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Deconstructing the vulnerable Global South subject in the discourse of women trafficking in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

Migration governance on human trafficking reflects gendered, neo-colonial South–North constructs that repress mobility and sex work. The ideological stress on the intrinsic vulnerability of migrant women legitimises and depoliticises intervention, while strategically subtracting agency from social actors. Drawing on ethnographic research on trafficking in Central-West Brazil, this article reframes vulnerability as a composite analytic field rather than a fixed condition. It shows how international and Brazilian institutional perspectives reproduce a disempowering, patriarchal conception of vulnerability in relation to migrant sex workers, while the ethnographic case of Ana – a Brazilian migrant sex worker identified as a trafficking victim – reveals vulnerability as a relational and ambivalent process, in which subjects are neither simply passive nor deficient. Bringing Butler's and Fineman's theorisations into conversation with post-structuralist and postcolonial feminist accounts of subjectivity and power, alongside critical migration and development scholarship, the article advances an explicitly anti-colonial reconceptualisation of vulnerability that links subject-making, institutional practice and migration governance. Its original contribution lies in repositioning vulnerability as a site where structural constraint and self-making coexist, enabling a critique of neo-colonial victimising constructions within gendered migration regimes.

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Introduction

In the Global North-led discourse of human trafficking, state hostility against undocumented migration and migrant sex work is blended with the white women trafficking legacy and the transatlantic slavery rhetoric (Lazzarino 2019). Since the entry into force of the Trafficking Protocol of the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in 2003, human trafficking has informed a series of legal and policy changes, at the international and national level, as well as a renewed apparatus of humanitarian interventions. This whole apparatus – of both territorialised and de-territorialised sovereignty (Pandolfi 2003) – has served neo-colonial, racialised, and gendered discourses devoted to jointly controlling national boundaries, migrant women's labour, and women's bodies (Kempadoo, Sanghera, and Pattanaik 2012;

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Segrave 2009; Sharma 2005; Yuval-Davis, Anthias, and Kofman 2005). Human trafficking has become an articulated discourse which has given further capacity to neo-liberal and patriarchal migration governance, and this, in turn, has created geographies of vulnerability (FitzGerald 2016). Stasis is normalised, and the protection of national boundaries and of good international relations are prioritised along logics of profit making and national identity building (Malkki 1995; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). Migrants are turned into commodities: they can be profitable and welcome (Anderson, Khadka, and Ruhs 2024); constructed as an uncomfortable social problem to be expunged (De Genova 2013; Feldman-Bianco et al. 2011); or framed as vulnerable and infantilised social actors to be rescued, assisted, or repatriated (Agustín 2007; Anderson and Andrijasevic 2008; Lloyd 2024).

The focus of this article is on the trope of the vulnerable victim in the dominant discourse of human trafficking. This focus helps me theorise about the ideological fabrication of the Global South migrant woman victim. Vulnerability is analytically approached across a few interlinked dimensions, including: structural vulnerability, produced through gendered and racialised regimes of migration and labour; relational vulnerability, emerging through embodied interdependency, power relations and lived social encounters; and discursive vulnerability, mobilised within contemporary migration governance on human trafficking as a gendered and post-colonial dispositif that represses mobility and sex work while depoliticising intervention (Deshingkar, Awumbila, and Kofi Teye 2019; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Piscitelli 2006).

Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in Central-West Brazil, the article develops a multi-layered analysis that brings together subject-making, state practices and international governance. By contrasting institutional and humanitarian framings of vulnerability with the lived experiences of migrant sex workers, the article advances an explicitly anti-colonial reconceptualisation of vulnerability that foregrounds relationality, ambivalence and agency within conditions of structural constraint (Butler 2006b, 2016; Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016; Fineman 2010b, 2010a). Such composite reconceptualisation is developed from intertwining post-structuralist and intersectional feminist approaches in relation to power and subjectivity (Butler 1997; Das 2008; Foucault 1980, 1990; hooks 1991) and deployed via an in-depth analysis of the emblematic story of Ana, a Brazilian migrant woman identified as a victim of trafficking.

The anti-colonial potential of my analysis is not confined to advancing critical theorising and methodologies in gender migration and trafficking. This work becomes a fuller anti-colonial tool inasmuch as it contributes to decolonise policies and interventions by creating the conditions whereby survivors of human trafficking, migrant women and migrant sex workers can be involved in setting agendas, developing migrant-centred policies, and co-producing interventions based on their support needs.

Vulnerability in the global discourse of human trafficking and gender migration

Vulnerability is used across a range of disparate disciplines and in different realms (UNODC 2008, 68), eluding a single definition or theorising. The vulnerability relevant to trafficking policymaking and humanitarian interventions sits within the realm of social vulnerability. There is no unique theory or model to understand social vulnerability (Hufschmidt 2011).

Within social vulnerability scholarship, vulnerability has been theorised as structurally produced through poverty, exclusion, and unequal access to resources (Cutter, Boruff, and Shirley 2003; Hufschmidt 2011; Prowse 2003). While these approaches foreground structural inequality, critical scholars have shown that vulnerability discourse crystallises marginalised populations as passive and deficient, reinforcing paternalistic imaginaries of the Global South as inherently in need of external intervention (Prowse 2003). This tension is particularly evident in trafficking governance, where vulnerability often functions as a justificatory device for surveillance, rescue and control. Moreover, within the Trafficking Protocol, the abuse of a position of vulnerability is paired with the abuse of power, creating a stark dichotomy between powerful perpetrators and powerless, vulnerable victims. In this framing, vulnerability and its abuse are portrayed as two opposing, fully mapped constructs of the subject (Das 2000, 210).

