CONCLUSIONS

RETHINKING SEXUAL COMMERCE AND FEMALE
INTRA-REGIONAL MIGRATIONS

This research project was motivated by the scarcity of studies about migrants in the sex industry from a migration research framework and the still limited attention paid to the voices and arguments of this migrant group in discussions about transnational sexual commerce. But as I examined the stories and narratives of Peruvian and Colombian migrants in the Ecuadorian province of El Oro, and I analyzed the structures guiding their migration and erotic experiences, I realized that there were more issues at stake behind these experiences. The stories of these migrants allowed me to look at the particularities of south-south migrations, which are largely ignored in migration literature, and they revealed more complex notions of borders and sexual commerce. Therefore, my work integrated three bodies of literature, and it explored the ways in which migration, sexuality, and borders are interconnected in the lives of these migrant women.

By looking at Peruvian and Colombian women engaged in a variety of intimate-material relations from the perspective of migration studies, this research examined different aspects of these migrants’ lives, and it did not restrict their migration experiences to their sexual encounters. These women were seen as part of a larger group of intra-regional migrants that undertake temporary, circular, or permanent migration movements from Peru and Colombia into Ecuador, taking advantage of dollarized wages, geographic proximity, and a free-entry visa regime. Locating the experiences of my informants within this broader migration process allowed me to see these women as migrants and active border crossers rather than as sexual actors or sexual victims, as other studies on the topic often do.

Likewise, my theoretical approach helped me recognize that the experiences of Colombian and Peruvian migrants engaged in different intimate-material relations have both commonalities with other working-class migrant
women in Ecuador, as well as differences and particularities. Sexuality—understood as an axis of power that produces both “normal” and “not-normal” subjects, wanted and unwanted migrants—guides these differences, and it becomes an element that presents migrant women in the sex trade with particular opportunities and limitations.

**The difference sexuality makes in migration and border contexts**

This dissertation claimed that migrants’ experiences in commercial sex and other intimate-material relations are highly heterogeneous. However, it also emphasized that a common aspect among these migrants is the fact that their marginal sexualities distinguish them from other migrant groups as well as from “national women.”

I explained that normative notions of female sexuality, and their intersections with nationality stereotypes, have produced Colombian and Peruvian women in Ecuador in general as exotic and erotic figures, and Colombian and Peruvian migrants in the Ecuadorian sex trade in particular as sexually deviant or sexual victims. I called this differentiation process in which sexuality and nationality overlap and naturalize distinctions and hierarchies between “nationals” and “foreigners” the sexual stigmatization of national origin. This process is particularly salient in migration contexts where other markers of difference—such as ethnicity, race, and class—are not so prominent. This is the case with the Andean sub-region of South America, and more specifically with its interconnected border regions.

Indeed, in a border region like El Oro that has gone through rapid and relatively recent transformations—including the permanent opening of its border with Peru and increasing labor migrations into the province—the image of Colombian and Peruvian women in the local sex trade is prominent in the discourses of borderland inhabitants. These migrants are depicted by many Ecuadorian men as “warm,” “friendly,” and “joyful,” more sexually open and
appealing than Ecuadorian women, and thus especially “suited” for paid sexual relations (chapter 1). These exoticized/eroticized images stimulate gendered and sexualized labor demand and recruitment processes that guide Peruvians’ and Colombians’ marginalized incorporation in the informal Ecuadorian labor market (chapters 2 and 3).

But Colombian and Peruvian women in the El Oro sex trade are also and especially marked by negative stereotypes. They are portrayed as “clandestine prostitutes” and vectors of sexually transmitted infections, “illegal aliens,” or victims of sex trafficking “mafias.” These portrayals provoke fears and public anxieties among border populations. I argued that these anxieties reveal broader concerns about “invaded” or “violated” borders and the vulnerable boundaries of a community that is being particularly altered by sub-regional integration agreements. In other words, fears about “violating” or “violated” bodies concur with fears about “violated” borders, and this encourages tighter controls and migration restrictions targeting particular groups of migrants.

