On Institutionalized Sexual Economies: Employment Sex, Transactional Sex, and Sex Work in Kenya’s Cut Flower Industry

Today Kenya boasts the longest-standing, largest, and most lucrative cut flower industry across Africa (Dolan, Opondo, and Smith 2002; Bonarriva 2003; Riisgaard 2009). The core of Kenya’s floriculture production surrounds Lake Naivasha, where early flower farms were established in the 1960s as small, family-owned agricultural producers that supplied flowers to niche markets (Dolan, Opondo, and Smith 2002; Hale and Opondo 2005). Floriculture in Naivasha expanded exponentially during the 1980s, attracting considerable foreign investment, and in the 1990s it was promoted as a mode of export diversification under structural adjustment programs (Little and Dolan 2000). By the year 2000, floriculture had emerged as one of Kenya’s most important sectors. The cut flower industry continued to grow at an annual rate of approximately 200 hectares, one of the most rapid expansions in the world, and now constitutes over 60 percent of Kenya’s horticultural sector and contributes 1.5 percent of the national gross domestic product (Bolo 2008).

The cut flower industry is one of the largest sources of agricultural foreign exchange in Kenya (second only to tea), generating indirect income for millions and providing jobs for approximately fifty thousand employees (Bolo 2008; Riisgaard 2009). For these employees, unionization across flower farms has remained extremely low, gendered, and unequal, with only 3,400 union members, who are predominantly male and in permanent positions (Riisgaard and Hammer 2011). As a result of this persistent gender discrimination, job insecurity, low wages, and reports of sexual harassment, exploitation, and rape of women workers, Kenya’s cut flower industry has been subject to a series of exposés since the 1990s (Dolan 2007; see also Morser and McRae 2007). With national and international attention focused on poor labor practices and pressure mounting for the cut flower industry to better adhere to higher standards of corporate social responsibility (Hughes 2001; Opondo 2006; Ziegler 2010), Kenya’s flower farms have become increasingly guarded and securitized. On the surface at eye level, and in the normalcy of the everyday, it often goes unnoticed just how profoundly this global industry has transformed socioeconomic life in Naivasha.
Everyday life and the flower farm sexual economy in Naivasha

If you drive or take a matatu, or public passenger bus, around Lake Naivasha, you will certainly pass many signposts indicating some of the largest flower farms in Kenya: Bilishaka Flowers, Oserian, Finlays, Karuturi, Homegrown, Sher, Nini Farm, and Wildfire Flowers are just a few of over fifty farms. However, unless you are an employee, rarely do you see beyond the armored gates and security guards. You may catch a glimpse of row after row of white, plastic greenhouses through tree-lined fences, and you will often see busloads of mostly female employees and trucks filled with cut flowers in transit. You will pass several settlements of dusty, rough roads and 12 × 12-foot corrugated-roof homes for migrant laborers, the largest being Karagita, with a population of approximately one hundred thousand. Yet the magnitude of the flower farms largely remains hidden in plain sight. Many farms provide their own facilities, and communities of thousands—complete with housing, hospitals, schools, markets, social halls, and pubs—live unseen behind their gates, along with the thousands of hectares of land used for floriculture. In her ethnographic description of an aerial view overlooking Lake Naivasha, Catherine S. Dolan (2007) writes: “The landscape is dominated by sheets of shimmering white plastic, the hippo-filled lake framed by a labyrinth of modern greenhouses that comprise some of the largest flower farms in the world. It’s disturbingly beautiful—techno-capitalism etched into the birthplace of humanity—and easy to suppress the sprawling slums of migrant labourers these greenhouses have spawned” (239–40).

At nighttime, the flower farms become more pronounced, with the greenhouses illuminated for the overnight workers spraying pesticides, a sea of lights among the blacked-out settlements, which are often without electricity and other basic needs. At night too is when female flower farm workers will travel by matatu to bars in settlements along the lake, like Karagita, or even to Naivasha Town, to do street-based sex work. Here in Naivasha, at the production site of Kenya’s global cut flower commodity chain, female labor migrants often participate in a sexual economy that exists along a gendered and unequal labor continuum of sexual commerce. Along this continuum, women exchange sex for employment at flower farms, what I call “employment sex” or “sex for employment,” engage in transactional sex with flower farm managers, supplement their incomes with part-time sex work, and move in and out of full-time, street-based sex work as their temporary flower farm contracts turn over.

Given how sexual commerce is so firmly entrenched in employment in the cut flower industry, and also within work in comparable value chains globally, this research contributes to our understanding of what I refer to as “institutionalized sexual economies.” While extensive research on flor-
culture in Kenya has addressed unequal labor practices and organization, social codes of conduct, and the consumption of fair-trade flowers in explicitly gendered ways, this article is the first to use critical feminist theories to examine sexual commerce at flower farms and to place the debate over sex work as work squarely in the context of the cut flower industry.¹ By offering the term “employment sex” and documenting the labor continuum of sexual commerce at Naivasha’s flower farms, this article proposes new conceptual tools that address the lack of sex worker perspectives and experiences in the global South that has been identified by Kamala Kempadoo (1998), especially in Africa, and provides a better understanding of what Laura María Agustín has called the “cultural study of commercial sex” (2005, 2007a) in the context of institutionalized sexual economies.