The preamble of the Trafficking Protocol underscores that women and children are particularly vulnerable to trafficking and must be protected. Yet, five years after its entry into force, three subsequent UNODC documents – aimed at clarifying vulnerability and its abuse – failed to acknowledge that women ‘victims of trafficking’ are made vulnerable by a structurally violent and gendered regime of migration governance, which overlooks the intersectional oppression experienced by migrant women (Bastia et al. 2023). One UNODC document (2008) locates the problem in individuals’ inability to cope with diverse external stressors. In another (UNODC 2013, 13–14), vulnerability is tied to ‘inherent’ environmental aspects – poverty, inequality, discrimination, gender-based violence, minority status and lack of legal status – that increase an individual’s or group’s risk of being trafficked. The third document (UNODC 2012) describes vulnerability through personal, situational and circumstantial factors. Despite these efforts to articulate vulnerability for frontline practitioners, the concept remains both conceptually and practically problematic.

Vulnerability, like other terms in the definition of human trafficking, is elusive (Fouladvand and Ward 2019; Munro and Scoular 2012; Piscitelli 2006). It is often depicted in terms of deficiency: individuals and groups are seen as unable to cope with stressors, lacking power and status. The ambiguous concept of vulnerability is increasingly used in global migration governance at large (Karlsen 2024; Pécoud 2021), but it is particularly potent in trafficking discourse (FitzGerald 2016; Fouladvand and Ward 2019; Szörényi 2014). The vulnerabilisation of trafficking victims is amplified, as many have argued, by its ideological association with slavery – especially the imagery of transatlantic slavery (Kempadoo 2017; Martins and O’Connell-Davidson 2022; Quirk 2011). This rhetorical and sensationalistic linkage fosters emotionally charged, simplified narratives framed in terms of victim vs perpetrator, good vs bad and freedom vs unfreedom (O’Connell Davidson 2015). Additionally, the Trafficking Protocol reinforces the historical stances of the anti-prostitution, women traffic campaign which arose in the late nineteenth century and resulted in several agreements around white slave traffic culminating in the 2000 Protocol (Bernstein and Jakobsen 2010; Doezeema 2010; Kempadoo 2012).

Combining these two ideological associations, the ‘othering’ of the migrant woman is further bolstered by a revitalisation of the patriarchal narrative of the archetypal victim (Blanchette and Silva 2011; Frederick 2012; Snajdr 2013). Resonating with a neo-evolutionist and neo-colonial infantilising gaze, the Global South woman is narrated as enslaved and exploited, inevitably marginalised and under-equipped, from the educational and economic

spheres to the cognitive and cultural spheres (Kapur 2002, 2000; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Mohanty 1984).

Emphasising an intrinsic vulnerability in migrant women justifies interventions – assistance, deportation, protection and prosecution (Fassin 2005; Fassin and Rechtman 2009) – while simultaneously diverting attention from the structural and political factors that systematically render gendered migration vulnerable. Indeed, the notion of vulnerability is linked to protection rather than to migrants' human rights (Pécoud 2021). Not only does it fail to protect South–South and South–North migrant women, but the focus on inherent vulnerability in trafficking diverts attention from the political and economic frameworks that create and sustain post-colonial subalternity. It perpetuates a narrative that positions the South woman as both victim and passive subject in need of rescue – a portrayal that undermines her agency and overlooks the complexities of her lived experience. As critical approaches to international aid argue, as an attribute, or identity position, of the Global South subject, vulnerability turns Western knowledge and assistance into a necessity (Bankoff 2003; Pupavac 2001). This view underpins much of the work by multilateral and United Nations (UN) agencies (Bankoff 2001), including those involved in the fight against human trafficking, as shown. In contrast, looking at post-structuralist and feminist theorising of vulnerability, which I approach from the notion of subjectivity, illuminates a route where vulnerability is complexified and conceived also as a place of agency and resistance.

Vulnerability, subjectivity and power in post-structuralist, feminist theorising

I approach the reconceptualisation of vulnerability via the subjectivity–power framework grounded in post-structuralist, postcolonial and feminist thought. Subjectivity concerns the ways social actors interiorise, negotiate, and act upon the world through agency, desire, fantasy and sense-making (Moore 1988). It requires attention to multi-positionality (Moore 1994, 2007) and intersectionality (Brah and Phoenix 2013; Crenshaw 2017; Prins 2006), acknowledging that subjects are constituted at the crossroads of gender, sexuality, race (Butler 2006a; Smith 2000), class, nationality and migrant status (Pinelli 2013; Piscitelli 2008b). Subjectivity, as a methodological lens, foregrounds the lived experiences and interpretative authority of social actors, challenging the epistemic hierarchy that privileges the perspectives of rescuers over the self-understandings of those labelled vulnerable. This conceptualisation of subjectivity draws from a Foucauldian understanding of power as productive rather than merely repressive (Foucault 1980, 1990, 1995). Power creates categories, institutions, expertise, and practices of care (Berman 2010; Parreñas 2021); it is diffuse, relational, and ambivalent (Scott 1986; Strathern 1990). Accordingly, subjectivity emerges through a constant interplay of being made and self-making (Butler 1997; hooks 1991; Lauretis 1990). As Das (2000) argues, subjects engage in 'the delicate work of self-creation' even within profound structural constraint; rather than passive victims, they oscillate between subject positions of 'transgressor, victim, and witness, beyond the rude model power/resistance/submission' (Das 2000, 222).

