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I Don't Sell My Body Anymore Because I Can Sell Drugs . . . . . 1



# I Don't Sell My Body Anymore Because I Can Sell Drugs

By Justine Illiria

An Albanian woman writes about her experience with prostitution and drug dealing in Greece (defending her choices all the way), setting up a grassroots support organisation, and about NGOs in Albania as agents for the interests of centralised elites. This was first published in the Harm Reduction Communication newsletter, Summer 2001, but is still relevant considering the increasing presence of EU/NATO military forces and NGOs in the area given Kosovo's imminent declaration of independence. It also offers a more candid perspective on immigrant sex work than the ongoing compassion campaigns about - and deportation of - the 'victims of sex trafficking'.

At the age of fourteen I was engaged to young man from a nearby village who had regular work in Greece, although he was undocumented. We married and I moved with him to Greece, where we worked on a farm and shared a little house with several other undocumented couples. Unfortunately my husband was severely injured in an accident. Being "illegals" we had no insurance or right to medical care. Friends took my husband back to Albania. His mother agreed to nurse him.

My wages were important to both our families, so I agreed to stay in Greece. After a short time, the woman I shared our little house with asked me to go out with her to Thessaloniki where she was a hostess in a bar. Her job was to get men to buy expensive drinks for her and themselves, and she would get a percentage from the sale. Sometimes she would go back to hotels with foreign businessmen and have sex with them for money.

I compared her income and mine, and I decided to try what she was doing. My husband's family was not poor, nor was I in any particular need. But if I was going to work I wanted to maximize my income. I started working as a hostess at sixteen. I had to get papers to show I was eighteen. (It seems sixteen year old people are old enough to marry and go in the army, but they're not old enough to have sex for money.)

Now I consider sex for money a lot like nursing: it helps people whose lives are incomplete for all sorts of reasons. It is not like sex for pleasure or love, it is a different type of sex. It's a bit like the sex you have when you would prefer to sleep but your boyfriend wants sex, or when you like someone but not enough to have sex, but you feel sorry for them so you let them have sex. Or you want something from someone and they want sex so you arrange an unspoken contract for the exchange. Sex for money is more honest and direct. It was hard work, but not as hard as the farm work, and it paid much better.

Some women I know find the sex work soul destroying, but they also believed that women were second class people and sex for money made them unworthy of being wives. I couldn't understand how eight minutes of sex, several times a day, should be the defining element of my spiritual identity.

My husband was recovering slowly. I would visit him every month and bring money home. I could only give our families such money as I could justify from farm work because I couldn't tell them I was selling sex. This was very frustrating, as I wanted to help both families. In this way I accepted that my sex work was stigmatized.

Eventually I resolved this problem by moving into “drugs”. In those days a lot of people in Southern Albania grew marijuana and exported it to Greece and Italy. Several of my clients used marijuana. They would assume that as an Albanian I would have a connection for marijuana.

I told my husband and family that I was taking marijuana from Albania to Greece for sale. Within a few weeks I was sending most of my sex work money home, supposedly as the proceeds from drug sales. This activity carried no stigma. Both families were able to buy more land, tractors, and my family rebuilt their house. My three younger sisters are now all in University and will not be married off in traditional marriages.

I continued in the “drug trade” for more than three years. After that time my husband died and I lost my motivation for life. I returned home and stayed with my parents for about a year.

Seven teenage women met to discuss their life options, and formed the Morava Foundation. In recent years I have been working with the Morava Foundation in Southern Albania, where we offer non-prejudicial advice to young women working in the sex work “drug trade”. Unfortunately some sex-working women become injecting drug users while working abroad. When they return to Albania where they are unable to practice safe injecting. We have tried to create services that include such women. Our discussions include issues of marriage as woman exchange, selling sex in foreign countries, and the role of education in the liberation of rural women. Our initiative has been totally grass roots. We did not learn about these things from foreign run workshops or Albanians who wear white coats and like to be called sir or madam!

Because we are a small agency in a rural area near the Greek border in southern Albania, we suffer a great deal of prejudice from the big NGOs based in Tirane (the capital). When we raise issues that affect our lives in the rural South, agencies and donors in the Capital deride us as unprofessional. In fact we have rejected the pseudo-professionalisation of Albanian civic society where elites gather control and power within unrepresentative organisations.

Donors need to look to the grass roots. The dependency of donors on an old Albanian intellectual elite creates a third sector in Albania that serves as a force for domination rather than a support for a diverse civic society. Foreign donors are paying for a travesty, imposing a third sector template upon Albania in the presumption that truly local initiatives are non-existent.

When foreign funding organisations pursue their agenda in my country, they should not just assess the need for “harm-reduction” among sex workers and drug-users, but also assess the impact of their money on the development of truly representative civic society in Albania. There is no reducing of harm to small local agencies when centralised elites overwhelm us or exclude us.

Sex and drugs were the best things that ever happened for me. I don’t trust the initiatives that foreigners are funding to “help” me and others. Foreigners are pimping the new elite organisations, who are whoring whatever issues their pimps demand. The sex and drug trade is more ethical and straightforward. I would rather prostitute myself in a Thessaloniki bar than in a pseudo-NGO in Tirane anytime.