Transnational prostitution

CHANGING GLOBAL PATTERNS

EDITED BY

Susanne Thorbek & Bandana Pattanaik

TRANSNATIONAL PROSTITUTION

Changing Patterns in a Global Context

EDITED BY SUSANNE THORBEK AND BANDANA PATTANAIK



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Prostitution in a Global Context: Changing Patterns

SUSANNE THORBEK

§ Prostitution across borders has increased in the last twenty to thirty years. More and more men go abroad as tourists or to military or UN camps (Enloe 1989) and many of them buy sexual satisfaction from local women. In the last twenty years the number of women who migrate to richer countries from poorer and work in prostitution has also grown (see chapters by Ruenkaew and Lisborg).

The differences in the circumstances of migrant prostitutes are vast. Some may have been cheated or forced into the trade; others have chosen it voluntarily, knowing what the work entails; and some have had experience of prostitution both at home and abroad before travelling to Europe (Ruenkaew). There are differences in 'legal status': some have citizenship, others not. Some are married to a fake husband who is often well paid for his hire. Others are illegal migrants. The type of employment and the existence of women's networks are important elements in the amount of autonomy an individual woman has. Income levels and the degree to which women are exploited vary so much that some women barely survive while others earn double the minimum wage (Lisborg).

All this means that living conditions and prospects for the future also vary considerably. This makes it difficult to generalize from case studies, but case studies do show that other generalizations are doubtful: for example, the habitual naming of sex-workers of foreign origin as sex-slaves, debt-slaves or trafficked women is inaccurate. Case studies can also show differences and nuances much better than most other methods of study. They indicate the complexity involved in the choices the women make (Ruenkaew, Mix). In this volume the case studies were

undertaken either by researchers or staff in NGOs who work with prostitutes. Some of them utilize the statistics of their NGOs and in this way give a more general picture (Meaker, Ruenkaew). So, with careful consideration of the context, it is possible to generalize and to raise new issues.

Many of the studies in this anthology concern Thai women in prostitution, and the reader may well be tempted to make the generalization that Thailand has more prostitution than other countries. Vanaspong argues in her chapter that this is not the case and demonstrates how media handling of the theme has created such an impression. Lim (1998) has shown that prostitution is widespread in four Southeast Asian countries, and is little influenced by either its legal status or by religion. Lim, however, was concerned with prostitution for the home market and in this area Thailand is in no way exceptional; but it is probably the country which has the greatest tourist-related prostitution involving straight men. At the same time, Thailand is the focus of better and more research than other countries, housing as it does a well-known international organization that works with trafficking (GAATW).

MEN IN PROSTITUTION: THE CUSTOMER

Men as customers in prostitution have historically been ignored both in public debates and in legislation. In recent years, however, several studies have been undertaken. The two studies of men in prostitution in this anthology explore mainly tourist-related prostitution in Thailand (Bishop and Robinson, Thorbek). Both argue that the men combine old notions on race, class and gender with very modern (postmodern?) conditions of life and personalities. It can be argued that the image of the tourist is an idiom of postmodernism (Bauman 1996), and that the sex tourist in this sense becomes an image of postmodern man (Thorbek). Bishop and Robinson analyse men's travel reports on the Internet and show how these men are alienated from their own sexuality but also from society in general through their obsession with the Internet.

The increase in the male demand for paid sex is logical in the sense that 'privileges' which were formerly restricted by class, race and gender are now available to everybody; there is no need to be rich to exploit women in very poor countries.

The customers and their relationships with prostitutes come in many

forms. Much has been written about the so-called 'open-ended' relationships at some prostitution resorts, for instance in Thailand. O'Connell Davidson (1998) pointed out the inbuilt contradiction in the trade in sex: many men search for something more than a fuck — maybe male bonding and respect or maybe some sort of feeling of being alive in the meeting with another human being. In a clear-cut business relationship around sex neither of these aims is achieved.

Male customers are numerous and they may be served by male and female prostitutes, and children. Male prostitutes who serve female customers exist in some tourist resorts. The 'open-ended' relationship is characteristic of the latter in Barbados as well, Phillips argues here. She shows also how the male prostitutes see themselves as entrepreneurs. They create themselves in the image of the white world, fulfilling their female customers' fantasies with their hairstyles, their young, well-trimmed bodies, virility and sex-drive as well as their lack of inhibitions.

Even if the women who buy their services and give them gifts exploit their poverty as men do with female prostitutes in other circumstances, the relationships between them seem to be based on 'normal', maybe now old-fashioned, gender relations. The male prostitutes choose their customers carefully, they flatter and entertain them, take them on boat trips, teach them to enjoy seaside sports, and so on. And their motives are those of an entrepreneur: to earn money, to invest and to take risks.