Theoretical considerations: Migrant labor markets, institutionalized sexual economies, and sex work categories

While there is emerging research that examines how migrant labor markets influence informal sexual economies, the entanglements among formal employment sectors, local sexual economies, and the sex workers’ rights movement have not yet been examined in Africa. Global evidence points to the significance of this intersection, including how migrant female sex workers reassert their presence after being pushed out of a new, male-dominated maquiladora industry in Mexico (Wright 2004). And in both Mexico and Cambodia, it has been documented how female labor migrants’ low wages, long hours, and experiences of sexual harassment in garment factories directly influence their entry into street-level sex work (Nishigaya 2002, Katsulis 2008). In Africa, scholars have examined the vulnerability of women participating in sexual commerce at restructured sugar plantations in Tanzania (Norris and Worby 2012) and have noted that male migrant labor systems often create markets for female sex work, including in South African mining towns (Campbell 2000) and along the Zambian copper belt (Parpart 1988). It has been argued that these unequal labor structures adopted from the colonial period are what perpetuate HIV transmission (Turshen 1998) and transactional sexual exchanges (Swidler and Watkins 2007) in Africa today.

In Kenya specifically, recent literature has pointed to this connection among economies dependent on labor migration, transactional sex, and the spread of HIV and AIDS in both the fishing and tea industries. These studies reveal how female labor migrants sometimes engage in different types of sexual commerce based on different labor markets. For example, the intersection of labor migration and high-risk transactional sex in Lake Victoria’s fishing industry has gained much attention due to high levels of HIV prevalence there. Many studies have documented how migrant female fish traders exchange in high-risk sex with male fishermen through “sex for fish” transactions, locally known as *jaboya* relationships. Similarly, studies have also documented high rates of HIV transmission among migrant laborers in the tea industry in Kericho (Ondimu 2005, 2010; Foglia et al. 2008). Kennedy Nyabuti Ondimu (2010) has noted that migrant female heads of households there seek out protection from sexual harassment by male colleagues and supplement their low incomes with cash and goods through transactional sex relationships.

These studies make important contributions to understanding how labor migration informs high-risk transactional sex relationships, which have been extensively documented throughout Africa. Owing to the economic dimensions of sexual relationships and the disproportionate burden of HIV across the continent, theorizations of transactional sex have dominated the literature on sexual commerce in Africa. However, this principal focus on the material and risky aspects of sexual exchange has resulted in a hegemonic narrative that overt sex work does not exist, contributing to an erasure of the sex workers’ rights movement in Africa. This imbalance within African sex work research has the simultaneous effect of obscuring the fact that categories of sexual commerce often operate across boundaries or along continuums and also means that understudied categories, such as employment sex, remain silenced. For example, Joanna Busza (2006) notes that mainstream categories of sexual commerce, namely survival sex, transactional sex, and sex work, can overlap, and individuals sometimes move among these categories along a continuum of sexual exchange. Instead of a singular practice, Svati Shah (2014) has described sexual commerce as being produced along a continuum of income-generating activities, where female migrants often work in other sectors in addition to the sex industry. Understanding sexual commerce as existing along a continuum also has implications for moving beyond the polarized

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debate over structure versus agency in sex work research (Bernstein 2007; Dewey 2011), which has been reinvigorated today in the context of antitrafficking fervor and migration for sex work (Agustín 2006, 2007b; Szörényi 2014). While migrant sex workers in the global South are continuously viewed as having little choice, and sex work is often conflated with poverty, Shah (2014) argues that across multiple migrant sex work spaces, “the discourse of sexual commerce . . . suggests that sexual commerce exists on a continuum of income-generating options for low-income urban migrants and that, rather than delineating the parameters of ‘choice’ and ‘force,’ these options are part of a broader set of negotiations that people living in poverty engage and manage in everyday life” (112). Therefore, such continuums always exist within the broader context not only of local, regional, and global labor markets; employment options; work practices; and policies (Maher, Pickering, and Gerard 2013) but also migration patterns, unpaid labor, and sex workers’ rights and programming, in culturally specific and gendered ways.

Methodology: Feminist ethnography, migration stories, and secrecy at the flower farms

This article draws on feminist ethnography conducted between 2011 and 2013, with follow-up research in 2017, examining different migrant sex work spaces in Naivasha, including at the street level, along highways and roadways, in a camp for internally displaced persons, and at the flower farms. During this research I collected 110 migration stories from migrant female sex workers, many of whom transited through Naivasha targeting male flower farm–worker clientele, and even more who had employment histories at the cut flower industry before entering street-level sex work. Within these migration stories, this article draws primarily on twenty-five narratives collected from female labor migrants living and working at the flower farms. Caroline Brettell (2003) has defined migration stories as the oral life histories of the migration experience that are compiled so as to “emphasize what generalizations about migration look like on the ground and to delineate how migrants make decisions, forge social relationships, and exercise agency in the face of various local, national, and international constraints” (32). Therefore, the collection of migration stories is a method that sheds light on the migration patterns of female sex workers but also the multiple scales of power that tell us about both structure and agency in their everyday experiences in the cut flower industry’s institutionalized sexual economy.

