



Paying the Price for Sexual Gratification

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Would I be right in assuming the glaring red lights of Amsterdam's legalised prostitution district would appear in one's mind when mentioning the phrase 'sex tourism'? Paying for intimacy and pleasure may seem a bewildering concept for some. Conversely, the iconic destination which is filled with exotic museums, massage parlours and sex shops, attracts 200,000 visitors each year, all travelling with the intention of purchasing a sexual service (Amsterdam.org, 2018).

This piece highlights how sex tourism is dependent upon globalisation for facilitating movement within people. Without migration, the sex industry would be limited as individuals from developing countries seek employment within prostitution. Women situated in highly indebted countries have limited access to jobs and therefore sex work is an economic survival option. This work considers how sex traffickers make money off the back of vulnerable women through the commodification of the body (Sassen, 2003). It is recognised that the tourist gaze shadows the harsh reality of sex work and the coercion of women (Urry & Larsen, 2011). Throughout this reflection I will critique how



organised crime has made abused and oppressed women a crucial part of the global economy. The bodies of poor women are now a key commodity, which generates billions.

As we delve into the workings of the sex tourism industry it is important to recognise this piece is not in complete opposition. The entertainment sector is praised for boosting the economies of indebted countries and empowering deprived women with a source of income (Sassen, 2003).

In our post-modern era, we experience a notion of space and time compression. Global infrastructures have emerged, facilitating the rapid flow of travellers. We witness "movement of bodies across borders, as the poor migrate in search of work or safety, and the rich travel the globe as tourists" (Wonders & Michalowski, 2001: 545). Although the expansion of a global infrastructure has enabled tourism and migration, it has adversely created the possibility for illegal enterprises to flourish. Sassen (2003: 24) agrees "key globalized industries are also making it possible for other

types of actors to deploy their activities at global scales, whether money laundering or trafficking”.

At the centre of globalisation is global capitalism, which requires constant growth and the accumulation of profit (Wallerstein, 1990). Nancy Wonders and Raymond Michalowski state “globalised capitalism demands the continual development of new commodity forms” (2001: 545). In response, the female body has become a global commodified object, intended for patriarchal consumption. The growth of sex tourism is facilitated by increasing demand from wealthy western men, who seek for pleasure in the exotic. Wonders and Michalowski (2001: 550) agree,

“for advantaged men in the developed world, sex tourism provides an opportunity, not only to experience fantasized sexual freedom with uninhibited women, but (...) to perform male supremacy”.



In the city of Amsterdam, the window displays the market’s goods. With over 400 windows, the workers are required to parade their bodies, with the intention of attracting customers (Amsterdam.org, 2018). Men have the opportunity to ‘shop’ between arrays of blonde, brunette, slim and curvy women. Ryan and Hall (2005: 2) state that “sex work is about the commodification of female sexuality” and by reducing women to a market price, sex tourism is objectifying and dehumanising women. However, critics have been keen to

highlight limitations of the patriarchal concept, as we recognise a growing presence of male sex workers and female sex tourists (Wonders & Michalowski, 2001). This is evident in Matthew’s (1978, quoted in Hall & Ryan, 2005: 8) study as he reports, “Barbados has a well-developed industry of male prostitution (...) which thrive[s] on the alleged desire of white female tourists having sex with black males”.

The production of sex tourism is hidden behind the socially constructed sex tourist gaze. Professional experts in the travel industry preconfigure people’s perception of a location through literature, images and videos (Urry & Larsen, 2011). For instance, Amsterdam’s tolerance towards activities which other countries tend to criminalise, is thought of as an exhilarating place to explore. The city “is based on a youth culture of sexual liberation and narcotic indulgence” (Wonders & Michalowski, 2001: 554). The streets seemingly offer a clean and secure environment, filled with intense pleasure. However, many of the smiles painted on the sex workers face, are a façade.

The reality of sex tourism takes a more sinister approach, consisting of forced prostitution, child labour and sex trafficking. Global migration has played an instrumental role in maintaining the survival of the sex tourism industry. Women situated in deprived areas, may opt into prostitution as a way of improving their economic position (Sassen, 2003). In Amsterdam during 1995, “75% of all prostitutes behind windows in the Red Light

District were foreigners and that 80 percent of all foreign prostitutes were in the country illegally” (Bruinsma & Meer-Shoek, 1999, quoted in Wonders & Michalowski, 2001: 555).

The presence of illegal sex workers ascends through organised crime.

Sex traffickers use the pre-existing material infrastructures for the transmission of vulnerable women across the globe. Like all capitalist ventures, the primary goal for sex traffickers is the accumulation of profit. In 1998, 4 million people were trafficked as a source of cheap labour, “producing a



profit of \$7 billion for criminal groups” (Sassen, 2003: 17). Many of the women face inhumane conditions, ranging from abuse and exploitation to rape. With little opportunity to resist, sex trafficking is described as a form of modern slavery. The women are “expected to service on average 15 clients a day” (Sassen, 2003: 17). The pay is little and often withheld. There is an extreme violation of human rights as the women are prevented from using protection against AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections (Sassen, 2003).

In the sex tourism industry, many women suffer patriarchal exploitation under the ownership of pimps. Herman (1995, quoted in Wonders & Michalowski, 2001: 549) refers to sex tourism as “one of the booming markets in the new world, with finders, brokers, syndicate operations and pimp managers at the scene of action”. Furthermore, the use of children in sex tourism is on the increase, it is “estimated that there are over two million children

working as child prostitutes in sex tourism circles” (Vrancken & Chetty, 2009: 112). Therefore, global capitalism accumulates profits from the oppression of vulnerable women and children, who are trafficked for their sexual labour. According to The

Economist (1998, quoted in Wonders & Michalowski, 2001: 549) the global sex industry is worth “at least \$20 billion a year and probably many times that”.

Despite the reservations one may have regarding sex tourism and trafficking, mutual beneficiaries can still be identified. Heavily indebted countries facing high rates of poverty and unemployment, benefit from the enhancement of revenue. Echoing this perspective, Enloe et al (1989, cited in Wonders & Michalowski, 2001: 551) claim “sex tourism has become a significant market fostering national economic development and international capital accumulation”. The industry provides surplus value for many, as visitors seek the use of accommodation, travel facilities and restaurants (Hall & Ryan, 2005). Women partaking in prostitution benefit from a regular supply of income. This enables remittance to be sent back home, in support of their family’s survival. It also allows women to gain a greater personal autonomy and sense of independence (Sassen, 2003).

To conclude, all concepts incorporated into this piece have critically assessed the sex

tourism industry. We have identified how the commodification of the female body is accustomed to patriarchal desires and how oppressed women are central to our capitalist economy. It has been established that sex tourism has contributed to the sexual exploitation of both women and minors, as they are forced to endure inhumane conditions. Unfortunately, sex tourism will continue to occur as it produces billions for the economy. However, the price for sexual gratification is much more than monetary value.

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