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**ECONOMIES OF SEXUALITY: SEX/GENDER IDENTITY FOR  
 BENEFIT AMONG ROMA “WOMEN,” SEXUAL WORKERS IN  
 SKOPJE**

**Abstract:** This paper deals with the local sexual/gender system and the sexual/gender identity “for the benefit” of “women” in the Roma community in Skopje. This concept applies to Roma people, biologically born as men, who want to make earnings for their families by doing sex work as women at the “open” and “closed” spaces in Skopje, North Macedonia, and in Europe. The idea that sexuality can be sold as a service and used as an income generator is one of the principal reasons for those individuals to maintain their sexual/gender identity as “women” in the local economic system of the Roma gay people. This concept manifests through the peer system of “sisters” in the Roma community in Skopje.

**Keywords:** economy, sexuality, sex/gender identity, sex workers, Roma, Balkans

In *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, Serena Nanda develops the concept of a third gender, through the ethnographic study of a religious community of men who dress and act like women (Nanda 1998). As she wrote in earlier work, the *hijra* (eunuch/transvestite) is an institutionalized third gender role in India, “neither male nor female, but contain[ing] elements of both” (Nanda 1986: 35). Commenting on Nanda’s contribution to the field of gender studies, Unni Wikan emphasizes the novelty of her approach that allows overcoming the binary model when referring to a person’s gender identity (Wikan 1991). Furthermore, she argues that the “humanity” of this approach lies in the subtle way in which Nanda deconstructs prevailing Western concepts and by showing “how a Western conception of gender is rigidly dichotomized into two (and only two) permanent categories that are fundamentally culture-bound and pitifully constraining for those who do not fit the pair but are forced to choose to be one or the other” (Wikan 1991: 721). Hence, the norms introduced regulate all other non-standard cultural phenomenon and push them to choose either the former or the latter sexual/gender category: either “man” or “woman.” For R. Parker and P. Aggleton, “Nanda is able to relativize many of the assumptions that associate

with the notions of transvestism and transgender identities in contemporary Western societies and to suggest some ways in which other cultural assumptions may lead to very different readings of the whole notion of sexual difference” (Parker, Aggleton 2007: 6). My interest in this approach derives also from the need to analyze the institutionalized gender roles both through the cultural and individual lens. Similarly to hijra, Roma “women” build their gender/sexual identity *for the benefit*. They are sex workers and cross-dressers when performing in hidden spaces in Skopje, or in public and private places as *hitchhikers* in the Western countries like Italy, Switzerland, France<sup>1</sup>.

Discussing the notion of “third sex” or the “third term” applied to transvestite/transsexual experience, Marjorie Garber points out the limits of binary thinking. The “third” is neither sex nor a term pertinent to something in between the two sexes. It is rather “a mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of possibility”. Three puts in question the idea of one: of identity, self-sufficiency, self-knowledge” (Garber 1992). Similarly, the “sisters” – biologically male Roma who perform as female sex workers – build their gender identity by doing something of their own with the imaginary spaces of masculinity and femininity. When acting as women, they live under the same roof and share a common household budget. As men, they have families and children living a “normal” life elsewhere in the neighborhood. Hence, their children tolerate their absence, and their parents support them. Within the sisterhood, members build an economic model based on mutuality, sharing of assets, knowledge, and contributions to the “household” budget. They mutually support each other and manage together their working activities on the sexual market. The common objective of the community is to provide a living for their families and to reproduce their labor force.

The local Roma vernacular has a word to designate the “third” gender, conceptualizing the character of being “both man and woman”. These are people who are called *buljiáshi*, *kulale(i)ja*, or *kulalo*<sup>2</sup>. The word *buljáshi* contains what M. Garber refers to as the ambiguity that destabilizes a comfortable binary. This

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<sup>1</sup> This article draws on almost 10 years of fieldwork and observations among Roma sex-workers in Skopje. The first ethnographic study was conducted between 2006 and 2009 in the framework of the preparation of my Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Ss Cyril and Methodius, Skopje.