While feminist ethnographies of sex work have proliferated since the mid-1990s, and despite the fact that contemporary sex work research presents a number of issues feminist analyses are positioned to address, sex work
researchers have been reluctant to publish on the methodological and ethical challenges they face (Dewey 2013). The majority of ethnographic sex work research has been conducted in the public working spaces where sexual-economic exchanges occur, most often street markets and red-light districts, because of the difficulties in accessing sex workers’ private lives (Shaver 2005; Sanders 2006). This, of course, is a result of the overwhelming concealment under which sex workers operate on a daily basis to avoid criminalization and stigmatization (Sanders 2006). In Naivasha, the secrecy of the cut flower industry coupled with the secretive nature of sex work intensified the methodological and ethical dilemmas of doing sex work research. In order to access flower farm workers who were doing different types of sexual commerce, I initially established rapport at the street level by volunteering with two different community organizations targeting sex workers. Sex work researchers often use such gatekeepers, who have developed well-established and trusted relationships with the sex worker community, in order to overcome initial distrust and hostility (Sanders 2006).

However, as this research demonstrates, even gaining access and rapport through such methods is not straightforward. At the time of data collection, the two sex worker organizations operating in Naivasha included a sex worker outreach project and an antitrafficking rehabilitation project. This not only reflects the polarized feminist debates in sex work research but also alludes to the fact that sex work researchers often find themselves positioned at the convergence of conflicting movements, while also being ethically accountable to their research participants (Dewey 2013). After initial rapport was established, I identified key informants across the different migrant sex work spaces, including at the flower farms. These informants recruited research participants and facilitated my ethnographic entry into flower farm communities. While I did gain entry into a limited number of flower farms, these twenty-five migration stories were collected from employee housing in Karagita and other settlements surrounding the flower farms and in some bars and pubs where flower farm workers frequently sold sex. Protecting the identities of sex workers who are already operating under multiple levels of concealment necessitated various strategies. Not conducting interviews inside flower farms, at women’s places of formal employment, helped to hide sex workers’ identities from other flower farm workers and managers. Within their neighborhoods, given the close quarters of employee housing and settlements, sex workers always chose the time, place, and frequency of migration story collection.

As I have argued elsewhere (Lowthers 2014, 2016), mobile phone use is having a marked impact on sex work practices as well as sex work research and programming in Kenya, and ongoing communication through phone
calls and text messages provided additional concealment, secrecy, and confidentiality for sex workers at the flower farms. Furthermore, language was an important methodology for lessening the power differential between researcher and research participants, and I became fluent in Swahili, collecting migration stories in a mixture of Swahili and English. Migration story collection ranged from a single interview of approximately one hour, to recurrent interviews over several weeks or months, to conversations that spanned the entire duration of the research up to now. These interviews ended at various times, most often naturally, when sex workers felt they had exhausted their life histories; lost interest in participating in the research over time; or because of practical reasons, such as moving to another town to sell sex. Over time, recurrent migration stories evolved into everyday ethnographic encounters that often included multiple participants and key informants; frequently included child care or meeting boyfriends and/or clients; and moved across space and time from flower farms, to the street level, and across highways and roadways, as women’s sex work practices and migration trajectories were mapped.

Migration stories were recorded and transcribed; they reflect participants’ own words and multiple perspectives, or what has been termed female sex workers’ “herstories” (Nyongo’o 2010, 4). In order to further contextualize these narratives, an additional fifteen semistructured interviews and focus groups were conducted with a number of community representatives, including community development workers at the flower farms and senior flower farm management. Pseudonyms are used for all research participants, and all identifying information, such as the flower farm where individuals were employed, their ethnic identity, or the settlement where they lived, have been omitted. These methods and ethical considerations were reviewed and approved by the University of Western Ontario’s Ethics Review Board and the Ethics Review Committee of the Kenya Medical Research Institute.