Consequently, the symbolic boundaries between “us” and “others,” “nationals” and “foreigners,” “good” and “bad” migrants (investors, highly-qualified, regularized, and moral, versus impoverished, unskilled, “illegal,” and immoral), drawn through sexual and moral distinctions, are materialized and institutionalized through selective and restrictive migration regulations and tighter border controls. These restrictions and controls are an attempt to redraw the territorial limits of the Ecuadorian state. In this way, the migration control apparatus not only responds to sexual concerns and national considerations, such as internal security and public order, but it also reproduces sexual and national origin hierarchies, as discussed in chapter 4.

One of the contributions of my work is the fact that a territorially focused study of borders and border-crossings helps explain how state power operates in a concrete territory and in the margins of the state. A territorially focused study also allows to illustrate the material consequences—and not only the symbolic significances—that border divisions have for migrant populations in general and
for migrant women in the sex trade in particular. Certainly, controls, detentions, and exclusions are part of these consequences. In El Oro, these controls are directed in large degree towards Peruvians and Colombians, and they take place not only at official checkpoints but also in sites perceived as “invaded” by “illegal migrant workers.” Sex businesses are among these sites. They are seen as “hazardous locations,” and for this reason they are put under a network of surveillance that includes health authorities, anti-delinquency police agents, migration officials, and private actors like journalists, employers, and local workers. Curiously, sex businesses, whether formal or informal, are also and deeply integrated in the economic and social life of El Oro. Chapter 2 explained that these businesses are a source of labor and income for numerous unskilled and impoverished workers, both locals and migrants.

Hence, this dissertation illustrated how sexuality informs modes of inclusion/exclusion in migration contexts. Peruvian and Colombian women are incorporated into the border geography of El Oro as exotic and erotic figures and then sought after in the local sex sector. Simultaneously, migrants in the sex trade—in contrast to migrant women working in domestic service—face greater difficulties to legally work and reside in Ecuador, and they are put under additional surveillance due to the stereotypes that depict them as sexual threats or sexual victims.

The above confirms that sexuality structures different aspects of migration, such as migrant women’s incorporation in segmented labor markets and sexualized jobs, migration policies, and migrants’ broader integration in destination. Likewise, it shows that migration and sexuality come together to select and control migration flows and concurrently to regulate female sexualities.

South-South intra-regional migrations and the limits of integration projects

The connections between migration, sexuality, and borders/boundaries have been examined in interesting and relatively recent studies that were cited along this
dissertation. These studies, however, focus on south-to-north migration movements while leaving unmentioned the particular ways in which these connections manifest in south-south intra-regional migrations and among people with similar cultural, ethnic, and class backgrounds.

Exploring the contemporary migration movements within the Andean sub-region of South America showed that those coming from the other side of the border are seen as “dangerously close,” not only in geographically speaking but also ethnically and culturally speaking. As “foreigners” that can easily pass as “nationals” due to a common language and similar physical appearance, the migration experiences of Colombian and Peruvian women in the Ecuadorian province of El Oro expose the arbitrariness of boundaries between peoples and nations. My informants’ experiences also reveal the ways in which state agents and private actors stress differences between members and non-members of the nation-state to erase identity ambiguities and maintain hierarchical forms of citizenship. Thus, contrary to most migration and border literature that concentrates on race and class as elements of differentiation and hierarchization between “nationals” and “foreigners,” I emphasized the role of sexualization and national origin distinctions as markers of difference and justifications for restrictions and exclusions, as explained above.

But despite limitations and restrictions, Colombian and Peruvian migrants find opportunities in short distance south-south migrations. Trans-border movements within the Andean sub-region are facilitated by geographic proximity and porous/integrated borders that allow formal and informal border-crossings. For this reason, the Colombian and Peruvian migrants I interviewed highlighted the advantages they found in their movements into Ecuador that allow them to move back and forth and remain in close contact with relatives back home. Within this particular migration process, women in the sex industry are confronted with risks like human smuggling and debt-bondage with less frequency because geographic proximity and a visa-free entry reduce traveling and documentation costs. Likewise, historical trans-border movements in the Andean sub-region provide
border crossers with social connections or job contacts in destination, preventing them from resorting to criminal organizations.