Building on these insights on subjectivity and power – where agency arises through relational exposure and is not external to it – Butler's subsequent work (Butler 2006b, 2016) precisely conceptualises vulnerability as a fundamental condition of embodied and relational life. Vulnerability is also a constitutive condition of precariousness: to be embodied is to be

'given over' to others whose recognition is necessary for one's intelligibility and survival. Vulnerability is universal, but its distribution (*precarity*) is politically orchestrated. Butler thus invites vulnerability to be understood not as a marker of deficiency or a static attribute, but as a site from which claims to livability and justice can be articulated (Butler 2016). Crucially, Butler develops an ethical understanding of vulnerability as the condition that demands responsiveness and solidarity; resistance does not emerge from invulnerability, but from exposure, interdependency and collective presence (Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016).

Fineman's socio-legal vulnerability theory provides a complementary critique of the liberal subject that underwrites these interventionist regimes (Polychroniou 2022). For Fineman (2010a, 2010b), vulnerability is also universal and constant, but it becomes politically meaningful through the differential distribution of resources and institutional protections, similarly to Butler's concept of precarity. Fineman's thought casts light, at the same time, onto institutional responsibility (the statutory one in the first place) and the subjective experience of interdependency, which calls instead for individual responsibility (Fineman 2010a). In her elaboration, there is a strong critique of the idea of the liberal, Global North subject. This subject, as opposed to the Global South one, is an autonomous and 'competent social actor capable of playing multiple and concurrent societal roles: the employee, the employer, the spouse, the parent, the consumer, the manufacturer, the citizen, the taxpayer, and so on' (Fineman 2010a, 11). The Global North subject underpins Western political and legal institutions, as well as healthcare and humanitarian assistance. It is at the root of 'systems of power and privilege that produce webs of advantages and disadvantages' (Fineman 2010a, 16; Harris 1990). Both Butler's and Fineman's elaborations disrupt colonial and neo-colonial imaginaries of the self-sufficient Western subject and of the Western epistemic and ethical superiority legitimising regimes of gender migration and humanitarianism.

Other critical scholars have mobilised both Butler's and Fineman's thought on vulnerability to critically approach the trafficking discourse (Sanghera 2005) and, within it, the securitarian migration regimes backed by politics of sexual humanitarianism (Mai et al. 2021). Butler's relational ontology and theorising of power, subject-making and vulnerability has been invoked to challenge the dichotomy between the passive victim and the fully autonomous agent in sex trafficking and how vulnerability is lived and negotiated within relational power (Szörényi 2014). Fineman's theory has been applied to highlight how anti-trafficking regimes frequently intensify vulnerability by individualising it, obscuring the institutional practices that produce victims and legitimising coercive governance (Fouladvand and Ward 2019).

On the one hand, following Polychroniou (2022), I draw on feminist scholars so to assemble a better integrated 're-acquisition of vulnerability' that enables a re-politicising of gendered power – showing how certain subjects are made vulnerable not only by exposure but also by the institutional architecture of rights, recognition, and resource distribution. On the other hand, by simultaneously tightly drawing in critical migration and development literature, as well as other post-colonial, feminist work, I want to place emphasis on the anti-colonial potential of such a composite re-conceptualisation of vulnerability. This allows me to keep together the multiple layers at stake – from the micro-dimension of subject formation to the discourse of the international community and UN agencies, via the role of the state – and to join theorising, methodology and policy- and practice-impactful research that enables feminist struggles to recognise interdependency, open new solidarities and contest the liberal subject's fantasy of invulnerability. This composite conception of vulnerability is therefore intrinsically anti-colonial: it exposes how the ideological view of

vulnerability serves to legitimise intervention, and how it is unevenly produced through global hierarchies; furthermore, it rejects the Global South woman as a one-dimensional victim and instead foregrounds the multiple, intersecting, and historically situated ways subjects respond to and rework power.

Fieldwork

This article's research was conducted before the 2016 Law to Prevent and Combat National and International Trafficking in Persons (see next section), in August 2010 and from April to November 2012, in Brasília, Goiânia, and Anápolis in Goiás state – as part of a four-year-long multi-country study. Data collection included ethnographic immersion, informal conversations, in-depth interviews (n = 54), focus groups (n = 4) and critical documentary analysis. Participants included: officers of multilateral organisations, essentially UN agencies; practitioners of statutory bodies and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) belonging to the anti-trafficking *rede* (network); returnees of human trafficking, for the most part women aged between 25 and 35, with the addition of three participants self-identifying as non-cisgender, belonging to the LGBTQ+ communities; and returnees' family members and friends. Purposeful – emergent and snowball – sampling was adopted. This strategy began both with desk research, to identify relevant stakeholders in the anti-trafficking system, and by relying on the local network of colleagues, who facilitated an introduction to relevant practitioners on some occasions. After I had made contact and established trusting relationships with frontline practitioners, these acted as gatekeepers to reach returnee survivors of human trafficking. These latter, in turn, facilitated contact with a few returnees outside the assistance system. The language used was Brazilian Portuguese during all interactions and interviews with participants, and the interview topic guide revolved around three broad themes (i.e. life before trafficking, the trafficking experience, life after trafficking). A fieldwork diary with field notes, including interview notes and audio recordings, as well as photographic recordings were maintained throughout. Data were analysed through an inductive, ethnographically grounded thematic process, developed iteratively across participant observation, field notes, informal conversations, in-depth interviews and documentary materials, with analytic themes generated through repeated reading, comparison and contextualisation of narratives and institutional texts, and triangulation across data sources and methods used to strengthen interpretative rigour and support reflexivity (Bernard 2006; Charmaz 2006; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007).