<sup>2</sup> The word *buljashi* is from Romani *bul* ‘ass, buttocks’. The suffix *-ash* means ‘person who is occupied with or connected in some way to something’. Thus, the reference is to anal sex. The final *-i* os normally the marker of feminine gender in Romani, but in Albanian *-i* is the masculine definite article, and in Skopje this is a potential source for the *-i*. In most dialects, the form is *buljash*. In *khulalo* the base is *khul* ‘shit’ and *-also* is a highly productive Romani suffix for forming adjectives (*-o* marks the masculine). Thus the meaning would be ‘shitty [person]’. This adjective can also mean ‘wicked, evil’. However, the association of shit with anal sex could also be involved. The suffix *-ale(i)ja* or *alo* could be influenced by the way Macedonian adapts the Turkish suffix *-li* as *-lija*, e.g., Turkish *kismetli* > Macedonian *kasmetlija*, *k’smetlija*. (Victor A. Friedman personal contribution)

is why, and in order to be consistent with my interlocutors' representations about themselves, I often alternate genders, using masculine pronouns in some places and feminine ones in others.

Thomas Laqueur has shown how throughout history the body has become “a representation of one flesh and one corporeal economy” (Laqueur, 1990: 114) and argued that the nature of sex “is the result not of biology but of our needs in speaking about it” (Laqueur, 1990: 114)115). How do Roma sex workers speak about their bodies, in a context in which bodies are the tools or the vehicles of labor? In general, they consider themselves as “both man and woman” doing their job, which is essential for them and their families. In the life course, the gender identification connected to sexual work has gradually become essential and equally crucial to other gender roles within the larger community: to be fathers of their children, husbands of their wives, sons of their mother and father, brothers of their brothers and sisters. In essence, the case of “sisters” as they call themselves, or *bulyjashi* as others call them, illustrates A. Cornwall's idea according to which “shifting discourses have produced variant sexualities and genders over time. Sexual and gender identities may be regarded as the effects of discourses, but there is never only one option available.” (Cornwall 1994: 124).

### **About the third gender: being women/men, sex workers and sisters**

The common thing for all interlocutors is that they are called *buljashi* (*bulja* means buttocks). The term is considered insulting, except in cases when they are joking among themselves. Another term used is *kulale(i)ja* or *kulalo*. This, too, is an insulting term, although they use it for themselves sometimes. The most polite and politically correct term used is a local variant of “gay” in the Macedonian language (*gaytsi*). All of these terms are used to express that these sex workers want to have relationships with “men” for pleasure. They do sex work, as they say, “like women”. “Like women” they have contact, they do it, they exploit it, they want to ... with men, they are selling themselves for money, compensation or awards; they are ‘doing’ the client. In the context of sex work, men outsiders are called clients or customers. In a modern context, the economic aspect is present when the term ‘boyfriend’ is used, meaning ‘client’. *N: a boyfriend who is paying us, sometimes they buy us or bring us the things we need. So, if it is not possible to pay with money, the client will buy something, will contribute to something*. The client, N. says, *is fucking you for a benefit; the client is giving [money] to use me*. Yet contrary to other, biologically female, Roma sex workers, the “sisters” provide their services on a “closed” stage, far away from the eyes of the wider public.

