month. Linh agreed to pay S\$2,400 in fees through salary deductions. Once in Singapore, a Malay broker and his wife, a Vietnamese madam, forced her to work as a sex worker in Geylang to repay her debt and to cover daily expenses. According to Linh,

“When I arrived in Singapore, I knew I had been deceived. I got there in the morning, and in the afternoon, they asked me to dress up and put on make-up. I didn’t know how to work. I did it very terribly. I worked in a bar. We had to give them all the money we earned. The price was S\$150–200 for quick sex and S\$300–400 for a night. They kept all of our earnings, especially if we owed them money.”

Eventually, Linh repaid her debt and returned to Vietnam upon the expiration of her Social Visit Pass. This unfortunate experience did not traumatize her. Instead, she used it to succeed during her return trips to Singapore. I found a similar case in the legal archives. A Vietnamese broker named Liều, who was married to a Singaporean man, was sent to jail for coercing and procuring a ‘victim’, as detailed in the record ‘Public Prosecutor versus Nguyen Thi Bich Lieu’. In Vietnam, the recruiter lured the ‘victim’ with the promise of a job as a maid or helper in a restaurant for S\$1,000 per month. She provided an air ticket worth S \$250 and US\$800 for show money, of which S\$200 was loaned to her parents. When the ‘victim’ arrived in Geylang, Liều coerced her into sex work to repay S\$1,200 in agent fees and the family loan. She directed her to charge each customer S\$100 for a quick service and S\$200 for an overnight booking and to hand over all her earnings. Liều’s sentence was based on “aggravating factors – (i) the use of deception to lure the victim to come to Singapore, (ii) coercion i.e. the use of pressure to take

advantage of the victim’s vulnerability, and (iii) the victim’s young age”, according to the record.

It is important to emphasize that the exploitation of both Linh and the ‘victim’ stemmed from deception and coercion but not from debt bondage per se, which was just a mechanism used by their brokers to extract capital from them. In other words, both women travelled to Singapore with the understanding that they would repay their migration debt through labour. The point of contention lay in the nature of the labour to be performed, not the repayment of debt through labour. Needless to say, not all arrangements involving brokers acting as procurers are deceitful and coercive. Many Vietnamese sex workers share half of their earnings with their pimps and madams in Vietnam (Lainez, 2015, 2018) and their Vietnamese brothel-owners in Cambodia (Busza, 2004). The ones I met in the Mekong delta, Ho Chi Minh City and Phnom Penh for my doctoral research did not consider the standard 50:50 arrangement exploitative, especially when their procurers provided reliable services for protection, client referral and credit. In short, while cases of trafficking and debt bondage occurred in Singapore, they were not representative of the situation in Joo Chiat where sex workers worked independently. The favourable conditions they enjoyed there explain why they kept returning with the help of their brokers known to them. Whether a newcomer would end up in such a favourable environment or in a more coercive one ultimately depended on her social networks and ‘luck’ (*hên*), as my informants often stressed.

Oanh had a slightly different perspective on exploitation and trafficking. For her, the sale of S\$1,000 package was a fair transaction she framed as ‘help’ (*giúp đỡ*). According to her, a package was exploitative when:

“People charge the girls up to S\$2,000. This is a cut-throat loan [*tiền cắt cổ*], not the money for sponsorship. They sexually exploit women who don’t know anything about Singapore. Only the girls who come here for the first time will pay so much money. They don’t know anything so they are deceived.”

On the contrary, trafficking was for her:

“When you go to Cambodia to work. You are told that you can make a lot of money, but you have to pay US\$10,000. You think it is going to be heaven, but once you are there, you don’t work in nice bars like here, but instead, you end up sold to a brothel and they don’t let you go out. This is called human trafficking.”

To summarise, Oanh defined exploitation in economic criteria in Singapore, an Eldorado viewed as prosperous and safe. However, she equated trafficking with turning women into commodities to be traded for exorbitant prices in brothels across Cambodia, a country considered underdeveloped and dangerous (Lainez, 2011b). Anti-trafficking legislators refuse to provide a yardstick with which to define exploitation and determine when a debt arrangement becomes debt bondage and, therefore, a slavery-like practice. Oanh and her clients filled this gap by setting a limit beyond which a package was exploitative and, as a result, best to be avoided. Ignoring the calculation frameworks and risk assessments of brokers and sex workers – as anti-trafficking advocates often do (Bales, 1999; Kara, 2009) – amounts to ignoring the socio-economic logics that underpin circular migration for sex work. It would also deny their agency, ability to make informed decisions and to determine what practices are safe or unsafe for them amid structural constraints and limited choices, and the fact that “although indebtedness can imply serious and extensive restrictions on freedom, it is also a means by which many people seek to extend and secure their future freedoms” (O’Connell Davidson, 2013, p. 177).