The vulnerable migrant sex worker in the Brazilian trafficking discourse

Due to political pressures and economic incentives from the US-led UN agencies, many states, including Brazil, have adopted the Trafficking Protocol to address issues such as immigration, organised crime, prostitution, and human rights abuses (Aradau 2008, 13). Brazil ratified the Protocol in 2004, integrating it into national legislation. Consequently, trafficking became a problematic umbrella term, obscuring historical local concepts such as slave labour and sexual exploitation (Davida 2015; Sprandel 2016). International trafficking discourse redirected focus towards migrant sex work, accelerating shifts in how commercial sex was perceived, reinforcing moralistic media campaigns (Blanchette and Silva 2018; Piscitelli 2023) and conservative government agendas (Olivar and Farias 2021). Opposition to 'women

trafficking' in the nineteenth century was fuelled by growing aversion to prostitution, which was framed as a moral threat to women and the nation, exploiting women's supposed 'weakness' (Venson and Pedro 2013, 61–63). The 1940 Brazilian Penal Code crystallised such aversion and linked domestic and international trafficking for sexual exploitation to prostitution, cementing the notion of passive victims, nullifying consent and criminalising migrant networks facilitating both migration and entry into the sex industry (Castilho 2015; Venson and Pedro 2013).

Before the 2016 Law to Prevent and Combat National and International Trafficking in Persons (Law 13.344), Brazil relied on the international Trafficking Protocol and the Penal Code. This dual configuration created a fragmented, inconsistent system of legal interpretations and responses. The 2016 law sought to align national and international frameworks, expanding definitions of exploitation to include working conditions in a regime of servitude and analogous to slavery, as well as sexual exploitation. However, the narrative of the vulnerable sex trafficking victim remained central (Piscitelli 2023). The new law also failed to clarify key concepts such as consent and vulnerability (Da Silva 2021, 260–261). Meanwhile, anti-trafficking policies increasingly focused on border securitisation (Lobasz 2009), reinforcing restrictive migration controls (Olivar and Cunha 2017; Piscitelli 2023).

On the ground, this translated into practices remarkably similar to those documented in other contexts, which are not based on the needs and rights of migrants (Lazzarino 2020; Lazzarino and Greenslade 2022). Across Europe and Asia, anti-trafficking interventions have blurred the boundaries between protection and coercion, reflecting a paradoxical stigmatising and victimising approach that often exacerbates rather than reduces vulnerability, producing unwanted removals, surveillance, and deportations under the guise of humanitarian protection (Doezema 2001; Kempadoo 2015). In the UK and France, sex workers 'rescued' under trafficking operations reported raids, loss of income and pressure to enter unwanted assistance schemes (Calderaro and Giametta 2019; Mai 2013). Similar dynamics have been documented in the Netherlands and Germany, where migrant sex workers described unwanted raids, document confiscation and coerced 'assistance' despite expressing no desire to exit sex work (Thiemann 2020; Wagenaar and Altink 2012). Studies in Thailand and Cambodia likewise show women forcibly removed from workplaces, confined in shelters or repatriated against their will (Brennan 2014; Derks 2000; Hoefinger 2016). In Australia, anti-trafficking enforcement has repeatedly taken the form of police raids rebranded as rescues, leading to detention or deportation rather than improved working conditions (Brockett and Murray 1993; Segrave 2009). In South Asia, Frederick (2012; also Lazzarino 2023) demonstrates that 'vulnerability' is actively produced through institutional practices and rescue-orientated development discourses, while in India, anti-trafficking and anti-prostitution frameworks reproduce post-colonial regulatory logics of rescue, rehabilitation and confinement rather than labour or citizenship rights (Kotiswaran 2014; Walters 2019).

In Brazil, the broadened definition of trafficking of the 2016 law further criminalised human mobility, shifting attention away from migrant rights (Piscitelli 2022). While the anti-trafficking framework ostensibly aimed at protection, it largely functioned as a mechanism of control, where interventions did not address structural conditions of everyday violence, criminality or unemployment, or harms such as police extortion, immigration precarity and the absence of labour protections, which workers themselves identify as harmful (Blanchette, Silva, and Bento 2013; Piscitelli 2016). Anti-trafficking efforts aligned with

narratives that construct migrant sex workers as inherently vulnerable and in need of rescue and protection (Piscitelli 2023), instead of addressing the structural conditions which, both in the country of origin and in the destination country, facilitated migrants' exploitation and offering little in the way of material support, labour rights or opportunities for self-determined mobility.