To be able to talk about the identity *for the benefit of a sex worker*, we need to familiarize ourselves with the identity *for pleasure*, for enjoyment, which is very important in building the *for benefit* identity. Based on Indian ethnography, which is related to the social organization of the hijras, a connection

can be established in the organizational-functional sense with the “sisters” organization. More specifically, this system of relatedness refers to a kinship metaphor implemented on the social, economic, and ritual level. “The sisters” are a type of association of Roma men who come together on the basis of their jointly identified segments of “femininity.” It is the basis for “practices of commensality” (Papataxiarchis, 1991: 156) of the sisters, as a result of which Roma men will refer to themselves as “women” and have the need to be in a relationship with men. In this context, they are identified by “ordinary men”, as well as by themselves, as *buljàshi* or *gaytsi*. Practices of commensality are of great importance for the sisters, according to our interlocutor L, who usually meets with his close sisters in a house where they spend time together, primarily for “having fun and pleasures”. They can live together under the same roof for a longer period depending on their mutual arrangements and clients’ preferences. Often, they deliver sexual services in the common dwelling, and a sister can bring a client or a boyfriend in the presence of other sisters. It is essential for them that these befriending events take place in a hidden place where individuals can act the way they feel it. This partnership is based “on a commonality of character, on the enjoyment of being together, and on the reputation they have for being emotionally involved in what they do”. (Loizos, Papataxiarchis 1991: 160)

As symbolic siblings, sisters are forbidden to have sexual intercourse between themselves. This prohibition is fundamental to maintaining relationships “as women” and “sisters,” living together in a system of peers. The community has a hierarchical organizational structure. The more aged are senior sisters, and the oldest one is called ‘chief’ or ‘mother’. She is very respected and known as wise. Younger sisters have the status of daughters, and they have to learn from the seniors how to behave. During these “befriending” sessions, the sisters not only live in communion, sharing the same space but also build together a kind of a household model. For example, when they live together, all costs are covered by those who have a better financial situation at a given moment. There are no exclusive agreements when it comes to investing personal funds in this community. The money spent by a sister during socializing events is non-refundable; that is, the others are under no obligation to reimburse those funds. Individuals contributions are allocated to food, coffee, drinks, cigarettes. If sisters have urgent needs, but they are short of money, they call clients to provide them with sexual services.

The closest sisters support each other financially and with other means outside their community setting. This activity is considered “borrowing,” which is expected to be equally returned. According to the interlocutors, “borrowing” applies to the common practice of exchanging clothes appropriate for sex work. They usually borrow only things they consider personal, in the sense of earned by themselves in the course of the sex work. Contrary to money “borrowing,” which is assumed that it should be repaid, the “borrowing” of clothes does not have such value, so the returning of the same could take place after a more extended

period. This type of reciprocal exchange is vital for maintaining social relations “in the family”. To the outside world, the functioning of the community is of closed character, while for members of the community, it is of open nature. The degree of closeness between individuals is also measured through manifestations of loyalty toward others.

### **The field of sexual work in anthropology**

Many authors acknowledge that studies on sexual work are rather marginal (Crvenkovska Risteska 2017). Sexual workers are also often absent from other important research fields: “People who sell sex are excluded from studies of migration, of service work and informal economies, and are instead examined only in terms of ‘prostitution’, a concept that focuses on transactions between individuals, especially their personal motivations” (Sanchez 2003; Agustín 2004b, 2005a, according to Agustín 2005). In order to avoid the moral implications of the term “prostitution” scholars started employing the concept of sexual work (Agustín, 2005b: 619), and more recently “sexual labor” (Boris, Gilmore, Parreñas 2010: 131) or “sexual commerce” (Kotiswaran 2011: 70). I have chosen to employ the term employed by my interlocutors who identify themselves as “sex workers,” which “summarizes the theoretical position of those using it for analytical and interpretational purposes (Zikic 2009: 39).

According to Shivananda Khan, the “sex worker” definition came into life with the occurrence of HIV/ AIDS as a global health problem – an infection after which, people were forced to become aware of sexually transmittable infections. This definition “was largely invented to de-stigmatize what were once called ‘prostitutes,’ a word that was seen to carry a great deal of shame, dishonor, and stigma” (Khan 1999: 195). According to him, this renaming process brings two aspects – the sense of political correctness and the sense of choice. Hence, sex work becomes one more “activity” that can be abandoned at any time, and those involved in that activity can find the excuse that “they are doing it to survive and sustain themselves”. In this manner, sex work becomes economic work, a “survival strategy”. This approach tackles the economic side of the sexuality of a specific group of individuals who, by exploiting their personal sexual/gender identity, support the needs of their families. Here I put the emphasis on the economic dimension of the process of building sexual/gender identity, framed within a symbolic sibling system. This system permits to make economy from sexuality in order to reproduce a specific sociality collectively and individually to maintain the double identity - “as a woman” in the sex work, and “as a man” in the everyday “normal life”.