The feminization of migration and migrant labor markets at flower farms

It has been widely documented that the cut flower industry in Naivasha, like many economies of production, depends on a female migrant labor market operating within a system of institutionalized gender discrimination. However, despite the fact that labor migration to flower farms has been increasing since their establishment, research surrounding the migration patterns of workers is limited. While one study in the early 2000s found 75 percent of female flower farm workers to be short-distance migrants from neighboring towns (Dolan, Opondo, and Smith 2002), this research found that mi-
grants from all over Kenya are now represented in the cut flower industry. Furthermore, a 75 percent female migrant population is a modest estimate given that second-generation migrants at flower farms have not been taken into consideration. Some flower farm workers were the daughters of first-generation female labor migrants who began working in the cut flower industry when it exploded in the 1980s and 1990s; these second-generation labor migrants grew up in female-headed households within the employee housing at flower farms in Naivasha. The well-established nature of the cut flower industry has resulted in an intergenerational female migrant labor force that includes mothers, daughters, sisters, and intricate networks of extended family ties, which provide the flower farms with a large, gendered, and flexible labor pool of migrant female workers from across Kenya.

Women dominate floriculture in Naivasha as a result of the feminization of flexible labor, wherein gendered notions of what constitutes women’s work structure employment practices. This gendered division of labor is organized such that women are responsible for the tasks that are most important for the cosmetic appearance of the final product, including picking, packing, and value-added processing of the cut flowers, because women are thought to be more dexterous than men. Men are primarily responsible for irrigation, construction, maintenance, and spraying chemicals and pesticides, which are considered to be more physical tasks, and also dominate the management positions (Dolan, Opondo, and Smith 2002, 28). One senior male manager who had been working for over ten years at one of the largest flower farms in Naivasha explained the inherent gender discrimination that exists in the logic of hiring female workers: “It is not that women are attracted to the job; it is the nature of the job also. It is more favoring women than men, the kind of job. Most employers feel like it suits women [more] than men because it is some enduring task most men can’t do. I think it is not skills, but the kind of job, the task that men can’t do that women can do. Most employers find it more suitable to hire women than men. Picking flowers, chopping, weeding, push carting [is women’s work].” As a result of this institutionalized gender discrimination in hiring practices, this same manager estimated that in a typical flower farm in Naivasha approximately 80 percent of the current labor force is female. Furthermore, because these female workers are predominantly temporary, casual laborers in unskilled positions, while men largely occupy more permanent positions of power, this results in a gendered and unequal working environment wherein sexual harassment is widespread.

Although many flower farms have implemented codes and policies to address sexual harassment between female workers and their male supervisors, these incidents persist. In a study that examined seven flower farms across
Kenya, including Naivasha, women workers at all farms expressed that they were subject to sexual harassment by their supervisors and felt unable to report these incidences (Dolan, Opondo, and Smith 2002). While Kenya’s 2007 Employment Act mandates that flower farm companies prohibit and punish instances of sexual harassment, recent reports document that this continues to be a problem in Naivasha (KHRC 2012; Wilshaw 2013). Both senior management at flower farms and community representatives in Naivasha acknowledged this persistent sexual harassment. The same flower farm manager, although hesitant, went on to explain: “Sometimes you have people in senior positions, especially when you hire young ladies within the farms and they’re employed with a low salary, at times they are going to be taken advantage [of] by those people in higher positions. . . . At times you find they have even become pregnant.”

Similarly, an outreach worker from one of the sex worker organizations in Naivasha further explained the dynamics of sexual harassment and exploitation that exist at flower farms: “In most of the flower farms, 70 percent or more are women. They also don’t hire elderly women, they target young women. The flower farms are a gold rush. They come with very high expectations; it’s town life, a job. There are very few men who are there, they get attracted to them [young women]. Some of them [the young women] are forced to sleep with them [the men] to retain that job.” Both the manager and the outreach worker alluded to the economic and age asymmetries that exist between male managers and female workers in the sexual economies at flower farms. These economic- and age-unequal characteristics are analogous to “sugar daddy” relationships (Silberschmidt and Rasch 2001; Luke 2005; Dahl 2015) as well as the complex interplay between subsistence needs and consumption wants that exist in these and other transactional relationships across Africa (Leclerc-Madlala 2004). And the way these female workers sometimes sleep with managers in order to keep their jobs in the cut flower industry is comparable to how fish traders secure their access to, and ongoing participation in, fish markets through jaboya relationships, and how they sometimes supplement this fish trading with sex work (Camlin et al. 2013). However, the above descriptions of the dynamics between flower farm workers and managers also emphasize how the characteristics, relationships, and expectations of employment in the formal sector make the institutionalized sexual economy of the cut flower industry distinct. Female labor migrants are seeking access to formal employment at this global production site and are therefore subject to unique sets of gendered and institutionalized power dynamics in their sexual transactions. At the same time, the cut flower industry allows young women the opportunity to work in a socially respected job and to gain economic independence via the formal sector, fulfilling rural-to-
urban aspirations for increased social networks, access to basic services, consumption needs and wants, and more cosmopolitan lifestyles. Therefore, female migrants’ experiences of gender discrimination and sexual harassment coexist in complex ways with women’s choices to engage in different types of sexual commerce in the cut flower industry.