A last important point related to power is the degree of legal, customary and social protection a debtor enjoys in a given setting, which partly informs the creditor’s power to enforce repayment. Once in Singapore, newcomers like Linh and the ‘victim’ were powerless against their abusive brokers. They could resist and escape them, or as a last

resort, report them to the police. By doing so, however, they would incur the risk of being treated like criminals even if, as trafficked victims, they have the right to be assisted under the Women's Charter, and from 2014 onwards, the Prevention of Human Trafficking Act.⁵ This lack of legal protection results from repressive policies implemented by the Singaporean authorities against foreign sex workers. The most newcomers can do to navigate an unsafe legal environment and prevent coercive legal scenarios is to collect as much information as possible about their would-be broker from their recruiters and social networks before migrating. They can also call upon gods and spirits' protection. If granted, this protection generates a cosmic debt or obligation to reciprocate (Lainez, 2015, pp. 289–290); see Chu, 2010).

4. The social and moral meaning of debt: Cultivating belonging, interdependence and reciprocity

When legal protection and mechanisms are weak, migrants can tap on social networks to seek security and stability. In quasi-family networks, the purchase of a package led to the establishment of a lasting bond between the brokers and their clients. As Julia O'Connell Davidson (2015, p. 198) puts it, debt becomes "a form of social glue, one that can hold people together in very different kinds of relationships and for varying periods of time." From the perspective of a newcomer, the short-term benefits of the package were appealing as it allowed her to travel to Singapore with no initial investment. In the long run, it also granted her the possibility of forging a bond with a broker whom she could rely on in the future, to be integrated into her quasi-family network, and to create interdependency and reciprocity. This belonging opened the door to insider privileges such as access to advice on how to succeed in Singapore, and most crucially, to the purchase of single services and the possibility of engaging in new debt arrangements. These privileges shine a light on the social and moral meaning of the package, the third pillar of the socio-economy of debt, which is often overlooked in debt-financed migration research (see Chu, 2010; Chuang, 2014; Goh et al., 2016; Stoll, 2013 for exceptions). It also brings temporality back into the equation, as while the economic meaning of debt bounded brokers and sex workers to the past and the present of the package, the social meaning of credit understood as the investment in a mutually beneficial relationship thrust them into a productive future informed by indebtedness.

Quasi-family networks were forged around kinship ties because many Vietnamese brokers operated with their Singaporean husband – often a former customer – and relatives commuting between Vietnam and Singapore (see Chong, 2019; Alkhatib, 2012; Law, 2015). Moreover, they operated with a family ethos, a pattern observed in similar settings across Asia (Cheng, 2010, pp. 107–117; Lyttleton, 2014, p. 64). In Singapore, Oanh and her clients addressed each other using the terms *con* (child) and *me* (mother), instead of the more usual pairs *chi/em* (old sister/younger brother-sister). This family ethos reflects many Asian systems of person reference which use kinship terms in place of personal pronouns to address kin and non-kin. In quasi-family networks, this ethos created hierarchy and a code of conduct with rights and obligation. By endorsing the role of 'mother' in charge of her network, Oanh committed to providing protection and free advice to her 'daughters' on how to get through immigration controls at Changi airport, how to recruit, manage and obtain the most out of their patrons, how to protect themselves from STIs and HIV/AIDS, and how to avoid police raids and ID controls. However, Oanh could not assist her clients in case of arrest and expulsion the police, nor in cases of violence and abuse by patrons as she was not involved in sex transactions. Anh, the 22-year-old sex

worker from Ho Chi Minh City, praised her 'mother' Oanh for being attentive, caring and protective. She showed gratitude by purchasing services from and staying with her on return trips. While she forged a strong emotional bond with Oanh imbued with obligations, other peers were merely interested in the practical benefits brought about by inclusion in a quasi-family network.

