Chapter 20

Privileges and Problems of Female Sex Tourism: Exploring Intersections of Culture, Commodification, and Consumption of Foreign Romance

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides an exploration of female sex tourism, or romance tourism, a global consumer phenomenon that has evolved over several decades. Amidst forward strides in their social and economic empowerment, many women in advanced countries still experience marginalizing constraints to their freedom, mobility, and expression in many aspects of life. Yet, scholarly research and anecdotal evidence suggest that some women have utilized sex tourism as a means to escape such domestic constraints and find entrée to myriad social and cultural privileges at certain destinations abroad. Moving beyond tenured, clichéd stereotypes that typically associate sex tourism with male consumers, this chapter brings to light the rationale, justifications, criticisms, and cultural issues pervading this institution. Despite its liberating potential for women, female sex tourism does, at least somewhat, rely upon and reinforce historically entrenched national and cultural demarcations that tend to marginalize the people (partners, families, communities) of targeted destinations in the developing world.

I know you don’t know but that’s why you came here. So stop pretending you just came here just to get a nice tan. I mean, think of those cute boys. They are a dime a dozen. Take your pick. [...] If you are too shy to pay them, just give them gifts. – Ellen, Heading South (2005, directed by Laurent Cantet)

... there’s a denial of the power that money brings to the relationship that creates a culture of dependency and exploitation. – Chris Beddoe, Director, ECPAT UK

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INTRODUCTION

Thinking globally and acting locally represents a common paradigm for people to understand the terms of survival and prosperity in our dynamically integrating world community. For some people, signs of globalization are knotted with the multinational corporate investments, currency exchanges, and value-added supply chain networks that define today’s most advanced formal economies. However, evidence of globalization (and its precursor internationalization) has been inconspicuously evident for many decades in the form of sex tourism, one of the world’s most conspicuous systems involving transactions between people for people. Overwhelmingly, such systems have flourished without pause, tying together haves and have-nots, respectively coming from once-colonizing nations and once-colonized nations. In the case of female sex tourism, exchange partners – foreign buyers and local sellers – find one another by the gravity of potential relationships that offer access, opportunity, and mobility not necessarily possible within the confines of their respective home communities. Jacobs (2009) offers an interesting description of the female sex tourist in one study: “They are travelling independently of their families, taking a highly visible place in a culturally male public space, being the major wage-earner in a relationship and selecting and proposing to a partner who might be significantly younger than them” (p. 54).

Indeed, evidence of globalization can be observed in the informal, but established exchanges and economies of sex tourism. Whether in times of world peace or conflict, prosperity or recession, the “market” in sex tourism has seldom, if ever, relented. One significant feature of the globalization process is cultural influence. Regarding such influence, Appadurai (1996) notes that communities affect and are affected by myriad influences, which can be understood in the form of “scapes” — **ethnoscapes** (e.g., movement people across borders), **financescapes** (e.g., money, currency), **technoscapes** (e.g., internet, transportation), **mediascapes** (e.g., information dissemination, constructions of one’s imagined world), and **ideoscapes** (e.g., lifestyle, worldview) — that enable and affect interactions and influences between people across geographies. Indeed, female sex tourism exhibits aspects of these scapes:

- international travelers and local romantic partners (ethnoscapes);
- exchange of money or gifts for sexual experiences (financescapes);
- internet sites for recommending destination hotspots (technoscapes/mediascapes); and
- female sex tourists “recourse to perhaps their most important ‘masculine’ privilege – their mobility” (Jacobs, 2009) (ideoscapes)

Sex tourism is a significant global, cultural phenomenon. Historically, the majority of sex tourists have been males from the United States, Europe, and Australia; and, there also have been significant flows of sex tourists within Asia. Given its exchange oriented nature and transaction style features, sex tourism occasionally has been linked to prostitution (Enloe, 1989), where a buyer provides some form of consideration (e.g., money, gifts, meals) to an anonymous seller (e.g., prostitute, gigolo, companion) with the anticipation of a sexual experience or romantic companionship free of personal commitments (Karch, 1981).

While the study of male sex tourism has received the overwhelming majority of scholarly and media attention (Jacobs, 2009), female sex tourism has gone largely understudied and underreported as a phenomenon that taps the global intersections of culture, commodification, and consumption. Much of the scholarly research conducted on the subject has dealt with “ethno-sexual relationships” (Nagel, 2003), focusing on Western tourist women who favor destinations in the Caribbean, Central America, and Africa.