My exploration of south-south intra-regional migrations also brought to the fore the interesting but still rarely studied trans-border dynamics of South America,\(^1\) where integration agreements coexist with new divisions and barriers. Economic, social, and cultural networks across South American border territories have been formalized through integration accords that strengthened in the late 1990s and the early 2000s. My work underscores, however, that regional and sub-regional integration projects cannot be seen as the disappearance of borders, an idea that is rather common in some analyses about regionalization and globalization.\(^2\) Current dynamics in South American borders indicate that it is precisely regionalization and globalization processes and the state policies that come with them that have redefined contemporary borders, making them fade in some ways and reappear in others. As Alejandro Grimson (2001: 99) says in relation to borders in the Southern Cone of South America: “while the ‘paranoia’ over [territorial] sovereignty has faded into the background, the panic over movement begins to take center stage. From the obsession over space we have moved to an obsession over flows; the obsession of multiplying flows coming ‘from above’ and restricting flows coming ‘from below’” (translation is mine).

Consequently, this ethnographic research exposed the limits and contradictions of regional and sub-regional integration projects and the need for deeper critical analyses of these projects. It showed that the romantic metaphor of “brotherhood” that is used to define relations between Andean nations and their populations is sometimes empty or merely diplomatic rhetoric. Moreover, when this rhetoric of brotherhood is deployed by diplomats, national/local authorities and ordinary people in border (as well as in many interior) cities, it can obscure or prevent the recognition and thus the resolution of the tensions and power relations that still occur between border regions and neighboring countries involved in integration projects.
In the Andean sub-region, integration accords aim to consolidate an integrated space, with open borders, free circulation, and a broader and more inclusive notion of citizenship, as various official documents indicate. In practice, though, the rhetoric of brotherhood and the ideals of universal, Latin American or Andean citizenship³ have been overshadowed by nationalist ideologies and practices and the stigmatizing prejudices many local people have against those coming from neighboring countries. Integration projects in this (and other) part(s) of the world have been also limited by a global securitist agenda that is guided by a series of “panics” over cross-border movements: drug and human trafficking, goods smuggling, “illegal migrations,” transnational crime, and “moral panics” about the autonomous and unaccompanied movement of women.

Thus, although many border areas in the Andean sub-region are seen as spaces of “real integration,” current national security concerns, fuelled by “invasion” narratives and the construction of borders as zones of disorder and subversion, have become an obstacle to border integration processes. In addition, the security discourse has impeded the study of social, cultural, and other “human dynamics” of border regions—as van Schendel (2005) asserts—and has turned public policies towards borders zones back to the notion of defense. Actually, in Ecuador violence, (in)security, and criminality concentrate the attention of scholars studying and writing about borders (which are usually academics from central cities and rarely actors from border provinces), while other topics connected to border regions have practically gone unnoticed.⁴

Sex, intimacy, and commerce: blurring the boundaries, struggling to move ahead

Commercial sexual activities have usually been understood and dealt with from two main perspectives, which I proved limited when trying to explain the various and ambiguous relationships women engage in in cross-border settings. The first perspective conflates commercial sex with “sexual enslavement”; the second one,
which was the starting point for this research project, understands commercial sex as an alternative form of labor.

Drawing on Colombian and Peruvian migrants’ intimate-material experiences, this study illustrated, in the first place, that the sex industry is highly diversified. It comprises a wide range of activities, not only sex-for-money exchanges but also eroticized services. The latter do not necessarily include sexual intercourse but rather the use of female bodies to provoke erotic fantasies and thus stimulate consumption, as in barras-bar. Additionally, it showed that some of the intimate-material encounters that migrants engage in are not restricted to the public spaces of the sex industry, and they are not defined as prostitution or sex work by the participants themselves. Some Colombian and Peruvian migrants engage in sporadic relationships that combine friendship, companionship, sex, eroticism, and different forms of material gain, such as “gifts” and material support given by friends and boyfriends as part of daily life interactions.

Hence, I questioned the use of all-encompassing categories to describe different relationships mixing sex, eroticism, and commerce, or intimacy and materiality more broadly. First, I problematized the conflation of transnational sexual commerce with sex trafficking because this conflation implies that migrants in the sex industry face homogenous experiences of violence and oppression. Further, the discourse of “sexual enslavement” ignores the agency exercised and the risks assumed by women that cross borders to negotiate their marginalization. Contrary to these victimizing and homogenizing discourses, my informants defined themselves as “audacious,” and they expressed changing and conflicting meanings and feelings about their involvement in the sex trade. They recognized commercial sex as a means to overcome economic difficulties and open up opportunities that were otherwise closed for themselves and their families. At the same time, their narratives suggested that their engagement in a highly stigmatized and unprotected labor sector caused emotional distress (eased to a certain degree by being away from relatives and friends) and made them vulnerable to abusive controls,
detentions, bribe demands, deportations, mistreatment from clients, and labor exploitation.