The labor continuum of sexual commerce in the cut flower industry

The different categories along the labor continuum of sexual commerce in the cut flower industry include sex for employment, transactional sex, and both part-time and full-time sex work. A common narrative was to migrate to Naivasha and exchange sex for employment at the flower farms and then maintain a transactional sex relationship with manager(s) for a number of work-related and economic benefits. After entering into these types of sexual-economic exchanges, women often then began to supplement their low incomes with part-time sex work at night after a full day of work at the flower farms. In many cases women made careful, calculated decisions to enter sex work full time and leave flower farm work altogether as a result of the poor working conditions, job insecurity, and extremely low salaries in the cut flower industry.

The following narrative clearly illustrates the different types of sexual commerce that occur at flower farms in Naivasha. Rose was a thirty-eight-year-old single mother who had migrated from another town in the Great Rift Valley in the late 1990s looking for work at the flower farms. She was one of the most educated migrant sex workers, having completed all of secondary school and some postsecondary education. However, she opted out of finishing college because she became pregnant and decided not to marry but instead to raise her child alone. To help her support her daughter, who was then three years old, a female relative from Naivasha put Rose in touch with a flower farm manager who offered her employment in exchange for sex. This was the first time Rose slept with a manager to secure employment at a flower farm; however, she estimated that over a period of fifteen years she slept with ten managers and supervisors for employment or promotion at three different flower farms in Naivasha. Because of her low salary, fluctuating between 4,000–4,500 Kenya shillings (approximately 40–45 US dollars) per month, depending on the farm, Rose supplemented her income with transactional sex and part-time sex work while working at all three flower farms. She now does sex work full time because she feels the working conditions are more favorable in sex work than at the flower farms: “You end up sometimes [exchanging sex for a job] because you’re hustling. And at every level there’s a manager, a supervisor, and they all want you. You want a better
I worked in three farms and slept with maybe ten managers. Few used a condom. I got the better positions. Throughout that time I used to do sex work, mostly on the weekends. . . . Now I feel like I don’t want to work anymore at the farms, I just do the other job [sex work].”

While Rose’s story is exemplary of the sex work practices that often occur in the cut flower industry, it is important to emphasize that this labor continuum is nonlinear. At different points in time many women had also tried supplementing their flower farm salaries with nonsexualized income-generating activities, such as market trading. Further, each type of sexual-economic exchange involved various actors and varying degrees of choice and coercion. For example, female labor migrants who were able to avoid sex-for-employment transactions could be subject to sexual harassment and exploitation by managers and be forced to engage in transactional sex in order to keep their new jobs. Part-time sex workers could enter into full-time sex work at the street level because their temporary flower farm contracts ended and then decide to start flower farm work again when casual labor was available. Given how institutionalized this labor continuum of sexual commerce is across farms in the cut flower industry, few women are able to avoid any extreme or category along the continuum altogether.

**Employment sex, or, sex for employment at Naivasha’s flower farms**

Women in Kenya face a number of gendered and unequal challenges to accessing employment in the formal economy, which has contributed to employment sex becoming prevalent well beyond the cut flower industry. This was especially true for female flower farm workers who had sought employment in other unskilled jobs in the formal economy, at hotels, bars, and the many resorts surrounding Lake Naivasha. For example Faith, a thirty-three-year-old HIV-positive migrant female sex worker, reacted with disbelief that this was not presumed when I asked if she had ever engaged in employment sex:

Are you asking? Many times. It’s uncountable! There was a time I wanted a job at a hotel. The brother to the woman who was employing people, it was a must he fuck me to give me work there. From there, I was working at a farm, the person who was employing people also had to fuck me. It reached a time I said I don’t want jobs. I wanted work as a cleaner at [a resort], . . . that person who is a manager he used to come fuck you. Even as a house girl it happened. [I’ve exchanged sex for a job] almost four or five times, the ones I can remember.
From the perspective of female labor migrants, employment sex had become a normalized aspect of obtaining employment in the cut flower industry, often even anticipated and expected. For example, Jamila, a fifty-year-old sex worker and second-generation migrant, had worked at three of the largest flower farms in Naivasha and exchanged sex for work at each one: “You have to do it [have sex with a manager] so you can get the job. You can’t get without . . . you have to have sex with them.” Jamila explained further that this kind of sexual-economic exchange was a given and was widely used as a strategy among female labor migrants to ensure employment. Many female labor migrants told of how sex for employment was a necessary part of the employment process and that they were willing to engage in these relationships. Alice, a thirty-six-year-old labor migrant from central Kenya and a single mother of three, compared exchanging sex for employment to an interview process because employment sex is such a firmly entrenched practice at flower farms:

You must be fucked to get employment there. That’s a must. You go talk to the big men there, he gives you a date he might fuck you for two or three times to give you a job. We call him farm manager. We talked through the phone. He told me to find him in town. I found him. There wasn’t an interview; the fucking was the interview. He told me to go with my identity card the next day and I’d find a job. He fucks you then he stops, he starts fucking the ones who need a job.

For many women, this employment sex was just the first of many sexual-economic transactions with managers in order to maintain their positions in the cut flower industry.