Sex workers maintain relationships with boyfriends and clients not only “for benefits”, but also for meeting their own sexual needs. If in general, they make a distinction between activities “for the pleasure” and activities “for the benefit”. However, the conceptual boundary between the two is blurred, and the two

aspects are equally part from individual's sexuality: *L: ...it is something I learned from an old friend of mine. She said to me here: "You are gay, you are already fucking everyone without money; with this, you can at least earn money." Even when I'll be forty or fifty, I'll still be saying: "Sorry, money please!". "Otherwise, why would I ... everyone and why should I show my body to everyone? When I can have some benefit from that.*

### **Economies with sexuality, economies with femininity/ masculinity**

Sex work is a market – an organized system of selling sexual services in the Roma community in Skopje. The question is, how does economy relates to sexuality “from the perspective of what men and women believe they are doing when they engage in monetized sexual exchanges” (Hastings, Magowan 2010: 71)? Many interpersonal relations comprise a combination of sexual and economic activities, and the same applies to sexual work, “where the relations are narrow and short term” (Stinchcombe 1999, according to Zelizer 2010: 155). Sexual work is a relationship between a “sexual worker” on one side and the client on the other (understood as “consumer” in the sexual trade). This market – organized activity does not represent only these two market sides (the one who is producing and selling, and the one who is buying it and using it). The relation between these two parties is crucial, but “all individuals included in the market organized system are involved in that activity, make up that system” (Zikic 2009: 47). All social stakeholders: taxi drivers, restaurant and hotel workers, families, (if any) pimps, police officers, doctors, lawyers and other official persons, civil society organizations with their programs, media, friends of the sexual workers, and indirectly the researchers who, by providing compensation in the sense of an award, support the sexual market logic. This also shapes the local sexual/gender system and its social locations or “anywhere that sex is offered for sale on an occasional basis” (Agustín 2005: 622). For Roma sex workers in Skopje, these are the parking lots, streets, hotels, apartments, cafeterias, restaurants, the so-called “public houses”, graveyards, yards in the local schools, etc. This market is a system that can be implemented “solely through familial or political relationships”(Cohen 2011: 4), but only if the economic activity “is integrated” in the society itself (Polanyi 1944).

### **Profile of a sex worker**

The interlocutors see themselves both as “sex workers” and as individuals who are *buljàshi* (“gaytsi”) who do sex work as “girls” or “women.” For example, L sees himself as a communicative, merry, and people-friendly person, and also as a woman or girl doing sex work with specific clients. He thinks he has a normal life and describes his personal experience in this job work as a total “transformation”. L talks about himself in the third person. The “transformation” occurs at the location where he delivers his services. He feels afraid about his

safety and experiences it as gender change, which he expresses with the term *crossdresser*: According to L: *From man to woman. A crossdresser. I dress as a woman, which means I wear 100% of women's clothes; I have a wig, I use makeup, heels, all of it. I become a real woman.* It is interesting to notice that only L uses this definition among sex workers. While constructing his sex/gender, L aims to establish himself as a “woman” for the needs of the sex work and as a “man” the rest of the time. Ultimately, “sex workers live in a world of highly differentiated, and well-marked social ties” (Zelizer 2010: 156) framed within the local “work terminology” (Kulich 1998: 142).