Secondly, I exposed the limits of the concept of “sex work(er)”. This political concept has been essential in the organization of women in the sex trade and their struggles for respect and rights as it shifted debates from moral to economic and labor terms and from criminalizing to human rights approaches. I myself have been using this concept in my activism with organized sex workers. Nonetheless, during my fieldwork I realized that the concept “sex work” does not adequately define the flexible, informal, and contingent relationships that women (and men) in capitalist economies engaged in, especially relationships that take place outside the context of labor. In addition, defining all women involved in intimate-material encounters as “sex workers” has the risk of fixing the identity of these women, as my informants alerted.

As trans-border migrants with (for the most part) irregular migration statuses, some of them moving back and forth between Ecuador and their origin countries, the Colombian and Peruvian women I interviewed perceived their involvement in the Ecuadorian sex trade as a temporary and even incidental activity. Therefore, they were not interested in visibilizing their presence as organized sex workers, and they resisted the concept of “sex work” because they felt that this term fixed a temporary income-generating activity into a permanent sort of profession. This shows that the “global” concept of sex work is assumed and interpreted differently, depending on local contexts and the multiple subject positions of those involved in commercial sexual activities. Although this concept is still a powerful tool for collective action and to fight against the abuses and stigmatization affecting women in the sex industry, it cannot be imposed on every woman that engages in relationships mixing sex, eroticism, and commerce, or intimacy and materiality more broadly.

Indeed, my informants’ experiences illustrate that contrary to the rigid and moralistic boundaries commonly drawn between affective and commercial relationships, “pure” and commodified sex, the intimate relationships of
Colombian and Peruvian migrants blur the lines between intimacy and commerce, emotionality and material gain (chapter 6). The commodification of sex, friendship, romance, and marriage within the context of migration, and the romanticizing of commercial sex and eroticized services expose the ways in which different working-class women, and not only organized sex workers, make strategic use of sex and emotionality to respond to migration restrictions and enhance their life chances. These commodified relationships show that intimacy and materiality connect not only within labor relationships in the sex industry but also within daily life interactions of friendship and romance. In the latter cases, the concept of “sex work” is especially inadequate.

Subsequently, more complex analyses are necessary in order to enrich our understandings of the erotics. A way of doing so, according to Agustín (2005), could be a cultural-studies approach to commercial sex. This approach would:

…look at commercial sex in its widest sense, examining its intersections with art, ethics, consumption, family life, entertainment, sport, economics, urban space, sexuality, tourism and criminality, not omitting issues of race, class, gender, identity and citizenship. An approach that considers commercial sex as culture would look for the everyday practices involved and try to reveal how our societies distinguish between activities considered normatively ‘social’ and activities denounced as morally wrong. This means examining a range of activities that take in both commerce and sex (p. 619).

Even though my informants reproduced notions of commercial sex as “indecent” and “not-normal,” they also contested simple understandings of migrants’ experiences in the sex industry, and they brought up nuances and complexities, as I have explained in this section. Given the gap found between hegemonic discourses about migrant women in commercial sexual relations (in mass-media, governmental and non-governmental reports and some academic work) and the narratives and arguments of the women involved in these relations, I claim that researchers and other actors examining commercial sex in local, national, or transnational contexts (feminist groups and human rights activists, for example)
need to connect their analyses more to the way people make sense of and understand their own lives and erotic experiences.

My claim is rooted in a critical body of work in the social sciences—particularly anthropology and especially from feminist academics—in which the relations of power and knowledge that connect researchers and research subjects are put under profound and self-conscious reflection (Haraway 1988; Harding 1993; Abhu-Lughod 1993; Behar and Gordon 1995). This critical work underscores the theoretical potential that women’s (including migrants’) stories and experiences offer, and they alert researchers to the dangers of imposing personal values and generalizing categories on complex and multifaceted experiences (Bourdieu 1996). In this way, it becomes possible to give research subjects a different role (Bocaggni 2011) and at best change their condition from “othered” and spoken for figures to participant actors that can speak for themselves. This has been the case with some sex workers and migrants groups that engage not only in human rights activism but also in knowledge production.5

Re-politicizing the debate

When I started my fieldwork in El Oro in 2006, sex trafficking acquired a heightened level of attention in national, regional, and international public agendas, influencing public perceptions of migrant women engaged in commercial sexual activities as well as formal and informal responses towards this migrant group.