Brazilian institutional voices on the vulnerable trafficking victim

Brazilian institutional officers elaborated on vulnerability in trafficking in ways aligned with UN documents. Officers from Brazilian UN agencies linked vulnerability to the widespread pursuit of better opportunities and migration. An International Labour Organization (ILO) officer specifically tied this to poverty:

Migration generally occurs because of a search for a better life, of a dream [...] Considering the economic conditions of the country... the poverty [...], workers migrate in search of a job, an employment to make a living, to manage to provide for themselves and the family... and this condition of vulnerability turns into a trap for these people, facilitating the recruiters and traffickers' activities. (Officer, ILO Brazilian office, Brasília, 17 May 2012)

Two officers from the Ministry of Social Development and Fight to Famine defined vulnerability as a lack of social and political rights, hampering citizenship. 'There is a lack of rights, hence they [victims of trafficking] are not citizens like others', they stated (Brasília, 21 June 2012). This applied to both pre- and post-trafficking conditions, with survivors described as economically deprived and lacking autonomy. Similarly, a Goiás state officer emphasised that trafficking victims sought social inclusion but remained marginalised: 'Victims of trafficking want to be integrated in a social body and they do not get that social inclusion' (Federal Attorney office, Goiânia, State of Goiás, 31 August 2012).

In the Ministry of Justice, federal officers linked vulnerability to socio-economic and cultural factors, including discrimination against minorities, Brazil's migration history, and gender norms like machismo. A SEMIRA (State Secretary of Women's Politics and the Promotion of Racial Equality) project manager stressed that women's migration was often a response to repression rather than beauty-driven trafficking myths:

Our main social problem is [...] here, in our state, the repression of women which is very big, machismo is very big [...]. There is a myth that the Goiânia woman is trafficked due to her beauty, her charming physical appearance... I think it's the opposite, it's repression that provokes women [to] attempt to get out of this state of repression, of this state of subjection and look for [...] another kind of freedom that she idealises. (Project Manager, SEMIRA, Goiânia, State of Goiás, 22 August 2012)

A federal police officer shifted focus from social and political factors to personal development, suggesting vulnerability arises from inadequate self-protective mechanisms:

In my view, there are no vulnerable groups, there are moments in life where a person, due to deficiencies in the personality formation process, becomes vulnerable in that circumstance and in relation to that matter [...] and they succumbed. (Officer, Human Rights Division of the Federal Police, Brasília, 25 May 2012)

At both federal and state levels, vulnerability was often seen as linked to aspirations for better living conditions. This 'social dissatisfaction' was believed to facilitate trafficking,

particularly among those lacking various forms of capital – psychological, political, socio-economic, historical or cultural. This perspective framed the desire for change as a weakness traffickers could exploit.

An abundance of Brazilian scholarship looking at both sides of the Atlantic has critiqued the disempowering stance towards migrant sex work (Blanchette, Silva, and Bento 2013; Piscitelli and Lowenkron 2015; Silva and Ornat 2015). A fundamental point of this corpus of studies is shared with a more ample postcolonial, critical feminist literature on mobility and sex work (Agustín 2007; Kempadoo, Sanghera, and Pattanaik 2012); this point revolves around critiquing the construction of women migrant sex workers, in particular, as ultimately unable to grasp the *reality* and the implications of their labour conditions. Crucially, migrant women who rejected victimhood narratives often found their voices ignored in judicial cases. Those acknowledging awareness of engaging in sex work were still considered victims, perceived as either too afraid to tell the truth or too uneducated to grasp their situation (Blanchette and Silva 2011; Pérez 2016) – as several participants working in the Goiás anti-trafficking network whom I talked to repeatedly underlined.

The voices of Brazilian institutions reflect neo-colonial, patronising moral economies (Piscitelli 2016) and neo-liberal ideologies regarding autonomy and consent (Fineman 2008; Lowenkron 2015). These perspectives reinforce nationalistic, anti-migration regulatory frameworks masked as human rights measures (Ausserer 2011; Piscitelli 2022). The ambiguous concepts of vulnerability and consent risk functioning more as tools of repression than of protection (Castilho 2015, 2008). Ultimately, institutional narratives portray the drive for change as an escape from existing deficiencies rather than an intentional act of agency. This overlooks how migrants actively shape their own lives rather than merely reacting to structural constraints.

Subjectivity in vulnerability: the story of Ana

The imposing bodily presence of Ana contrasted with the frailty of her voice and her evident shyness. I first encountered her in the modest, bare room of the recently inaugurated *Centro de Referência da Mulher* (Women's Reference Centre) in Anápolis, where she was receiving support as a survivor of human trafficking for sexual exploitation – one of several migrant women I met during fieldwork. During our first interview, Ana would break into tears when recounting painful memories, such as her father's abandonment. These anguished moments alternated with flashes of self-confidence when she recalled happier times: periods when she studied computer sciences and logistics and attended vocational courses with the hope of securing a good office job – a prospect that ultimately never materialised. However, these light-hearted years were abruptly ended when her mother's declining heart condition forced Ana to abandon her studies and find work to support the family. She eventually obtained a position in the local pharmaceutical packaging sector – a job she did not despise, yet one that left her feeling 'very tired' (Field notes, book III.8).