### **Economic aspects of sexual relations**

The question now is how people see themselves during the sexual intercourse putting at the stage from one side the *buljasi* (“gaytsi”) and from the other the “men”? Our interlocutor N describes his/her position and identifies it with the role of “the woman”; this is what she “desires”, and what “he/she needs” to experience pleasure during the sexual act. Pleasure is an important dimension for her, “not only money”. L primarily experiences himself as a “female sex worker”, enjoying this work, and experiencing pleasure during sexual intercourses. “It reinforces their self-esteem, and it provides them with sexual satisfaction” (Kulich 1998: 183). In their narratives, except for C, the interlocutors talk freely about their desired position in sexual relations: “We subsume under sex a complex range of human phenomena, not only somatic practices but also cultural and personal signs of sexual practices and desires (i.e., immediate physical involvement and densely mediated gestures)” (Middelthun 2002: 182). The free talk about positions is one of the crucial details in sexual intercourse, which is defined in advance between the sex worker and the clients – the region of the anus, rectum, and prostate. The position can be one of the limitations in same-sex relations among “gay” boys, who are said to be “active”, but not in this particular case study. Sisters doing sexual work as “women”, identify themselves as “receivers”: *I: When do you feel better? L: As a woman. When I am passive, then I like it the best.* For my interlocutors, the position in sexual intercourses is important in building the sexual/gender identity both in the gay world and on the sexual market. The client is buying pleasure as a service, and he is paying for that. Sisters’ sexual identity has elements that belong to the area of “femininity,” and they acknowledge also getting a financial benefit from it. *N: A man, for example, he is fucking you only for interest. You can do him, and he does you. C: But, there are different examples. You can talk to people and do different ways.*

The interlocutors build an identity of a “woman” in accordance with the understanding of the “feminine” culture of the Roma community and in association with the female sexuality. In sexual intercourses done *for pleasure*, the emotional dimension is the only appearing factor, contrary to the sexual services where the mutual exchange of pleasure is done for the agreed financial amount.

The importance of the position in sex work is of crucial importance also for interlocutors N and L, who practice the same positioning, whether they are “doing it” with a boyfriend or with a client. Unlike sisters N or E, who do not want to take the position of “the man”, L usually alternates positions and sometimes plays “the man”, upon the wish of the client, and for a given amount of money. He/she says this is not a big problem, after all, even if, in general, he/she feels like a woman and enjoys the receptive role in anal and oral sex (these activities belonging to the “feminine area” of sexuality). These examples confirm R. Connell’s definition of masculinity as “a configuration of practice *within* a system of gender relations” (Connell 1995: 84). In the local Roma sexual/gender system, we can notice some tendencies in the practices that contributed to establishing a specific configuration in the femininity/masculinity system of relations. The subjectivity built in this way has a significant impact on seeing oneself within sex work. Sisters also reflect on the way clients’ see them and emphasize the exclusiveness of the sexual experience they are offering. *L: For most of the clients, the idea that you are a male dressed in female clothes turns them on. That is essentially what turns them on to see you as a woman knowing that you are a man. That is the crossdresser term. A person that dresses only, and I repeat only in a specific period, between four walls.*

There are different stages in the preparation of sisters, for performing the sexual/gender role they are expected to play. First, they meet clients in advance and agree on the visual aspects of their clothing. One of my interlocutors usually makes the first deal dressed as a man. If the two agree about the service, and the client has his private place where the sexual intercourse can take place, they go to that location (usually a car or a truck). If the client does not have his space, the service is offered in a hotel or “out, in the open air.” The sex worker carries his clothes in a bag and dresses at the location. In further encounters and in some cases with new clients, my interlocutor agrees with the client on a pick-up location and the drop-off location where the service is supposed to be delivered. The sex worker dresses as “woman” either during car transport or in the hotel room. Interlocutor N told me that usually they talk not only about the actual dressing procedure but also about the undressing process, during the delivery of the sexual service, where the panties (underwear) are of particular relevance – clothing that is covering the top of the lower part of the body. According to the procedure, these should be undressed last, and in some cases, when these are not undressed, they are becoming an instrument for the interlocutors to control the situation in the intercourse with the client. In the past, remembers N, when he was having sex with a client, he found essential not to remove the panties (although he was enjoying sex), because this was a way to keep the control over himself and over the client’s behavior. The goal was not to surrender entirely to the client. But this situation changed after the year 2000 when, violence against individuals providing services in Skopje started increasing. Senior interlocutors recall situations in which they experienced aggression on open locations in the

center of Skopje.