Indeed, national as well as international reports, both governmental and non-governmental, highlighted the criminal aspects behind the experiences of migrant women in the Ecuadorian sex industry. These reports warned about the alarming upsurge of transnational criminal organizations that deceive, coerce, and sexually exploit “womenandchildren” (no differences between them, as the concept coined by Cynthia Enloe critically points out). The increase in human trafficking in Ecuador was explained by the “permeability of borders” and a “lax visa policy” that stimulates “uncontrolled” migration flows.
Although human trafficking is part of the multiple and complex dynamics of transnational migrations, this issue is rarely analyzed within the framework of migration studies. Trafficking is basically studied within criminal or security frameworks. Therefore, migrant women in the sex trade, who are conflated with and portrayed as sex trafficking victims or potential victims are not seen as actors undertaking a cross-border experience; rather, they are depicted as innocent figures who have been deceived and forced to move, vulnerable to sexual exploitation, passive, and childlike. This portrayal reproduces not only traditional ideas about women but also traditional ideas of sexuality as an issue that is connected to violence and multiple disorders.

Moreover, the hypervisibilized image of migrants in the sex industry as victims of evil traffickers has depoliticized the debate about female international migrations and transnational sexual commerce by diverting the attention from the structural causes behind these two issues. Sensationalistic images and discourses about sex trafficking have also justified the adoption of migration and sexual commerce agendas guided by criminalizing approaches, controls, security measures, and exclusionary practices. For instance, in the name of protecting sex trafficking victims and “combating” criminal “mafias” that jeopardize the security of the Ecuadorian state, police raids in brothels and nightclubs increased, as did the “rescue operations” and subsequent deportations of irregular migrant women in the sex trade. Hence, anti-trafficking, anti-migration, and anti-prostitution policies are all connected. I suggested that despite the human rights rhetoric of contemporary anti-trafficking ideologies and practices, measures aimed at “combating” sex trafficking continue to rest on moral concerns about women in prostitution, and they are connected more closely to broader security agendas, like those regarding the “War on Drugs”, transnational crime, and “illegal migrations,” than to projects promoting social justice and inclusionary forms of citizenship.

In contrast to discourses conflating transnational sexual commerce with sex trafficking, this dissertation underscored the structural inequalities, not only gendered but also class-based and geopolitical, behind female international
migrations and transnational sexual commerce. My work also drew attention to the economic model that sustains the sex industry. In this way, it called into question discourses that individualize the complex topic of female migrations in the sex trade. These discourses tend to explain this phenomenon either by the presence of undesirable individuals/criminals that “force women into prostitution,” as mentioned above, or by the “imprudent” decision or “ambitious” attitude of immoral individual women. “Illegal migrations” and “clandestine prostitution” have been analyzed in an identical way, blaming “irresponsible” individuals and diverting attention from the state decisions, including the implementation of restrictive laws, as well as from the social, economic and political conditions that “produce” unauthorized migrants and “clandestine sex workers.”

Privileging political economy as the analytical framework, chapter 2 analyzed the economic relations and the global-local connections in which El Oro’s sex industry is embedded. As a region traditionally connected to global economic dynamics through the export of primary products, El Oro has experienced important economic growth and a significant development of its commercial, service, and entertainment sectors. Therefore, internal and more recently international migrants, mostly unskilled workers, have moved to El Oro in search of labor opportunities or following labor demand and recruitment processes. This mobile labor force, however, has been affected by an export-oriented economic model that not only increases inequalities and promotes consumerism but also keeps salaries low in order to raise employers’ profits and keep export enterprises competitive in the international market. Accordingly, this economic model has influenced both the supply of workers to and the demand for the services of the sex industry.