Reflecting on her circumstances, Ana explained her decision to leave Brazil:

I was earning very little, you know, [...] and then I was told that over there in Europe work was good My cousin told me that; he had lived there for six months, and then, I went ... I worked there as a waitress, and afterwards I went to work in prostitution ... because the job in the coffee shop was very hard and I turned illegal and I had to pay the rent, groceries ... and then I could not find any other job and I took and went to work in a night club. (Anápolis, State of Goiás, 25 July 2012)

Adopting the concept of subjectivity outlined above as a methodological lens allows us to explore how Ana was re-elaborating, making sense, acting upon, and reacting to her circumstances: her personal life; her socio-economic surroundings, and larger Global South–North configurations of gender migration. We can appreciate how she was negotiating and carving out room for manoeuvre at the intersection of her different positions, as daughter, student, working class employee and labour migrant. The very way Ana retrospectively made sense, in a very synthetic yet poignant way, of the vicissitudes leading her to enter sex work abroad shows how her agency is continuously interspersed among moments of constraint, where her existential precariousness interacts with her being made vulnerable by structural precarity (Butler 2016). From within her ontological and political vulnerability, she enacts resistance, challenging a binary understanding of agency and victimisation (Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016). In her emic way of expressing moments of perceived oppression – ‘feeling very tired’, the job as waitress ‘was very hard’ – she resolved to change her situation, embodying – even in her very physicality and way of expressing emotions and decision-making – the diffuse and ambivalent nature of vulnerability, as well as the ideological opposition between an autonomous Global North and a resourceless Global South subject (Fineman 2010a).

At the time of fieldwork, Ana was nearly 30. I visited her home on several occasions; it was located in a suburban favela on the outskirts of Anápolis. Like many Brazilian slums, her neighbourhood was marked by the pervasive presence of *narcotráfico*, illegal brothel operations, chronic under- and unemployment, and endemic child neglect. These factors – coupled with interlocking forms of violence (state-perpetrated, social, sexual, domestic) – significantly impacted residents’ mental and physical health, as witnessed both in Ana’s household and in the narratives shared by other migrant women (Wilding 2014) (Figure 1).

Reverberations of the history of colonial depredation could be seen in the contemporary structural violence in the area. Anápolis, one of several towns on the Planalto Central established during the eighteenth-century Gold Rush by *bandeirantes* with their cattle and slaves, is situated along a historical route from the coast to the Cerrado and the Amazon. Today, it remains a transit point on the highway between Goiânia and Brasília (Figure 2). The legacy of mobility endures in high rates of emigration – not only to wealthier coastal states but also internationally to the US and Europe (Colares 2004). Ana’s own migration, shared with her cousin, is nested within these broader patterns; Europe (especially Spain and Portugal) is a common destination for unskilled Goiânas (Leal, Teresi, and Duarte 2013; Piscitelli and Lowenkron 2015).

Ana spent almost five years abroad. Like many of the Brazilian women who decide to *ir para fora* (go abroad) and with whom talked, she had factored in that her quest for better life conditions could entail entering the commercial sex industry. Reflecting on her decision to leave, she recalled:

I myself decided to leave Brazil because my cousin was living over there in Spain and he told me that the only thing that you could make money out of was prostitution and selling drugs ... over there, there wasn't ... life was very difficult over there. Therefore, at one point, I took and said that I was going to give it a try, isn't it? [...] My cousin had a friend who was working in a night club [...] and he was there waiting for me. (Field notes, book III.8, Anápolis, State of Goiás, Interview, 25 July 2012)



Figure 1. Ana's suburban favela on the outskirts of Anápolis. View of Ana's neighbourhood in a peripheral favela where she lives with her extended family, marked by chronic under- and unemployment, *narcotráfico*, and precarious infrastructure. This landscape situates her story within everyday forms of structural violence and social abandonment that shape how structural vulnerability is lived, negotiated, and resisted in her trajectories of work and migration.

Source: Runa Lazzarino.

While in Spain, Ana worked in three different brothels, each time seeking improved working conditions. She confided that she deeply disliked the work, feeling that clients and society treated sex workers as if they were 'rubbish' (Field notes, book III.8). Yet she felt entrapped, subjected to multiple oppressive forces that are felt by many Brazilian migrant women in Europe (McIlwaine and Evans 2023; Piscitelli 2008b), and that kept her tied to that life. These included her undocumented status, her family connection to sex work, the expectation to send money to her mother, the burden of providing for her children, the constant fear of repatriation, the stigma of returning as a former prostitute, and a persistent hope for change. Ana's words and reflections illustrate how subjectivity is interwoven with power, at both micro and macro levels, resting in the interplay between resistance and oppression (Butler 2006a; Pinelli 2013). Her words give voice to the perspective whereby both agency and suffering can be thought without one cancelling the other. In a situation perceived as unbearably 'difficult', Ana's agency is again expressed: she decided to leave Brazil, and she resolved to try to capitalise on the opportunities at her immediate disposal to find a route out of it. This moment of subordination to a limited spectrum of opportunities is integral to Ana's subject formation (Butler 1997; hooks 1991; Lauretis 1990). Ana is instancing how subjects can both resist and accommodate dominant discourses, like that of trafficking – transcending monolithic portrayals of the Global South subject (Mahmood 2001; Mohanty 1984). Ana's



Figure 2. Goiânia city from the highway coming from Anápolis. The highway links Anápolis to Goiânia, part of a historic mobility corridor between the coast, the Cerrado and the Amazon. This transit geography echoes long-standing patterns of movement and aspiration that frame Ana's decision to 'go abroad', highlighting how her individual migration is embedded in wider routes, imaginaries and inequalities of South–North mobility.

Source: Runa Lazzarino.

experience embodies this dual process of being rendered vulnerable while simultaneously engaging in moulding her life.