### Origins and organization of sexual work

It is possible to identify, the political status of the participants in the delivery of the sexual service, which is seen as an agreed form of sexual activity for the implementation of which the interlocutors are building various strategies (Zelizer 2010: 156). The types of these strategies not only shape the political position of the interlocutors in the framework of the sexual relationship, but this position is also built within the market system of sex work within and/or beyond the Roma community. According to the examples mentioned by the interlocutors, we can see that their sex work as “women” does have political relevance. The way interlocutors resettle their identity in the frames of the sex work has something to do with the identity construction of a “woman” within the male community. The main reason why the interlocutors started sex work, first on the street on the “open stage,” and later on the “closed stage,” was their economic situation: unemployment, poverty, and money shortage for basic needs. In the case of L, it was hunger and no cigarettes.

Most of the interlocutors started selling sex when they were teenagers, after meeting someone who would support them in this activity. Interlocutor E started hanging out with men when he was 12 years old, but he did not become sex worker before reaching the ages of 16-17. In the beginning, he was assisted by his friend P, a “senior sister” with experience in sex work. In his and other examples we see how the “sisters” system becomes the social institution that forms newcomers to sex work, teaches the new gender/sexual identity, and provides for basic needs. L started to do sex work in public spaces together with another friend. They were supporting each other in the decision to “sell themselves for money.” In the beginning, most of the sex workers were ashamed of their job and did not talk about what they were doing. Such is the example of one adolescent who, when asked whether he has offered or has been offered money for sex, replied negatively, but in the further discussion, he uses the jargon term *whore* about himself and his close sisters. He also uses the term *customer* for sexual partners.

For L, it is rather rare for a gay person in the Roma community to declare openly as “sex worker.” It is easier to claim to be “gay,” and then, to some extent, when someone says he is “gay,” to understand in the context that he is also doing sex work, “*because he is ashamed to say that he is a sex worker, that he is making money from that*”. When interlocutors refer to sex work, they prefer to employ the term *gaytsi* as a substitute for the word sex worker. For example, L was feeling particularly ashamed at the beginning of his career. He/she changed his attitude after becoming an activist in a civil society organization. Such changes can also be noticed among other interlocutors who are part of civil society organization programs. They have embraced their activity,

and none of them is thinking about changing it. In other words, they do not see themselves outside sex work. They do not imagine a future in which they would be doing something else, although they have completed secondary education.

For interlocutor I, if he asked to think about changing his profession, he would still consider the fact that he is gay and sex work remains a lucrative occupation, even for older people. *I: To give up on this work? L: No way! I will never give up!* Similar statements have been obtained from other sex workers.

The sisters learned gradually to speak more openly about their activities, although only in the companies of really “close” people – sisters, some family, friends, connections, or someone like me who paid the service - compensation called an award. This shows that their attitude towards sex work has not changed but that they learned to adapt their position following the dominating discourse in a given situation. Although L thinks that he is an individual who speaks openly about the work he loves, he admits that it is not possible to discuss that openly with his mother, who is otherwise a good friend of him. In front of the public, interlocutors employ verbal forms used as substitutes for sex work such as *I walk (I go), I am working, I am doing, I am doing something*, and they are also using these terms when communicating with a potential client. L will say, in the communication with the client: *“Let’s meet somewhere, let’s see each other“*.