Similar to the way in which the economic model that sustains the sex industry is rarely examined in studies about transnational sexual commerce, the conditions of labor exploitation that migrants working in this industry face tend to be ignored by social and political actors. Public concerns and human rights work focusing on women in the sex trade concentrate on exploitation as “sexual harm,”
disregarding other forms of exploitation and violence. In contrast, the narratives of Colombian and Peruvian women in the Ecuadorian sex sector do not restrict concepts like exploitation and slavery to sexual harm. These concepts are more broadly understood, and they are usually connected to precarious working conditions in different labor sectors (not only in the sex industry but also and principally in domestic work), low wages, hierarchical employer-worker relations, and abuses from migration officials and other state agents.

Consequently, in analyzing the experiences of migrant women in the sex trade, much more work is necessary to understand the connections between sexual and economic relationships—as Bernstein (2007) suggests—and their links with gender, national, and other social hierarchies. Similarly, it is indispensable to critically look at the links between migrants’ second class status as “illegal migrants” and sexual “outlaws” and the exploitative labor conditions that afflict them, the effect of which is sometimes far greater than the actions of “criminal mafias.”

From sex deviants/slaves to full citizens: towards a human rights-based approach to migration and sexuality

I showed in this dissertation that analyzing the experiences of trans-border migrant women in commercial sex and other intimate-material relations from the dichotomist perspectives of criminality/victimhood, sex work/sex trafficking offers too limited an understanding of the complex realities of this migrant group. Further, I argued that both criminal and protectionist measures are unresponsive to the needs and priorities of working-class women in transnational sexual commerce. The stories of Colombian and Peruvian migrant women in El Oro questioned the effects of “rescue operations” in Ecuadorian sex businesses, which frequently end up in abuses, detentions, and deportations. Instead of asking to be “rescued,” my informants emphasized three main concerns and desires that were largely informed by their migration condition. One, they were concerned about access to labor
(“any kind,” many of them said) with “good payments” (higher than in their origin countries) and in appropriate working conditions; two, many demanded information about visa procedures and migration regulatory processes that would enable them to live and work in Ecuador without having to confront frequent and abusive controls; three, my informants insistently brought up issues of respect and non-discrimination/stigmatization for the type of work they do and for their status as “foreigners” or “illegal migrants.”

To change the ways in which migrant women in commercial sexual activities are envisioned in society, as well as the conditions of abuse, violence and discrimination they face as migrants and sexual “Others”, I want to consider the importance of using human rights as an analytical framework and a “tool of struggle.” However, I share the concerns of feminist academics and activists, and I believe that incorporating female migrations and sexuality into human rights discourse and practice requires attention to the ways in which these sensitive issues—that are connected to citizenship, morality, and, among other things, women’s position in society—will be addressed (Miller 2004; Miller and Vance 2004; Kempadoo et al. 2005; Cabezas 2009).

My first concern when addressing the situation of migrant women in the sex trade from a human rights-based approach was that this topic is most often discussed from the angle of sexual violence and many of the proposed measures are very close to patriarchal forms of protection and regulation of female sexuality. According to Allice Miller (2004), adopting the narrow framework of sexual harm in human and women’s rights work can inadvertently produce regressive responses. She says:

The recognition that sexual harm has begun to operate in isolation from other injustices as the worst abuse that can happen to a woman should alert us to the uncomfortable similarities, and differences, between this position and a position we [feminists and human rights advocates] fight against—that the most important thing to know about a woman is her chastity [or sexual integrity in contemporary human rights language] (p. 19).
Miller explains that the sexual harm framework in human rights work reduces women to “suffering bodies in need of protection by the law and the state, rather than as bodies and minds in need not only of protection, but participation and equality” (p. 27). Her analysis resonates with that of Anderson and Andrijasevic (2008) who critically examine the rhetoric of victimhood in relation to female migrants, especially those defined as sex trafficking victims, and make a distinction between passive victims and participating citizens. “Since victims are defined as those who are in need of help (by the state, NGOs, police or clients), they are not seen as political subjects but rather as objects of intervention. Victims cannot engage in the realm of the political. Others need to act on their behalf” (p. 143).

Anderson and Andrijasevic, as well as Miller, add that notions of female victimhood and policies focusing exclusively on the protection of women reinforce the idea that one can only engage with citizenship as a formal legal status that is administered by the state and not as a process in which individuals and groups participate in creating the policies affecting their lives.