Transactional sex and labor conditions at Naivasha’s flower farms
For many female flower farm workers who engaged in sex for employment, this marked the beginning of a prolonged transactional sex arrangement with one or more managers in order to secure more favorable working conditions, promotions and raises, and job security, and to supplement their incomes. Such transactional sex relationships, most often between female laborers and male managers, were desirable because they could result in access to better positions that required less arduous work and fewer hours. Many women were able to gain job security through transactional sex, but they sometimes also continued relationships because of economic gains such as rent, food, or other basic needs. Rose had experienced both of these types of transactional sex relationships many times, as she explained further: “I
slept with so many managers and I got the better positions. The last one he
furnished my house he paid everything, I even went to school. . . . Now I feel
like I don’t want to work anymore at the farms [I just want to do sex work].
Throughout that time I used to do sex work mostly on the weekends.” The
more preferable positions that could result from transactional sex were those
in the grading hall or pack house, and women often cited time off, shorter
shifts, preferential treatment, promotions, increased wages, and job security
as the advantages of having a sexual relationship with a flower farm manager.
However, refusing to engage in transactional sex for any reason often re-
sulted in immediate dismissal, as there were no fixed terms to these informal
arrangements.

Theresa’s narrative clearly illustrates the pressure to engage in transac-
tional sex relationships with managers. Theresa worked at a number of dif-
ferent flower farms from 1989 to 1992 and then married in 1993. After di-
vorcing her husband in 1998, she worked again at the flower farms until
2005 and experienced high turnover and transactional sex expectations: “I
was finding myself today I’m employed in this farm, after one month I’m
sacked, I go to another one, because the managers wanted to fuck us. . . .
There were so many who forced me to be sacked from the work because I
knew they only wanted to fuck me.” For most women this was a key factor
in deciding whether or not to do sex work either on a part-time or full-time
basis. Many women saw the rewards of transactional sex and formal employ-
ment in the cut flower industry as very low in comparison to the monetary gains
from sex work. Female labor migrants repeatedly used the logic that since the
managers were “fucking them for free,” it would be much more economical
to do sex work and be paid directly in cash for sexual-economic transactions.

**Part-time and full-time sex work at the flower farms in Naivasha**

In part because of the ambiguous nature of transactional sex relationships,
the need to further supplement low flower farm incomes with hard cash
was one of the main reasons female migrant workers cited for entering part-
time sex work. The average salary for an unskilled worker in the cut flower
industry is approximately 4,500 Kenya shillings (45 US dollars) per month,
following the minimum wage set by the Kenyan government for agricultural
and horticultural workers nationwide. These wages are considerably higher
than other informal economic alternatives for unskilled women workers, such
as domestic work or market trading. While employment in floriculture is of-
ten preferable when weighed against the other local employment options for
female labor migrants, flower farm wages still needed to be supplemented
with other income sources in order for women to make a living wage.
Many women workers noted that when budgeting for rent, food, clothing, school-related fees for children, remittances, and other unexpected expenses such as health care, it was very difficult to meet their basic needs solely on a flower farm salary. Agnes was a twenty-five-year-old second-generation migrant who was married at the age of fifteen and three years later discovered that her husband had infected her with HIV. She left him and sought work at the flower farms, where she had employment sex with a male human resources employee to secure work and then entered part-time sex work:

The one who got me that job fucked me before getting that job. Not a manager, a human resources worker. I came to know him through another mama down there. He asked me to give him my phone number, he called me. He asked me to meet at [a local pub], and when I went he told me if I wanted the job I must sleep with him to get employment. So when I slept with him, I stayed for one week then I got work. We slept like three times during that week. . . . I feel good to have the job, but you know that money is not enough [4,000 Kenya shillings]. It forces me to go and sell myself. . . . When I’m broke I go to town from work to sell sex. Then I wake up to work again.

Women workers who supplemented their incomes with part-time sex work saw themselves as working two jobs, often referring to sex work at night as the “other job.” While several women sold sex from employee housing, offices, social halls, and pubs within the flower farms, most women preferred to sell at the street level in other settlements surrounding the lake, like Karagita, or even at the small red-light district in Naivasha Town. Doing part-time sex work away from the flower farms allowed women workers to maintain distinctions between these two jobs as well as anonymity. When working at the flower farms and also doing sex work in the same space, a woman ran the risk of working alongside her client from the previous night. When these two jobs—that of flower farm work and sex work—came face-to-face in the greenhouses, women could experience intense stigmatization. Susan, a twenty-five-year-old labor migrant from Central Kenya explained this: “Yeah, I’ve worked [at the flower farms]. And there you get so many men. I’ve also been working from hotels. When you’re working in hotels you have a very big chance of meeting different people. With the flower farms what we hate is today you’ll see me, tomorrow you’ll see me. We’ll still be working together. You don’t want to spoil your name. That’s why we want to work in a hotel because today I see you, tomorrow you’re gone. We’re not working together.” Separating these two types of paid work in the informal and formal economies was extremely important to women work-
ing at the flower farms and helped them avoid the stigma associated with sex work. For some women who were able to separate these two jobs, employment in the cut flower industry actually helped to conceal the fact that they were supplementing their income with part-time sex work. Rose explained the importance of having the two jobs: “It’s good if you have something else you’re doing. They [my family] know I work in the flower farms. So even if you meet someone in a bar, they think you’re just having fun.”

