



Introduction to Special Issue Sexual Commerce and the Global Flow of Bodies, Desires, and Social Policies

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In anticipation of the 2006 World Cup games in Munich, a broad international coalition of feminist and faith-based activists joined together to protest Germany's world-renowned system of legalized prostitution. Although Germany's system of licensed, regulated, and taxed prostitution has been regarded by some commentators as a progressive exemplar of sex workers' rights, a diverse spectrum of antiprostitution activists were able to ignite a fervor regarding an anticipated epidemic of sex trafficking on the occasion of the World Cup, recasting the German state's embrace of prostitution as a human rights catastrophe and rallying cause. In the antiprostitution activists' analysis, human trafficking had little to do with the vast economic inequalities that propel individuals of all genders to migrate west and north under hazardous conditions, but was instead a manifestation of unchecked male desires run rampant—desires that, like Germany's prostitution system itself, were badly in need of reform (see, for example, Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, 2006; Lopez, 2006; "Sex Isn't a Spectator Sport," 2006).

Though much was initially made by activists, international officials, and the press of the estimated 40,000 women who would be trafficked into Germany to service the sexual needs of the sports fans attending the World Cup games,¹ after the event was held, the International Organization on Migration (IOM) concluded that there

1 Even MTV participated in fanning the flames of panic, producing a well-circulated advertisement warning viewers about the dangers for women and children that the World Cup nexus of sports and sex presented (see http://comps.mtv.co.uk/comps/streaker/site.jhtml?country_id=uk).

was no evidence whatsoever that any influx of trafficking in women had occurred.² The 48-page IOM report on prostitution during the games identified only five women who had been trafficked into Germany and concluded that the dire predictions of concerned activists had been, in fact, "unfounded and unrealistic" (International Organization on Migration, 2007, p. 5). In response to the report, many prominent antiprostitution activists claimed that it was their very efforts that had prevented worse atrocities from occurring, vowing to keep up a concerted fight against male sexual demand and sex trafficking, both in Germany and the world beyond (see, for example, Crouse, 2007; Westen, 2006).³

As the articles compiled for this special issue demonstrate, the World Cup games in Munich constitute but one example of how the globalization of sexual commerce entails a rapid circulation of bodies and desires—not merely those of potential sex workers and their customers but also, and perhaps most especially, those of other interested parties, including feminist and religious activists, members of a burgeoning transnational nongovernmental organization (NGO) sector, and local and state-level policymakers. Describing contexts ranging from Europe to South Korea, from India and the Caribbean to the

2 Nor, according to interviews with brothel workers, was there any increase in prostitution activity overall, because those in attendance at the games overwhelmingly opted for recreational drinking instead of paid sex (Associated Press, 2007; Landler, 2006).

3 Others not only vowed to extend the battlefield but also questioned the International Organization on Migration's findings (see, for example, Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, 2006).

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United States, the articles assembled in this special issue convey diverse facets of what some commentators have termed a *moral panic* emerging in response to the linked phenomena of sex, money, and migration (Brennan, 2008; Cheng, 2008; Soderlund, 2008; also see Kempadoo, 2005; Weitzer, 2007). Taken together, the work of the authors in this issue of *Sexuality Research & Social Policy* describes the profound social anxieties that emerge when sexuality and commerce are intermingled, as well as the flawed social policies that can result from displaced concerns about proper gender roles, the dividing line between childhood and adulthood, and the permeability of the boundary between the First and Third Worlds.

Viewed globally, the issue that is most frequently situated at the intersection of such concerns is that of human trafficking for prostitution—or what is often more ominously termed *sex trafficking* or *modern slavery*. Media accounts have rehearsed similar stories of the abduction, transport, and forced sexual labor of women and girls from the global south, whose desperation and poverty render them amenable to easy victimization in First World and Third World cities. Meanwhile, a remarkably diverse array of social activists and policymakers—abolitionist⁴ feminists, evangelical Christians, and both conservative and liberal government officials—have put forth a bevy of legislation at local, national, and transnational levels. Despite their divergent opinions about ideals of sex and gender, they have come together to advocate for harsher criminal and economic penalties against traffickers, prostitutes' customers, and nations deemed to be taking insufficient steps to stem the flow of trafficked women.⁵