Thus, to avoid restricting human rights debates and interventions in relation to migrant women in the sex trade within the framework of sexual violence, it is important to consider two issues. First, it is indispensable to look at the intersected forms of violence and injustice that women endure in local, national, and transnational contexts. This includes exploring questions of economic exploitation that have largely been ignored due to the still limited integration of women’s rights and economic rights in mainstream human rights movements (Miller 2004). Secondly, it is important to consider issues of oppression and agency and notions of protection and freedom simultaneously. Focusing on only one of these pairs certainly has limitations and risks. I have already mentioned that concentrating exclusively on female migrants in the sex trade as victims produces objects of intervention rather than agents empowered (with more information, more skills to work in better conditions, more rights consciousness, etc.) to avoid or respond to violent or exploitative experiences. But focusing only on agency will ignore the power structures that guide both sexual and migration experiences,
including the power relations that are part of south-south migration processes. Therefore, “a dual approach of protection from harm and creation of the conditions for enjoyment of rights” is necessary (Miller and Vance 2004: 10).

In addition, it is important to consider that although the state has an undeniable role in ensuring human rights and social justice, human rights advocates’ fervent but unexamined calls for state intervention, especially legal intervention, pose other problems to human, women’s, and migrants’ rights work. Several feminist academics studying sexuality have called for a deeper and more critical reflection about the basis on which the state regulates sexuality, especially if we take into account that the state has functioned and continues to function as one of the main sites of control and definition of what is considered “deviant” and thus punishable and excluded in relation to sexual behavior and sexual identities (see for example Araujo 2008). Commercial sex is certainly one of the sexual practices defined by the state as “deviant,” “immoral,” or “dangerous.” Something similar could be said in relation to state intervention regarding international migrations. I showed that even though the state implements laws under the argument of “protecting” and defending the rights of “vulnerable migrant groups,” many of these laws and regulations are guided by security approaches and by the stigmatized images many state actors have about migrant populations.

Although understandings of both sexuality and migration have changed significantly around the world over the past few decades, the law is often slow to register these changes, and political will is often too weak to enforce already existing progressive legislation. In Ecuador, for example, the innovative articles that the 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution incorporated in relation to migrations and migrants’ rights have not been translated into concrete migration laws and regulations; furthermore, these articles of the Constitution have been contradicted by exclusionary policies and practices, such as visa restrictions, detentions, and deportations. All of this is to say that notions of “free movement for people all over the world,” “universal citizenship,” “the progressive end of the notion of foreigner,” and the claim that “no human being should be identified as or
considered illegal due to their migration status” are nice constitutional principles that, unfortunately, have difficulties in their implementation.

Thus, legal responses to human, women’s, and migrants’ rights are important but not enough. More comprehensive and not exclusively legal measures are required to respond to the needs of migrant women in the sex trade. Moreover, state regulation of transnational migrations and sexual commerce through law, especially through criminal law, can result in punitive measures and abuses of a different sort, especially when these laws target populations that are particularly stigmatized due to the overlapping of their “peripheral sexualities” and their “foreign origin.”

But what possibilities for action and rights assertion exist for migrant women that, due to the stigmatized type of work they do and their irregular migration status, do not want to visibilize their presence and thereby become participating actors instead of state objects of protection? Furthermore, if the political concept that has served so many women to organize and fight for their rights, “sex work”/“sex worker”, is avoided or even rejected by migrant women like my informants, what other organizing frameworks can be used for action and rights affirmation? Labor rights and migrants’ rights could be broader frames to alert public attention to the conditions of discrimination and exploitation that numerous people, including migrant women in the sex sector, are confronted with in transnational contexts.

In theory, labor rights and migrants’ rights could more easily be claimed and achieved in a context of regional and sub-regional integration agreements, as in the case of the Andean sub-region of South America. Here, despite many inconsistencies and limitations, the integration agenda has incorporated migration issues, especially those regarding migrant labor. For example, the Andean Labor Migration Instrument, adopted in 2003 by the Community of Andean Nations, establishes provisions that will permit the movement and temporary residence of Andean nationals in the sub-region as wage workers. In practice, this sub-regional integration instrument has not actually been implemented due to a lack of political
will and the still limited importance given to labor migrations in the integration agenda. Further, authorities of Andean countries have not recognized that if adult sex work is tolerated and regulated in all Andean nations, the people engaged in this labor activity require the protection of their rights, both at national and regional levels, instead of exclusionary provisions guided by moral or public order concerns as is the case with the Andean Labor Migration Instrument. Exclusionary measures do not prevent migrant women from crossing borders and engaging in commercial sexual activities; on the contrary, exclusions and controls drive these women further underground and thus make them more vulnerable to abuses.