Ana's feeble voice was nested inside her imposing strong body, that metaphorically, yet carnally too, talked about how she enacted and effected change, exercising agency and resistance in her life. Her life was marked by events that stripped her of agency – her father's abandonment, her mother's failing health, the chronic violence of her upbringing, and the gruelling demands of work as a factory worker, a waitress and, ultimately, a sex worker. However, it is in these moments of *being made vulnerable*, almost at their saturation point – when Ana felt 'very tired' and 'treated like rubbish' – that decisions were taken. She challenged the ideological passivity of the Global South victim of trafficking by continuously acting upon her circumstances, and resisting rather than submitting – instantiating, once more, how vulnerability and agency are intermeshed. In Spain, she changed brothels three times, eventually deciding to leave and return to Brazil. During her second pregnancy, forced to work until her eighth month, she reached a turning point; she resolved that she could no longer endure the life of both a sex worker and a mother. With assistance from an NGO operating between Switzerland and Goiás, she navigated the bureaucracy, secured the necessary documents and obtained financial support for repatriation.

Upon her return, Ana was officially identified as a victim/survivor of human trafficking for sexual exploitation. Her counselling therapist at the Women's Reference Centre repeatedly

asserted that Ana's cousin had been instrumental in enticing her (Field notes, book III.8). Prior to the 2016 anti-trafficking law, already the Brazilian Penal Code had strongly linked trafficking for sexual exploitation with prostitution and criminalised migrant networks – such as Ana's cousin – that facilitated transatlantic migration and access to the sex industry (Assis and Kosminsky 2007; Piscitelli 2008a). My research, in conjunction with the quoted literature, shows that reliance on personal networks is common in women's migration. Institutional approaches, driven by moralistic, political, and economic fears, often result in securitisation rather than an understanding of the real practices and needs of migrant women (Piscitelli 2023; Sprandel and Dias 2010), whether pre-migration, during their time abroad, or once returned.

Importantly, Ana did not fully self-identify as a trafficking victim. She maintained that she was never allured, deceived, threatened or forced – either to leave Brazil or to enter the sex industry – and she never characterised her working conditions as akin to slavery, servitude or exploitation. Indeed, her ability to change employers on several occasions suggests a degree of agency, as mentioned. Her cousin's explanation – that 'the only thing that you could make money out of was prostitution and selling drugs' – meant that engaging in commercial sex was not entirely unforeseen. When asked if she considered herself a trafficking survivor, Ana responded without hesitation: 'I consider myself as a victim of being in need of money to eat and being exploited, isn't it? ... this yes' (Fieldwork diary 6, Viviam Parque, Anápolis, State of Goiás, 31 August 2012).

In another conversation, she further compared her experience to that of recognised trafficking victims:

I knew about human trafficking, I met many many girls who went there through women trafficking [...] I do consider [myself] a victim as well, because it's almost the same thing ... the difference is that they were taken there, isn't it? And they had to ... they were forced to work for them [the pimps] to pay back the transit [to Europe], isn't it? And ... it's only that we, who go with our money ... we also have to work and pay them [pimps] in the same way ... there's the difference that I could get out and go to work in other clubs ... and they have to work for them. (Field notes, book IV.9, Anápolis, State of Goiás, 29 September 2012)

Ana's narrative demonstrates an awareness of the dominant anti-trafficking discourse – a discourse perpetuated by the mass media and telenovelas that centres on criminals who abduct victims in Brazil, finance their travel abroad, and impose debt bondage that forces them into conditions akin to slavery (confiscated documents, restricted mobility). When she remarked, 'it's almost the same thing, isn't it?', she was drawing attention to the parallel between the ideological portrayal of trafficking and her lived experience.

At the same time, Ana distanced herself from the stereotypical victim. Among Brazilian sex workers in Spain, many do not self-identify as victims even as they recount knowing others who were trafficked; indeed, 'real victims' often remain elusive to researchers, including me (Piscitelli 2011; Piscitelli and Lowenkron 2015). I interpreted Ana's narrative as underscoring that the humiliation and hardship she experienced in Spain – as an undocumented migrant worker – were as severe as those of the stereotypical trafficking victim. Frequently, it is the irregular migrant status and the perpetual fear of deportation, rather than the rarer occurrence of overt 'sexual slavery', that most deeply affects sex workers (Piscitelli and Lowenkron 2015; Vianna and Lowenkron 2018). In her words, I discerned a critique of the structural violence imposed upon migrants and sex workers (Agustín 2007; Vianna and Lowenkron 2018).

Despite not fully embracing the trafficking victim identity, Ana's agency materialised in her instrumental mobilisation of this category to access services offered by an evangelical NGO. This opportunistic use allowed her to avoid harsh deportation measures and negotiate the stigma associated with sex work and return migration. Therefore, although she partially aligned with the dominant discourse of the vulnerable migrant victim, she also adapted it to serve her own goals – securing repatriation, achieving social acceptance, and shedding the self-perception of being '*sucia*' (dirty). In so doing, she opened the possibility of reclaiming a 'normal' identity.

Now I feel a normal person, before I didn't feel normal, now I feel I'm a mother, I take care of my children ... before I felt like rubbish, like an animal, whereas now, yes, I feel happy, now ... I'm looking for a job in order for me to work as a normal person ... and forget everything I went through over there ... Right now that I've come back from Spain I feel *feita* [a more complete/mature person]. I left here that I was a girl, now I feel like I am a woman already. (Field notes, book III.8, Anápolis, State of Goiás, 25 July 2012)

Ana had been back home from Spain for eight months when she expressed these thoughts and feelings to me. A couple of months later, towards the end of our fieldwork friendship, Ana and I met again, during a very hot and dry afternoon. Her two children played around our table in the restaurant managed by another trafficking survivor with whom I was residing. Ana was still jobless and living with her extended family in the small family house (Figure 3); she ordered nothing.