These benefits included the possibility of purchasing single services at a reduced rate on return trips. This service consisted of the bulk of Oanh's business, although she only made 10–20 percent profit at most for each air ticket sold. This service was in great demand. Most sex workers bought a one-week return ticket to deflect suspicion from border officials and to increase their chances of being granted a 30-day Social Visit Pass. Once in Singapore, they discarded their original ticket and purchased a single return one dated a few days before the expiration of their 30-day pass to take full advantage of their time in Singapore. As a result, Oanh was often asked to provide return tickets, which she secured through her daughter who worked as a travel agent in Ho Chi Minh City. The 'show money' and the 'address' services were also popular. Quỳnh, a sex worker from Central Vietnam, bought a package from Oanh when she first came to the city-state. According to her,

"The second and third time I came here, I borrowed S\$1,000 for show money and paid S\$100 for the fee. The second time, I didn't need to buy an address for the airport card because I used the one from my previous trip. I came to this flat directly. The third time, though, I had to buy an address for S\$100 because I had not come here for a long time. I also borrowed S\$1,000 for show money, which cost me S\$100."

Oanh and her clients were thus interdependent: where the former needed the latter to sustain brokerage operations and recruit new clients in a transient setting, the latter depended on the former to access competitive on-call services, safe houses, protection and guidance. This arrangement was clearly mutually beneficial as it brought stability and security to both parties, a prerequisite for ensuring circular migration.

The inclusion in quasi-family networks also gave rise to new debt arrangements which generated further interdependence but also reciprocity and, at times, muddled hierarchy and power. Different types of arrangements prevailed. Some brokers provided small interest-bearing loans to their clients for consumption. Nguyệt, an ageing sex worker, explained how her broker lent her and her peers S\$200–300 at most, with a flat interest rate of 20 percent. Other brokers provided loans based on the income level of their clients according to Kim, a broker working in Hong Kong and Singapore. Lastly, other brokers like Oanh proposed interest-free loans. Vân, a young woman who travelled to Singapore after having sold her virginity to help her parents, mentioned, "I came here for a week and sent money back to pay my mother's debt. Actually, by the time I wanted to send money, I had not earned enough yet. I had to borrow some money from Oanh. At least she didn't charge me any interest." Another woman, Khai, a compulsive gambler from Tây Ninh Province, borrowed S\$400 from Oanh after having lost her savings at the Marina Bay Sands casino in Singapore. Oanh framed all these loans as solidarity and charged her borrowers no interest:

"I only lend money to the girls because I want to help. If I lend them money, how can they not pay me back? It would be very embarrassing for them. I don't know what to do if they don't pay me, though. I think that I help them this time, then they would help me another time. But if they don't help me back, I won't help them again."

Concomitantly, the sex workers described these loans as mutual support. While these transactions further reinforced asymmetry between them and Oanh, they also complicated their relationship. If the sale of the package originally initiated their financial ties, they became more complicated with the addition of market transactions (the sale of single migration services) and loans regulated by a gift economy and its set of

⁵ The record provides no details about the fate of the 'victim', in particular whether she was assisted, repatriated or deported. I could only locate one file involving sex trafficking from Vietnam to Singapore, which indicates the scarcity of these cases, although not all records are made public.

reciprocal moral obligations framed as ‘I help you once, you help me back’ (*giúp qua giúp lại*). These obligations, in turn, merged with those imbued in the personalized ‘mother-daughter’ relationship, thus further mingling market and intimate logics.

The power differential was disturbed if not upturned when the brokers borrowed from their clients to cope with cash flows. The trafficking narrative portrays traffickers and brokers as evil and greedy actors seeking to maximize profit and efficiency. Nevertheless, brokers like Oanh and her next-door colleague in Joo Chiat live modestly and made little profit from their operations. They also endured significant risks. Oanh, for example, used part of her earnings to compensate for the risk of losing her clients and the ‘show money’. Such incidents occurred when immigration officials rejected sex workers at Changi airport and expelled them to Vietnam on the same or the following day depending on the availability of seats on the carrier, making it difficult for Oanh to track them down. She could also lose them at the Ho Chi Minh City airport – this occurred once during the study. According to Oanh,

“My husband gave S\$1,000 to the three girls in Vietnam. But they did not check in. They pretended to go inside the airport, but actually, they did not pass through immigration. When my husband left, they went out and kept my S\$1,000 and never returned it to me. I had no way to recoup the money because I did not know where to find them, and I don’t have time to go to An Giang and Vĩnh Long provinces where they come from to look for them. Last year, I also rented a house like this and lost a lot of money. I had to borrow from loan sharks in Vietnam to repay the money I borrowed to advance the girls.”