But in order to assert their rights as full citizens, migrants require an ample set of actions, one that is not limited to those connected to labor. In this way, the short-term and long-term actions that are required to change social injustices would serve the interests of different women, not only those that identify as “sex workers”, as Cabezas (2009) asserts. This author proposes to move to a “new wave” of human rights activism, one that comes from the “expansion of sexual rights.” Cabezas and other authors recognize that the concept of “sexual rights” is far from clear and needs further elaboration in human rights instruments and feminist circles. Yet these authors claim that a broader and more comprehensive approach to sexual rights is required, one that does not focus exclusively on a negative or “reactive” response to the oppression and violence suffered by sexual victims.

A more affirmative and emancipatory notion of sexual rights should be guided by a clearly defined set of ethical principles, such as those of sexual diversity (in relation to sexual identities and sexual practices), sexual decision-making autonomy, and gender equality, and it should be complemented by a range of enabling conditions that will transform abstract principles into lived reality (Petchesky 2000). That is to say, an affirmative notion of sexual rights’ requires structural changes that will transform the ways in which women and men are envisioned in society while guaranteeing equal access to information—on safer sex and the prevention of sexually transmitted infections, for example—, material
resources, and quality services. Within this notion, sexual rights are viewed as interdependent with economic, civil, cultural, and political rights.\textsuperscript{10}

If due to the reasons I already explained, some migrant women in the sex trade do not want to become visible and organize to attain rights and change the social injustices they are faced with, human rights NGOs working on issues of migration, women, and sexuality, as well as migrants and sex workers associations could include the demands, concerns, and needs of these migrant women in their agendas. But this would require certain conditions that are not always easy to meet. First of all: a genuine interest in approaching and getting to know the complex realities of migrant women engaged in commercial sexual activities, leaving aside moral approaches and other prejudices.

In Ecuador, non-governmental rights-oriented projects have been directed at either migrants or local sex workers; but virtually none of them have focused on migrant women in the sex industry.\textsuperscript{11} As discussed in chapter 3, one of the reasons for this is that some sex workers’ organizations consider migrant women in the sex trade as “competition” and “foreigners” with limited rights. Likewise, human rights NGOs working on migration issues as well as migrant and refugee associations have invisibilized the presence of and thus silenced Colombian and Peruvian women in the Ecuadorian sex trade. At best, this silencing is expressed in representations of this group of migrants as innocent and passive victims that must be rescued, guarded, and spoken for; at worst, it is expressed in the distancing from their “dishonest compatriots” in the sex trade practiced by some Colombian and Peruvian migrants’ organizations as a way to change Ecuadorians’ negative stereotypes about Colombian and Peruvian migrants and thus facilitate their integration in Ecuador. Both cases are part of what Miller (2004) calls the “operation of respectability in human rights work.” This operation, by which human rights advocates attempt to gain credibility and thus influence public agendas on sexuality, and I would add on migration, focuses on alarming but “respectable” topics. For example, human rights advocates might focus on the sexual exploitation of women and children while invisibilizing or distancing
themselves from other issues—less “moderate” and “respectable”—like the rights of women autonomously crossing borders and engaging in the sex trade. In doing so, Miller alerts, advocates are inadvertently using the terminology of human rights to reinforce (rather than reconsider) social and sexual hierarchies.

In sum, incorporating the complex issue of migrant women in commercial sexual activities in human rights work requires a critical and self-reflective position, one that starts by recognizing that human rights doctrine and practice is free from neither geopolitical interests (Cabezas 2009) nor power relations and subordinations based on nationality, class, gender, ethnicity, or sexuality. This position, in which we human rights activists reflect on our own prejudices, ideologies, limitations, and possibilities as we carefully and seriously plan and develop our work, is part of a respectful (rather than “respectable”) and relevant human rights work. Being respectful when engaging human rights work also means recognizing the voices, arguments, opinions, and needs of those whom we intend to empower and help attain social justice. This PhD dissertation has attempted to contribute to this by paying particular attention to the multiple voices, ambivalent accounts, concerns, and priorities of migrant women in commercial sex and other intimate-material relations.