Figure 3. The small back garden of Ana's house in Anápolis. This is a crowded family home where she lives after returning from Spain. The modest, shared space evokes both a fragile sense of safety and the constraints of ongoing economic precarity, capturing the ambivalence of 'coming home' as a site where vulnerability, care and everyday acts of rebuilding a 'normal' life are continuously negotiated.

Source: Runa Lazzarino.

I recorded in my fieldwork diary that her visible sadness was accentuated by constant nail-biting and a persistently shaky voice (Fieldwork diary 6, Viviam Parque, Anápolis, State of Goiás, 29 September 2012). Sensing her difficult emotions, I asked her about her feelings regarding her migration experience:

I feel regretful ... if it were today I would never want to go to Europe [...] We always have an illusion [...] I was curious to go, I imagined that ... I don't know ... we create a fantasy in our mind – don't we? – I imagined that over there I was going to earn a lot of money, that I was going to be able to buy the things I wanted; this is what I imagined, but in reality it ended up being worse, because nothing can pay back the suffering, there is no money that can. (Field notes, book IV.9, Anápolis, State of Goiás, 29 September 2012)

In embracing the construct of the vulnerable Global South subject, Ana – as a migrant sex worker – also embodies its inherent subversion. For her, poverty and social vulnerability are not merely sites of oppression and passive subjugation; they are dynamic spaces for empowerment and self-transformation. Ana's journey from being 'a girl' to 'feeling like a woman' who 'knows how to defend herself', and from being 'like an animal' to a dignified human being, is marked by resilience and the active exercise of agency (Anápolis, State of Goiás, 25 July 2012). Her expressions of regret are not passive laments but attestations to her continued control over her life's narrative and choice. Despite a system that attempts to render her a passive, resource-deficient subject, Ana actively charts a course towards a life she considers 'normal' and fulfilling, where agency and suffering are not mutually exclusive, and where agency and vulnerability are co-located without resorting to images of helpless passivity vs uncompromised agency.

Conclusion

The dominant discourse of human trafficking of the international community and national governments, such as Brazil, instrumentalises vulnerability, positioning the Global South subject within a fixed framework of subjugation and incompleteness. This framing serves the interests of Global North migration and humanitarian governance, which seeks to control and suppress migration and sex work in the name of protection. Yet through the ethnographic case of Ana, vulnerability emerges not merely as a condition of deprivation but as a relational and dynamic site of resistance, re-signification, and shaping of herself. As I have shown, vulnerability is not a static state of victimhood but a complex and ambivalent process – one in which individuals are shaped by power yet also reclaim agency through everyday acts of strategising, negotiation and resistance. It is in this tension between being made and self-making that vulnerability, rather than reinforcing subjugation, can be harnessed as an anti-colonial tool to disrupt binaries entrenched in gendered migration regimes.

Beyond the figure of the trafficking victim, this article calls for an expanded focus on the subtle processes of counter-power at the level of the subject vis-à-vis statutory and international responsibilities of precarity. Shifting attention to these micro-politics of subject-formation challenges the entrenched neo-colonial narratives that cast Global South subjects as passive and in need of rescue. To illuminate this, I invoke the astrophysical metaphor of Hawking radiation (Hawking 1974) – a phenomenon occurring at the event horizon of black holes, where some subatomic particles escape gravitational pull while others are irretrievably absorbed. Like this radiation, subject-making at the margins of history unfolds between forces of containment and escape: some aspects of the self are engulfed by

hegemonic narratives, while others break free, asserting agency in unexpected ways, potentially tracing trajectories of new histories.

Ethnography, informed by critical theorising, must follow these trajectories – outlining the flickering escape routes of subjectivity, attending to the ways marginalised actors carve out histories of resistance even from positions of marginality. By doing so, we move beyond rigid models of power, agency and victimhood, unsettling the dominant discourse that continues to define migration governance and humanitarianism through colonial logics of salvation and control. Vulnerability, then, ceases to be merely a mark of disempowerment and instead becomes a radical space of transformation – where those cast to the peripheries of history assert their presence, not as objects of rescue, but as architects of alternative, anti-colonial futures.

Ethical approval

For this study involving human participants, the author confirms that informed verbal consent was obtained and recorded from all participants. All participants also verbally consented to have their interviews recorded and to ethnographic reproduction. Prior to each interview, the participants were clearly informed about the objectives and methods of the ethnographic work, and were offered either a written or oral description of the research project and of the specific topics to be discussed during interviews, as well as about the voluntary nature of their participation, the risks (if any) and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity in research outputs. All participants explicitly agreed to participate and to the publication of their anonymous statements and information in publications. To preserve anonymity, no real names or identifying details are disclosed in the manuscript. This study was reviewed and approved by the Doctoral Programme in Cultural and Social Anthropology, Department of Human Sciences for Education 'Riccardo Massa', at the University of Milan-Bicocca, Italy (2010/2014).

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Data availability statement

Anonymised interview materials may be shared upon reasonable request to the author, subject to ethical considerations.

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