Many female prostitutes can also be seen as entrepreneurs. Spanger shows how some black female prostitutes have marketing strategies similar to those of the Barbados 'beach boys'. They re-create their image in terms of European/American clichés about black women's sexuality: their sex-drive, loose morals and lack of inhibitions.

Migrant women who work as prostitutes can in many cases also be seen as entrepreneurs in an economic sense: they take risks and invest in order to earn good money. They are not just victims.

MIGRANT WOMEN IN PROSTITUTION

The case studies in this book show that migrant women in prostitution are not only able to make money, at least after a period of time, but are also able to create a life under new circumstances.

A case study in which the life histories of prostitutes are used as material shows that the migrant women are, on average, twenty-eight years old when they arrive, although they may have entered prostitution when they were much younger. Many are mothers and the education of their children is a strong motive for taking the risk of going abroad (Ruenkaew). The ways in which they structure their lives in the new country differ. Some compartmentalize their lives and keep their work a secret even from their closest family (Spanger). Some live in a recreated Thai group with Thai food, videos, friends and gambling (Mix, Lisborg); others become part of the local community, where one exists.

The most obvious dividing line between prostitutes separates those who are free and able to take new citizenship and those who work to pay off their debts. In Brisbane, Australia, the debt contract workers had to service between 400 and 700 men to get free (Meaker); in the German study they had to work for periods of between six months and four years to pay off their debts. Their legal status has far-reaching consequences, especially when it comes to violence, for it has a bearing on whether or not women are willing to call the police. In an illegal massage parlour in Denmark, knives were hidden under the bed and at the door.

In studies of diasporas, migrant women who work as prostitutes are seldom if ever included. This anthology shows that they keep in contact with family, friends and kin both in their country of origin and in other countries. They are part of a chain migration (Lisborg), using telephones, money remittances, and travel to maintain contacts (Spanger, Lisborg) and they are part of the creation of transnational social space.

TRAFFICKING AND MIGRATION

Trafficking has been defined in several ways; here, though, it seems logical to reserve the term for a situation in which a person is lured, cheated or forced into travelling to another country and to work there. Case studies in this anthology show that many women who decide to go abroad already know the risks. Only in one case was a woman lured into the business. She managed to escape (Lisborg). Trafficking does exist but there is less of it than the police, politicians, some feminist organizations and the media assume.

In the public debate at present, all women who work as prostitutes abroad are considered to be victims of trafficking, but this perception

is wrong. In fact, it is very difficult to distinguish between who is trafficked and who is not. A woman may decide to go abroad, knowing she will work as a prostitute, and then find the conditions under which she has to work and the payment of the debt and the interest rates charged unacceptable; in this sense she may be considered a victim of trafficking. Another woman may be lured or cheated into the trade but decide that, in the circumstances, her best option is to go on. Has she been trafficked if she does not want to be liberated?

Those people who organize travel, papers and jobs may charge very high prices. It is not only women who go in order to work as prostitutes who pay dearly. Workers from Asia who go to the Middle East to work as domestics or labourers certainly pay dearly too. As do refugees, as an old Danish example from the Second World War shows. When the Jews in Denmark were fleeing to Sweden, the Danish fishermen who sailed them across Øresund charged 1,500 kroner per person on the days when demand was highest, but less before and after (Mogensen 2001). These fishermen are today seen as heroes by both Jews and Danes.

Prices charged by smugglers or traffickers today also depend on demand and on the difficulties and dangers they anticipate. Traffickers and smugglers are seen by prostitutes, for instance, as both exploitative and as helpers (like travel agents, only rather more expensive).

It is common in the rich world today to define anyone who arranges for a prostitute to travel to work in a richer country as a trafficker, regardless of whether the prostitute has chosen to travel herself or has been forced or lured into the situation. If she is found by the police, the woman is often sent home immediately; the traffickers are prosecuted where possible but receive relatively mild sentences. In several countries the police are reluctant to use prostitutes as witnesses.

The hypocrisy of the public debate becomes very clear at this point. If the prostitutes who pay high prices to come to Europe (or Australia, Canada, USA) were seen as victims, we might expect that they should receive compensation and help. But the policy in the West is to send them home at a day's notice, to the same situation they had left behind, but now often in debt to the trafficker as well. And since few creditors take their losses without any action, many may choose or be forced to leave again, this time in a more clandestine, more vulnerable and probably more expensive way.

The whole policy is argued in terms of the human rights of the

prostitutes by the media, the police, by politicians in some countries and by several feminist and humanitarian organizations. If these people and institutions were concerned about the women's plight, they would find many good ideas proposed by NGOs, among them SQWISI (Meaker), as well as in a draft for a reform by the EU Commission (1995) where it is proposed that prostitutes who are willing to be witnesses or to bring a case should be allowed to stay in the country until the trial is finished. They should have medical and legal support during this period. Police and staff in the juridical system should be trained to understand the conditions and the lives of prostitutes.

