

## Contested definitions of diversity and violence: Chinese migrant sex workers' mobilization in Paris

Hélène Le Bail, CNRS-Sciences-Po CERI, Institut Convergences Migrations

### Abstract

During the two years of parliamentary debates on a new law on prostitution that France adopted in 2016, a number of sex workers' rights groups opposed to the criminalization of clients and organized their advocacy. Among them, a Chinese migrant sex workers collective The Steel Roses (Les Roses d'Acier), attracted attention. Since 2013, hundreds of Chinese migrants selling sexual services in Paris have been the target of systematic control operations by the police, whose clear objective was to "sweep" prostitution out of neighbourhoods. In reaction to these measures, a group of Chinese women asked the local government to better prevent violence against sex workers, rather than fight sex workers themselves. By doing so, they tried to embody political agency, and asked for the local government to include them as part of the "local diversity" and as legitimate city users. One of their key initiatives was to sweep the streets in order to engage in dialogue with their neighbour.

In a context of local gentrification, where diversity is presented as an important characteristic of multicultural neighborhoods, such a mobilization by migrant sex workers underlines the ongoing controversy around the definition of diversity, as well as controversy in terms of who is legitimate to embody urban imaging. The controversy launched by the Chinese sex workers in some districts of Paris is a case study of the ways political power relations contribute to the definition of who belongs to a city defined in terms of cosmopolitanism (Yong, Diep and Drabble 2006). This case study discusses the (hardly visible) contribution of migrant women in the discourse of cosmopolitan policies through the contested definitions of diversity, on the one hand, and of gender violence, safety and autonomy, on the other hand. It argues that the hegemonic definition of gender violence and the conflation of prostitution and exploitation contribute to the silencing and the exclusion of migrant women sex workers.

### Biography

Hélène Le Bail is a visiting Global Exchange Fellow at CERC Migration. She is a researcher at CNRS and Sciences Po Paris – CERI (Centre de recherches internationales) and a fellow of the Institut Convergences Migrations. She holds a PhD in political science from Sciences Po Paris

and a master's degree in Chinese studies from Inalco (National Institute for Eastern Languages and Cultures). She spent many years in Japan where she has been a research fellow for the French research center on contemporary Japan (Nichifutsu kaikan) in Tokyo and an invited researcher at Kobe University.

Hélène's research relates to Asian migrations (to Japan and France) and migration policies in a comparative approach. Special focus is made on female routes of migration (marriage, reproductive labour, sex work) and on collective actions and political participation. She is currently the principal investigator for the research project PolAsie (Political Participation of Asian Migrants and their Descendants in France) funded by the French Ministry of Research; co-investigator for the Japanese JSPS project *Rethinking the Nexus Migration and Sex Work Trafficking*, and co-investigator for the Colombia/Alliance joint project *Anti-Asian Hate Compared: Origins, Patterns, and Responses in the US and France*.