Although the authors contributing to this special issue draw on empirical research from many different points around the globe, making apparent the transnational trends that produce similar patterns in diverse geographic and political contexts, the outsized influence of the United States (and, to a lesser extent, Europe) on the global stage remains unmistakable. Cheng (2008), Shah (2008), and Brennan (2008) all highlight the significance of the U.S. government's landmark Trafficking Victims

Protection Act of 2000 and its successive reauthorizations in 2003 and 2005, which have powerfully affected local policies pertaining to both human trafficking and prostitution, and which have facilitated definitional slippages between the two terms. As Svati Shah argues in her essay, the U.S. government's use of anti-trafficking efforts to address concerns with border control has provided a model that has been vigorously exported to countries such as India. Meanwhile, in her description of recent policy developments within the United States, Denise Brennan shows how anti-trafficking policies that initially were guided by broader foreign policy agendas have since come full circle, boomeranging back into a tight national focus on domestic prostitution. As she notes, in the political foray from prostitution to trafficking and back again, "[s]aving U.S. young people who are involved in prostitution becomes a local enactment of global policies to end prostitution around the world" (p. 52).

Several of the articles in this special issue highlight the common reductionisms that take place when the broad and complex realities of sexual commerce are encoded into political agendas aimed at controlling prostitution and trafficking. These oversimplifications include, first, a reduction of all forms of sexual commerce to prostitution—with such phenomena as strip clubs, peep shows, and more informal modes of erotic commerce often disappearing from view—as Laura Agustín (2008) sharply argues. A second reductionism collapses all of human trafficking, as well as the exploited labor of migrants more generally, into the modern slavery of forced prostitution.⁶ In Denise Brennan's succinct words, "it is all about sex" (p. 49). The authors assembled here demonstrate just how much is lost through such elisions, with Brennan, for example, noting how abuses in other labor sectors have been largely ignored because of the obsessive focus on sex that characterizes current policy.

The contributions to this special issue also illustrate the ways in which a retrograde gallery of conventionally gendered perpetrators and victims can be mobilized in the service of a broader (and generally conservative) political agenda. Cheng, Shah, Brennan, and Agustín all call

⁴ The term *abolitionism* originated to describe the late-nineteenth-century feminist movement to eliminate prostitution (which, like the present movement, was international in scope). Here, I use the word *abolitionist* to designate the position that prostitution constitutes a social harm that states should extinguish.

⁵ See, for example, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (2000); the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (United Nations, 2000).

⁶ See, for example, Agustín (2008), Brennan (2008), Cheng (2008), and Shah (2008). Both the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons (2000) and the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (2000) officially define human trafficking to include forced labor as well as forced prostitution. At the time of this writing, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act is up for reauthorization by U.S. Congress, which is considering removal of the force requirement for commercial sexual transactions and thus the federalization of U.S. prostitution law.

attention to the images of women as powerless and innocent that are nearly ubiquitous in the media's accounts of sex trafficking, in most activist discourse, and in the laws and social policies that these both help to create. As numerous postcolonial feminists (e.g., Kapur, 2005; Kempadoo, 2005) have pointed out, such images have historically played a crucial role in the political silencing of Third World women and are often effective devices for drawing attention away from underlying structural issues—such as precisely why so many women might choose to migrate, or to engage in sexual labor, in the first place (see Shah, 2008). Thus, the image of the innocent female sex trafficking victim at once serves a dual function: the preservation (or reinstatement) of a particular gendered social order and the bolstering of existing political-economic relations.