The reason why the interlocutor L started to do sex work as a “sex worker” is the idea that in this work, the women earn more money. Boys start their sex work career with personal sexual experience, without any compensation, with boyfriends or sexual partners. When they narrate their personal stories, interlocutors depict their own views on their sexual/gender identity. It is possible to clearly distinguish between the period when the sex work became prominent in that process and the one before when the person was “just gay”. After establishing a gay identity, L “upgraded” to the sex worker identity and, after that, to the identity of a sex worker who “works as a woman”.

Some of the interlocutors made their first attempts to reach clients by participating in the night shows on the TV channels at specific private local TV stations that allow communication and live broadcasting of SMS messages (Crvenkovska-Risteska, 2013: 99-100). Most of them however started sex work directly in public but hidden spaces around the center of the city of Skopje. In the neighborhood of Municipality Shuto Orizari, the so-called “headquarters” used to be considered as a top location for the “gay world” in the community – a location created following the example of the oldest and most influential open stage for sexual workers in the center of Skopje, known as “na kocka”. The “headquarters” in Shuto Orizari stopped functioning after the independence of the Republic of Macedonia, and the conflict in 2001 that marked the beginning of a period of growing violence against Roma sex workers, and aggressive behavior on behalf of

some clients. The function of the “open stage” was to congregate in large numbers, which, according to them, leaves an impression on the broader public. The main characteristic of the “open stage” or “the headquarters”, is the assembly of people that makes the place recognizable for the “men” looking for sexual service.

After the closure, sex workers got dispersed into smaller groups, and each group opened its respective “base” in the neighborhood they live. This enabled sexual workers to achieve greater control over clients’ comings and goings. The smaller headquarters have an essential role in sex work because they were less visible for the broader public, thus avoiding the danger of violence and facilitating the selection of the clients. Interlocutor L is different from some others with the way he organizes his work since he is also working in Switzerland. During his/her three-month experience as a “woman on the street”, “transvestite on the street,” and as a “crossdresser” in Zurich, he learned new things about how to act at the “closed stage” as a sex worker.

### **The sex workers and the clients’ system**

The system of relationships between sex workers and clients depends on the experience and wishes of the sex worker. Interlocutors L and N, for example, contrary to the other interlocutors, prefer clients outside of Skopje. According to L, they are mostly Macedonians, Albanians, and Turks from different cities from all over Macedonia, but he avoids clients from the Roma community, except when he is looking for a boyfriend. Interlocutors N and S, on the contrary, organize their activities within the Roma community. They also communicate their telephone numbers in order to be contacted by potential clients. Most interlocutors have a profile on the gay website, which they can manage according to their wishes. These are “fake profiles” where they put their photos dressed as women and refer to services they are offering. According to interlocutor S, they are required to mention in their offer that they are males. The interlocutors establish contact with the clients via telephone. In specific periods, interlocutor L (especially in the periods when he is dating a boyfriend) also had a separate number for communicating with clients.

The interlocutors commonly provide their sexual services outside the family home, except E, who provides services in his parents’ house, where he lives alone. In some periods, L, together with his friend, moves out of his parents’ home and rents an apartment. This happened; they started a business with “erotic massages,” and they needed an empty apartment. It did not last long, and today L provides sexual services in a hotel room. He is now more careful when he chooses hotels, requiring from the working staff absolute discretion. Sex workers, in general, rent only less noticeable rooms in the hotel as acceptable, wanting to avoid encounters with people. The interlocutor L usually provides service in only one hotel in the city of Skopje.

The communication between the sex worker and the client consists of general questions. L only asks questions related to age and profession and never about the client's private life. Depending on the answers, the sex worker will build the profile of his client. For L, clients are never indigent as most of them are employed either in public or in private institutions. Based on that, he defines the price of his services.

Contrary to L, interlocutor E considers most of his clients as poor people. He makes evaluations based on the fact that he always has to negotiate the price of the services, starting from the amount the client offers him at the beginning of the deal. To draw on Zelizer's definition: "sex workers do not simply distinguish the sexual service itself, but who their clients are, their relationship to them, its duration and breadth, the amount and forms of payment, and the overall meaning of their work. Indeed the monetary payment itself signals the form of the relationship to both provider and consumer" (Zelizer 2010: 155).