To recoup the heavy loss from her missing clients, Oanh borrowed money from Huy in Singapore, a long-time client who had married a local man. The delay in repaying this loan created conflict, which she resolved by juggling with various loans and lenders:

“When my husband lost S\$3,000, Huy lent me S\$1,000. She didn’t charge any interest. It is gratitude, or I help you, you help me. But now she doesn’t understand that I am in a difficult situation. She lost more than S\$10,000 at the casino. I owe her only S\$500 and she insults me because I don’t pay her back... I do the business here and she lends me money when I am in a difficult situation. Why does she insult me like that? I asked Jack [her former Singaporean son-in-law] to pay her S\$500 for me already.”

I recorded similar transactions over a month: Oanh borrowed \$408 from Thu, a long-time client, and S\$300 from Uyên, a newcomer and successful sex worker who was earning substantial amounts of money through transactional sex arrangements.

These loans revealed Oanh’s vulnerability and dependency vis-à-vis her clients in the tight-knit environment of the apartment and her weak authority as a broker and creditor. In addition, the alternation between the roles of creditor and debtor challenges popular views about brokers as nothing but evil creditors and migrants as nothing but powerless debtors. Chris Gregory (2012, p. 394) reminds us that the moral valuation of lenders and borrowers “varies over historical time and geographic place, depending on the values of the speaker, the social context of the transaction and the social status of the transactors.” The moral values of the speakers are those of policy-makers, activists and scholars who view debt as inherently dangerous and approach it through the lens of trafficking (Thuc, 2009). This approach is informed by standard economic theory and problematic binaries between voluntary and forced migration, freedom and slavery, subject and object, agency and coercion, victim and oppressor, which fail to describe the complexities of human experience (see O’Connell Davidson, 2015, p. 198). The social context of debt is that of quasi-family networks, understood as organic and loosely organised socioeconomic structures where social bonds, interdependence and reciprocity are forged and sustained for practical and business purposes in a repressive and ever-changing

environment. Furthermore, the social status of brokers and sex workers is similar because they come from modest backgrounds and similar aspirations. Moreover, they alternate their role as creditors and debtors in quasi-family networks depending on evolving needs and contingencies. Overall, this context makes rigid categorizations of creditors as vicious and debtors as virtuous tenuous at best. My assessment of debt as a source of safety stems from its capacity to glue network members together in the long-run and to create belonging, interdependence, reciprocity and stability. Taken together, these conditions sustain circular and non-coercive migration in a volatile setting.

5. Conclusion

In popular thinking, debt is the tool by which an evil trafficker or broker coerces and exploits a vulnerable migrant. The use of concepts and frameworks constructed around debt bondage and vulnerability in debt-financed migration research reinforce these perceptions of debt as imprisoning and extractive. I challenge these views using dense and contextualised data on migrant sex workers’ economic lives and arrangements with their brokers, highlighting their ability to repay the migration package quickly and easily, and the fact that this product did not lead to debt bondage. My economic data also underline the benefits of irregular migration for sex work in comparison to labour migration to Malaysia and Taiwan. In addition, the socio-economy of debt shows how nuanced the power dynamics between the creditor and the debtor are in quasi-family networks, a central concern in studies of salary deductions systems where migrants mortgage their labour to their brokers and employers (Dinan, 2002; Goh et al., 2016; Parreñas and Silvey, 2017). The hierarchy and obligations that the package generates between the broker-creditor and the sex worker-debtor leads to capital extraction but not coercion except in rare cases of trafficking. As shown, peer pressure, group belonging and moral obligations suffice to ensure repayment. Most interestingly, the status of creditor and debtor is muddled and even inverted when the broker borrows money from her clients to cope with cash flow problems. As a whole, debt is socially embedded because it shapes and is shaped by relationships imbued in a family ethos. In particular, debt is used to fund mobility and also to create a lasting bond that will sustain financial activity and circular migration; hence the juxtaposition of a short-term temporality bounded to the repayment of the package and a long-term one that reveals a social and economic process that persists long after the repayment of the package.