Men and boys are also depicted in particular, conventionalized ways in the media, in activist accounts, and in the policy approaches that circulate globally. For example, the aforementioned campaign against the World Cup and German legalized prostitution marked the culmination of a 2-decade effort spearheaded by abolitionist feminists in the United States and Europe to link prostitution, trafficking, and male sexual demand, an ambition that the state apparatus increasingly has embraced (Leidholdt, 2005). By the early 2000s, a broad-based and increasingly international coalition of feminist activists had identified men's unfettered demand for sexual services as the principal engine behind the traffic in women, culminating in the criminalization of sexual clients in Sweden and South Korea, the foregrounding of demand at the Beijing +10 meetings of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, the criminalization of prostitute use by the U.S. military, and the incorporation of a program to reduce demand for commercial sex acts as a core element of the U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2005 (Bernstein, 2007). Within the United States, feminist antiprostitution NGOs such as the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, SAGE (Standing Against Global Exploitation), and Apne Aap Women Worldwide have received U.S. Department of State funds to implement programs designed to reduce demand for prostitution in countries across the globe, including Mexico, South Korea, and India (U.S. Department of State, 2005, 2006).

The articles by Cheng, Padilla and Castellanos (2008), and Soderlund (2008) in this special issue all seek to disrupt some of the commonplace assumptions about male sexuality that undergird popular accounts of sexual commerce and human trafficking. Whereas Cheng challenges the stereotypical depictions of the raucous and ravenous GIs in South Korea who frequent erotic hostess

clubs, Mark Padilla and Daniel Castellanos confront the opposite stereotype: the purported crisis in Caribbean masculinity that has emerged in the wake of the economic devastations of neoliberalism. Instead, Padilla and Castellanos seek to shift the prevailing frame to that of local gendered responses to neoliberalism among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) populations, particularly those that participate in the nation's burgeoning sex tourism industry. As Padilla and Castellanos write,

Although focusing on the changes in masculinity at the center has led to rather static and stereotyped visions of contemporary Caribbean men's dilemmas, a look at the margins—those men who never would have attained the markers of masculine success, perhaps especially prior to the late capitalist era—opens up a new set of questions about the moral contestations of contemporary Caribbean masculinities. (p. 33)

Similarly, Gretchen Soderlund draws on her own research (on the case of American teenager Justin Berry) to challenge hegemonic depictions of victimized youth. Soderlund demonstrates that the depictions that have guided recent political controversies conceal an uneasy tension between competing representations of teens "as simultaneously stars, victims, producers, perpetrators, and entrepreneurs" (p. 64). In fact, she argues, new digital technologies such as webcams may actually have the capacity to complicate preexisting cultural narratives about sexual predators and prey.

A final point of commonality that links the essays assembled in this special issue concerns how policies pertaining to sexual commerce have been dramatically reshaped by shared border control agendas and by the increasingly carceral focus of the neoliberal state. Cheng, Shah, Padilla and Castellanos, and Brennan all point to the inextricability of anti-trafficking and anti-sex tourism policies from the neoliberal state's agendas of border securement and criminalization, agendas that may originate with secular and faith-based NGOs and policymakers in the United States but that have been widely disseminated and appropriated around the world. Cheng shows how fears of border violation in the United States may affix to the hypersexualized bodies of Asian female migrants; Padilla and Castellanos convey the ways in which, in a Dominican context, the homosexual often figures as the violator of national borders. Soderlund, meanwhile, argues that even a violation of symbolic borders—such as the boundary between public and private, which the webcam seems to threaten—can lead to draconian calls for stepped-up punishment and incarceration.

Although many of the authors in this issue point to the critical role of sensationalistic journalism (or, in Agustín's case, even the rationalist allure of evidence-based research) in facilitating global flows of flawed policy, the rapid influx of new communications technologies may conversely represent an opportunity to challenge preexisting cultural scripts. As Soderlund writes with regard to the rise of webcam technology,

Self-produced teen porn sites complicate the traditional journalistic frame of child victims and adult perpetrators in underage sex exchanges. They do this in part because of the way the technologies involved can circumvent the middleman in the classic child pornography scenario while diminishing some of the physical danger that would be involved in child prostitution. (p. 65)

Finally, Padilla and Castellanos call attention to another important progressive possibility that has been opened up by recent political-economic transformations: the globalization of sexual rights movements. The tension between an ascendant conservative evangelical movement and a burgeoning push for LGBT rights is characteristic not only of the Dominican context that their article addresses but also of contemporary sexual politics more generally, as political challenges and possibilities—like bodies themselves—continue to circulate with unprecedented speed.

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