Even with the risk of stigmatization, many female labor migrants made calculated choices to enter full-time sex work because they could earn significantly more income than in the cut flower industry. Theresa explained her choice to quit flower farm work altogether, and instead of just supplementing her income with part-time sex work, she became a sex worker full time:

I used to find myself even when I was working in flower farms in the evening I used to go to the street because the salary was small. . . . In the morning instead of coming from home I used to come from sex work to the other work [in the flower farms]. I did that for almost four years. It was very hard. I made calculations and found that instead of the salary I get from the farms I’d rather go to the street. At the flower farms the salary was 4,000 Kenya shillings per month. And if I go to town, I can even get the 4,000 shillings in two or three days.

In addition to better economic opportunities such as the increased income Theresa described, for many female labor migrants street-level sex work provided other benefits over flower farm work. These included access to peer education programs provided by local nongovernmental organizations, especially Kenya’s highly successful education programs that are disseminated through the grassroots sex workers’ rights movement in Naivasha. This was clear in Veronica’s narrative. A forty-five-year-old sex worker since 1996 and a divorced, single mother of four, she talked about the positive impact these programs had when they were first rolled out in the early 2000s and she decided to enter street-level sex work over flower farm work: “By that time I was stupid. When you hear about condoms you fear. Because it’s something you’ve never used. Around 2002 I first learned about condoms. We were taught by another project how to protect ourselves with condoms. I felt good.” In addition to peer education and HIV/AIDS prevention programs, the street level also allowed sex workers to become aware of social services and government assistance and to have access to sex worker networks and social support in Naivasha Town. Most important, many single mothers felt that street-based sex work actually allowed them to be better mothers compared to their experiences of motherhood at the flower farms.
Unpaid labor and sexual commerce in the cut flower industry in Naivasha

Most female labor migrants who engage in sexual commerce in the cut flower industry weighed their employment options and sex work practices against unpaid labor and single-mothering responsibilities. This has been supported in one recent study, which estimates that over 55 percent of female flower farm workers are single mothers with an average of three children (KHRC 2012, 47), contributing to a nationwide explosion of female-headed households (Meda 2013). For many of these women, single motherhood was the most important push factor that led them to seek employment in the cut flower industry. And for those younger women without children who migrated to Naivasha looking for work, they often became single mothers from transactional sex or other sexual-economic relationships. However, because migrant flower farm workers did not make a high-enough wage and did not have extended family relations in Naivasha to help care for children, the ability to provide for their children and afford child care factored significantly in women’s choices to do sex work over flower farm work. This is ultimately because women prioritized their children when considering their employment options, while single motherhood simultaneously dictated how they were able to participate in the labor continuum of sexual commerce in the cut flower industry.

Many women workers stated that supporting their children was the main reason they were seeking employment in flower farms in the first place, and how they could best manage unpaid and paid labor figured prominently in their daily choices and experiences surrounding both flower farm and sex work. For example, Monica, a thirty-nine-year-old divorced, single mother of four who had been doing sex work for twelve years, talked about how she moved to Naivasha to work in the flower farms in order to support her children:

The best thing about kids is bringing them up. The hardest thing is still bringing them up. Life is too hard. What can I really want? Just money to make my life. . . . It was a must I go to work at the flower farm because of the kids. I want to bring them up with a good life. I fucked someone to get the job. I told him to get me a job, it was when he told me it was a must I sleep with him to get a job, we slept. It didn’t even take two weeks. He got me a job.

After they secured employment, women’s stories became focused on how they could supplement their flower farm incomes to maximize their ability to provide for their children. The challenge of managing flower farm work, part-time sex work, and unpaid labor was a reality for women who were do-
ing street level-sex work at night. Theresa told of how she would go to work at the flower farms, then cook for her children and leave them alone overnight, saying: “I used to cook for my kids in the evening, then leave them alone. I used to lie to them that I was going to a certain place. I did not stay for long. I would go and come back in the morning.” Similarly, Veronica also talked about working two jobs and managing her responsibilities as a single mother: “After work there are so many bars around here, so I go there. I close work, I come cook for the kids, I go to the other work around eight or nine... I’m happy about my work because it feeds my kids. I later got two more kids from customers. I used to close them in the house when I went to work at night. Now I tell them to close the door [because they are older].”