Individuals are doing sex work "as women have "a different set of stories" (Hall 2007: 461), concerning the types of transactions with clients. For their services, sisters receive different kinds of compensations – monetary, non-monetary, allowances, or "awards". Depending on whether clients' requests are acceptable or not, the sexual worker sets conditions for sexual intercourse; that is how far the client can go. In the case of L, there are clear limits and rules about the details in providing the sex service. What is considered necessary in this complex sexual activity is the need to establish precise proportional values in order to determine the right price for the service provided? Interlocutor E charges between 150 and 300 denars. However, if the sex worker happens to be under financial pressure and short of cash, he could accept amounts below 150 denars. Contrary to the interlocutor E, the interlocutor L gives prices in euros (150 to 200 euros).

When L provides his services, he is usually asking explicitly for money. Other compensations are unacceptable for him. *I typically ask for money. I don't accept things like a phone, or I will give you this, I'll give you that. Cash is the king – cash rules. They give me money, and after I can buy everything I need. We don't do barter or compensate for things.* This example confirms the fact that "money, especially in the form of precious metals, is just a convenient means of exchange or barter between individuals who hold private property in what they buy and sell" (Hann, Hart 2011: 95). According to the interlocutors, there are also cases when the sex worker accepts compensations in food items or medicines. In their words, the payment can include things which are of existential importance for the sex workers as well as things they consider as economic surpluses – "luxury," such as telephone, vouchers, and drinks.

A sex worker can also have several clients simultaneously – this is usually the case with younger boys from the Roma community, who form groups of

friends and address sexual workers for group services. According to a client, this is a typical way to have fun for their age. Many of the “men” interlocutors started to use services from sex workers in the same way, when they were young boys. The company of boys hanging out in town first go for drinks and afterward to a specific location – an apartment rented by the sex workers.

The complex sexual activity within the Roma sexual market-oriented system drives individuals to develop “various strategies used by men who engage in sex for compensation, some ways that young gay men become involved in it, how they represent themselves and their activities, and some of the problems they face” (Hall 2007: 461). Hence, we agree that with such distribution of weight of the complex activity into multiple segments it is possible “to fill an important gap in our understanding of gay males who exchange sexual services for various forms of compensation by blurring the lines between ‘sex work’ unitarily conceived and more nuanced forms of compensated sex” (Agustín, 2005, upon Hall 2007: 461).

## Conclusion

This article is an attempt to explore the sexual/gender system among Roma sex workers selling sex “for the benefit” in a Roma neighborhood in Skopje. The local model associates sex workers who call themselves “sisters” and who pursue the common objective of earning a living for their families by doing sex work as women in private and public spaces in Skopje and abroad. The idea that sexuality can be sold as a service and used as an income generator is one of the principal reasons for those people to maintain their sexual/gender identity as “women” in the local economic system of the Roma gay people. This concept is reflected in the structure and organization of the community of the so-called “sisters”, based on the economic model of sharing of common resources. Carried by the idea that the “women” earn more in sex work, individuals are offering services “like women”. The gender/sexual “identity for the benefit” makes sense when articulated with the “identity for the pleasure” as the two are complementary.

Interlocutors experience themselves both as sex workers and as *buljashi* or gay – categories applied to those who engage in sex work as “girls” or “women.” They usually start their carriers when they are minors, thus always supported by senior “sisters”. Interlocutors are using different strategies in seeking to develop and increase their client base. A stable income from regular clients enables sex workers to live independently from their parents; to improve working conditions and hygiene; to help their families and to adapt to rapidly changing European and global fashion trends. Organized in a community of sisters, sex workers acting as women to manage not only to make a living but also to create an innovative institutional setting that permits the social and symbolical reproduction of the group.

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