It seems that what is of concern in public policies today is the question of immigration, not the human rights of prostitutes.

POLICIES ON PROSTITUTION

From a feminist perspective, it is important to see prostitution in its social, economic and political context, and equally important to consider the power relations involved.

There is little doubt about the influence of economic and social conditions on prostitution. The main motive of women who choose prostitution is poverty, the desire to attain those goods – among them education and medical services – that others take for granted in a modern society. Global inequalities and the exploitation of poor nations are of course of paramount importance in the spread of transnational prostitution (Kempadoo and Doezema 1998). Personal factors may play a role, too, in particular family crises, including violence.

Julia O'Connell Davidson (1998) argues that women who work as prostitutes are involved in three sets of power relationships: with the customer, with 'third parties', such as owners of brothels, massage parlours, bars and nightclubs, escort agencies and so on, with society at large, most directly with the courts and the police. These three power relations influence each other: the law and the police's implementation of it places limits on the actions of 'third parties', and prostitutes' relations with their customers are influenced by both the others.

In the debate on prostitution today, there are two different lines of thought. The first is put forward by the abolitionists who want to get rid of prostitution. They argue that relations with the customers are by nature demeaning and harmful for the prostitute, as are relations with

the 'third parties'. They seldom argue for broader economic and social reforms but campaign for more legislation against prostitution. In some cases (as in Denmark) it is not criminal to sell sexual satisfaction but it is criminal to pay a 'third party' for it. In practice this means that Danish-born prostitutes, who are not supposed to pay 'third parties', can work legally, especially indoors, but women who arrive from other countries cannot, since they must pay for travel, for a 'hired' husband and to be part of a massage parlour or brothel.

The other line of thought argues that the main problems for prostitutes are related to legislation and police harassment, and that the solution is to legalize prostitution, including payment to brothel owners and the like. According to this thinking, sex-work will then be considered similar to other kinds of work and women will be able to form trade unions, will be taxed and have access to social security, pensions and the like. This argument is concerned with adult women who choose to go into prostitution.

Noulmook Sutdhibhasilp shows in detail in her chapter how both legislation and implementation on in-migration and prostitution make the lives of migrant prostitutes (and poor women) very difficult in Canada, and how strong discrimination against them is.

An implicit argument in favour of the second line of thinking can be found in the newly implemented laws on prostitution in Holland, with legalized brothels, with strict rules about hygiene and condom use, and the allocation of sites for street prostitutes outside the cities. However, Dorninck states that the law will still not legalize the work of migrant prostitutes or of prostitutes who work in less capital-intensive brothels. So the probable result will be a division in prostitution, with one section of workers legalized and another still operating in a black market. The outcome of this reform for the legal prostitutes will also depend very much on an individual's ability to organize.

The new Swedish law that prohibits men from buying sex but allows women to sell it is analysed in the chapter by Gould. He shows in detail how the idea of a gender equal society and the presence of feminists both in public services and in organizations has contributed to the new law. He argues, too, that fear of the immigration of women who work as prostitutes has been the chief driving force. Previously, prostitution had been dealt with mainly in relation to policies on equality, unemployment, social services and so on, and this was in fact very successful.

In the concluding chapter questions of feminist methodology are taken up and Pattanaik discusses several of the concepts which are central to the debate.

CONCLUSION

The problematic of prostitution is full of political overtones. The word prostitute, or for that matter sex-worker, is not acceptable to most women who work in the sex trade. Their devaluation and stigmatization are strongly felt and many probably share society's opinion of their work. They see their identities as separate from their work, refusing to accept the generalizations implied in the term 'sex-work' (Spanger).

The life of a prostitute is harsh and beset by many problems of different kinds. It is a telling comment on the current global, as well as national, economic and social situation that women choose this work as the least unacceptable in a series of unattractive choices. In this sense the in-migration of women from poor countries who work as prostitutes is the new globalization that strikes back at the West.

Legalizing prostitution, making it a business like any other, is problematic too. So far the market has not solved questions of inequality, or for that matter conditions of work or even slavery (in its new forms). The legalization of pornography has resulted in an explosion in this trade, a proliferation of pictures that demean women and teach youngsters and adults a rather absurd sort of sexuality. The legalization of prostitution may very well have similar results.

The best solution might be to concentrate on finding the real traffickers — those who coerce children and women into the business and keep them there by force. Simultaneously, a more lenient policy could be formulated (keeping one eye closed, as a Danish policeman described it) to deal with more 'normal' prostitution. And support would be available from NGOs or GOs without registration for women seeking help for medical, juridical, social and other problems.

These two forms of policies may very well turn out to be complementary. Support groups and the lack of police persecution and public stigmatization may contribute to the creation of trust between prostitutes and specific people and society at large, including the juridical system and the police. Some degree of trust is vital if women who work as prostitutes are going to bring charges against traffickers.