The lack of affordable child care in the settlements in the cut flower industry became critical for migrant female flower farm workers supplementing their incomes with part-time sex work. Female labor migrants did not have social systems in place or extended family members in Naivasha who could provide child care, and their low wages hardly afforded them the means to hire domestic workers (Dolan, Opondo, and Smith 2002). These limited child-care options meant that women sometimes resorted to locking their children in their homes or leaving them unattended while they went to work in the flower farms, which sometimes had tragic consequences. For example, one woman told of a young child who had been left unsupervised, fell into a pit latrine, and drowned in human waste. Paid child-care facilities in the settlements surrounding the flower farms provided a poor alternative for single mothers in Naivasha; one study across Kenya’s cut flower industry found Naivasha’s child-care facilities to have the worst conditions, with many reports of child malnutrition, disease, abuse, and mortality (KHRC 2012).

Many female labor migrants expressed that being faced with these precarious child-care options was a critical moment when considering whether to do street-level sex work full time. However, while women were then able to supervise their children during the day and do sex work at night, they faced similar challenges to providing their children with safe and affordable overnight child care. A retired female sex worker recognized this lack of child-care options and started an overnight child-care service specifically for sex workers in Naivasha. Sarah was forty-five years old and had been operating a child-care service for sex workers since 2006, after recognizing a demand when she cared for her own grandchildren: “I was one of the sex workers from the 1980s, and then in 2006 I saw I had aged, and my children had children and were doing that [sex work], so I decided to stop now and start caring for their babies,” she explained. Sarah stated that she was unable to go to the street as a sex worker and risk meeting her children, who were also sell-
ing sex there. She soon discovered that many sex workers were seeking overnight child-care services: “I have a daughter who has children, those children are the grandchildren. Even them, they are going out there. So let me leave them to do that, I take care of the children. I can’t go to the street and meet my children. There are ten kids at night and three during the day. All of them are single mothers, they are all sex workers. The way I have brought up my grandchildren, the ones who have seen me bringing up my grandchildren, have brought their children. After the good service they go telling the other sex workers.”

The children Sarah cared for were between four months and seven years old, and most of them were dropped off in the evening and picked up again in the morning, between five and eight o’clock. Sarah also explained how she sometimes cared for a child for several days if the sex worker went to another town, or, if one of the mothers was arrested, she could agree to care for the child until other accommodations were made, because she herself was all too familiar with sex work–related opportunities and risks. Sarah held this overnight child care in her own 12 × 12-foot home in the settlements surrounding Naivasha Town. Lining the floor with foam mattresses at night, she would charge just 30 shillings, or approximately 30 cents, per child:

Even if I charge 30, there are those ones who go and come back with nothing in the morning, what can you do? I care for them alone. The mothers have to bring with them what that child needs—the milk, napkins, food. I spread the mattresses and they sleep. . . . The going out of these girls or mothers is to get food for their children, that they don’t have alternative. And when they go there it’s not easy, they get raped even themselves. Sometimes they go even for a week without getting anything. So even these mothers when they come back they have nothing to give to those children. So sometimes if those children are brought here and they have no food and I’ve cooked my food, I’ll be forced to share my food with the children.

According to Sarah, this was her way of giving back to the sex worker community: by providing nonstigmatizing child-care services and helping women better manage both their paid and unpaid labor. As she simply put it, “I feel I support sex workers because I take care of their kids.”

Conclusion: Institutionalized sexual economies, the labor continuum of sexual commerce, and migrant sex workers’ rights

A critical feminist analysis of the institutionalized sexual economy that exists in the cut flower industry illustrates how, by way of women’s labor migra-
tion, everyday life in Naivasha has been transformed into a gendered and une-
qual global production site over time. The sociocultural impact of this in-
dustry has been profound, both reinforcing gendered inequalities within
Kenyan society and providing female labor migrants with the opportunity
to subvert traditional gendered roles and relationships. If, as Agustín (2007a)
argues, the “meaning of buying and selling sex changes according to the
social, cultural, and historical processes in which transactions are situated”
(403), then categories of sexual commerce must also be understood as vari-
able and dynamic. Introducing the concept of employment sex at the flower
farms as part of an institutionalized sexual economy emphasizes not only how
sex work categories overlap along a labor continuum but also how types
of sexual commerce evolve over time, across space, and at multiple scales in
Naivasha’s cut flower industry.

Analyzing the cut flower industry as a migrant sex work space in the con-
text of the feminization of migration and rapid urbanization makes a com-
pelling argument for placing migration at the forefront of sex work research
in Africa, similar to Shah’s recent (2014) argument that sexual commerce is
best understood through migration patterns and trajectories in highly mo-
 bile regions of the global South. Further, the complex interplay between
choice and coercion along the labor continuum of sexual commerce shows
how changing meanings and varied experiences of sexual-economic transac-
tions are embedded within gendered power relations scaling the entirety of
the cut flower commodity chain. Most important, this article has placed the
sex-work-as-work debate directly in the context of institutionalized sexual
economies, suggesting that sex worker advocacy, programming, and policy
formulation should also avoid the limitations of discrete sex work categories
and spaces in order to better reach often-excluded migrant sex workers in
Kenya and across Africa.

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