The importance of debt transcends the transactions described in this article. Debt was the economic lifeblood of quasi-family networks, as extensively shown. In addition, many sex workers came to Singapore to repay personal and family debts, and occasionally borrowed money from moneylenders in Vietnam to invest in clothing, makeup, phones, air tickets and so forth, especially returnees. Most ‘juggled’ (Guérin, 2014) permanently with personal and family loans, creditors and debtors, different types of financial products, opportunities brought by credit and constraints resulting from (over)indebtedness. Debt allowed them to meet daily expenses, to cope with setbacks, financial exclusion and rampant inflation between 2009 and 2011, and to materialize their aspirations for security, consumption and spatial and social mobility, including circular migration for sex work to Singapore. In the end, debt was more than a coercive tool used by evil creditors to exploit powerless debtors; it was intrinsic to quasi-family networks and the lives of their members. Unveiling the deep economic significance of debt-financed migration thus requires us not only to delve into debt-financed migration arrangements but also into the political economy of credit and development in sending and receiving countries, a central dimension in the socio-economy of debt.

This framework can be applied to the study of debt-financed migration more broadly. The emphasis on the materiality, power dynamics and social and moral meaning of debt opens up new and comprehensive research avenues that allow us to transcend pessimistic views of debt. Some of these aspects have been explored in detail in

research on irregular migration from China and Guatemala (Stoll, 2013) to the United States facilitated by snakeheads and coyotes smugglers. In the sending areas of Longyan (Fujian) and Nebaj (highland Guatemala), the funding of smuggling operations and the management of remittances fuel a vibrant and speculative debt and real estate economy. The migrants and their supporting families constantly borrow and lend money locally and transnationally to finance mobility, the construction of opulent houses, and in the Chinese case, offerings to gods for divine protection for smuggled migrants. The social and moral meanings of debt matter greatly in these communities: Nebajenses – especially women who are considered better payers – prefer to borrow from moneylenders who they know personally instead of formal credit providers (Stoll, 2013, pp. 113, 122), and Fujianese cultivate ‘creditability’ (Chu, 2010, p. 123), or a mix of moral reputation, good standing, reliability and strategic connections. In China too, indebtedness between brokers and poor labour migrants engenders speculation and risk together with a moral economy that normalizes exploitation and social ties, which are critical for brokers and workers’ aspirations of security and career advancement (Chuang, 2014). In brief, these examples illustrate the social embeddedness of debt-financed migration and the multiple meanings, values and effects surrounding debt at the material, personal, temporal and cosmological levels. Future research would benefit from pursuing these lines of enquiry under the comprehensive socio-economy of debt framework.

A valuable insight this framework has brought to the understanding of the financial inner-workings of quasi-family networks in Singapore is that the migration package is a socioeconomic device that generates mutually beneficial arrangements, belonging, interdependence and solidarity in a context of inequality, repression and uncertainty. Put differently, the package generates the stability required for the system to reproduce itself. This finding helps us to move toward a more systematic understanding of informal mechanisms and social networks as vectors of safe migration. This argument, though, challenges a dogmatic assertion made in policy and development circles that irregular practices inevitably entail risk and vulnerability (Steinmayer, 2018). My study contributes to recent critiques of this assertion raised in a joint study by the ILO and IOM whose findings do “not demonstrate that regular migration was essential to better outcomes” for Cambodian, Burmese, Laotian and Vietnamese labour migrants returning from Thailand and Malaysia (Harkins et al., 2017, p. xxi). Maryann Bylander (2019) further corroborates this insight by examining various datasets including the ILO-IOM survey data for migrant returning from Thailand: regular migrants enjoy better pay and working conditions than irregular ones, but also suffer from limited rights (earning less than the minimum wage, no paid leave), freedoms (deception, contract substitution, coercion, wage deductions) and benefits (paying high costs for migration, high indebtedness), partly because regular migration is poorly regulated in Thailand. She raises a major concern too, namely that the safe migration discourse masks the structural coercion inflicted upon regular migrants by regular brokers, labour markets and states, in particular, burdensome bureaucratic procedures and limitations over their rights and movements. Furthermore, it supports policies to limit human mobility and criminalise trafficking and irregular migration, migrants and smugglers. By arguing that irregular debt-financed migration for sex work may be a credible and safe alternative to regular labour debt-financed migration, my aim is not to promote the former at the expense of the latter. Instead I emphasize that irregular migration is not necessarily riskier than regular migration. Hence, the emphasis on the presumed perils of irregular migration to argue for the regularization of migration is inappropriate.

Credit authorship contribution statement

Nicolas Lainez: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing.

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