

«SEX TOURISM», MOBILITY ACROSS BORDERS AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Dr. Adriana Piscitelli

Doctor in Social Science, social anthropologist and feminist; level A researcher and part-time coordinator of the Gender Studies Group in the State University of Campinas/Unicamp, São Paulo; professor of the Doctorate on Social Science Program of the same University and level 1B researcher of the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development/CNPQ. She has been carrying out studies on the transnational sex and marriage markets and the articulation between them since the beginning of the first decade of the current century.

piscitelliadriana@gmail.com

THIS ARTICLE DEALS WITH SOCIAL NOTIONS AND DYNAMICS ASSOCIATED WITH SEXUAL, ECONOMIC AND EMOTIONAL EXCHANGES LINKED TO "SEX TOURISM." DIFFERENCES BETWEEN EXCHANGE MODALITIES IN THAT UNIVERSE ARE ANALYZED BY EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIP THAT CAN BE ESTABLISHED BETWEEN "SEX TOURISM," MOBILITY ACROSS THE BORDERS AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING FOR SEXUAL EXPLOITATION PURPOSES. MAIN ARGUMENT: THESE ASPECTS MUST BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT TO UNDERSTAND THE DIVERSE DIMENSIONS OF SUCH EXCHANGES, INCLUDING VIOLENCE, AND THE MOBILITY ASSOCIATED WITH THEM. THIS ARGUMENT IS BASED ON THE FINDINGS OF SCIENTIFIC STUDIES OF THESE TOPICS, INCLUDING THOSE OF A MULTI-SITED ETHNOGRAPHY DONE BY THE AUTHOR BETWEEN THE BEGINNING OF THE FIRST DECADE OF THE 21st CENTURY AND 2012 IN THE NORTHEAST OF BRAZIL, NORTH OF ITALY AND SOME CITIES IN SPAIN.

KEY WORDS: SEX TOURISM, HUMAN TRAFFICKING, VIOLENCE, MIGRATION

## INTRODUCTION

The text analyzes the relationship between "sex tourism," mobility across the borders and human trafficking. These issues have been the focus of concern of many national and international public debates during the last three decades. This concern has become more acute in a global context marked by the anxiety generated by international migration—particularly South-North migration (1, 2)—, drug trafficking, illicit arms trade, terrorism and greater prostitution repression all linked to an increasing trend towards abolitionism<sup>1</sup> and, in many cities, towards a process of gentrification (3, 4).<sup>2</sup> In this framework, problems like human trafficking have been addressed with policies that, though often part of securitization<sup>3</sup> projects, are usually formulated with a human rights protection language having most of the time humanitarianism connotations (7).

The debates that led to the formulation of such policies involved institutions with different interests: governments, supranational multilateral agencies, and human rights advocacy groups, including feminist and prostitutes' organizations and networks (8). In this political arena, the concepts of "sex tourism" and trafficking in persons are defined in no ambiguous terms.<sup>4</sup>

In discussions marked by lack of conceptual clarity international "sex tourism" is frequently fused with trafficking in persons for sexual purposes, and the latter is usually confused with cross border movements of migrants—mainly illegal—for prostitution purposes. This conceptual confusion has an impact on knowledge production, frequently losing sight of social notions and dynamics associated with "sex tourism," as well as of the differences in the sexual, economic, and affective exchanges involved, besides diminishing the relationship with across border mobility that can lead or not to engaging in prostitution abroad.

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This article deals with such aspects. The main argument lies in the fact that they should be taken into account to understand the many dimensions in such exchanges—including violence—and in the mobility associated with them. This article is based on the findings of academic studies, which include the results of a multi-sited ethnography (9) done by the author between 2000 and 2012 in northeastern Brazil, northern Italy and several cities in Spain analyzing the involvement of Brazilian women in transnational, heterosexual, sex, and marriage markets (10).

In the first part of this article we will dwell on this argument covering the social concepts and dynamics in international “sex tourism” contexts. The second part will comment on the link between these aspects and mobility across borders. Finally, the third part deals with the perceptions of interviewed women regarding the dimensions of violence involved in the different contexts.

#### INTERNATIONAL “SEX TOURISM,” SEXUAL, ECONOMIC, AND AFFECTIVE EXCHANGES

Reference to “sex tourism” is put in quotation marks to call attention to the lack of agreement on this expression. When the author began to study this topic, it was common to believe that this issue involved organized “center-periphery” trips for prostitution consumption of male clients between 35 and 50 years old in “rich” countries, often involving girls, boys, and adolescents. In Brazil, that concept of sex tourism acquired the status of a native category and became part of the everyday language and of public policies formulation process.

Academic studies, however, began to question several assumptions related to this notion. Research in trips by persons seeking homoerotic sex enabled the perception that heterosexuality was naturalized in the first studies on the topic (11-13). The heavy presence of men travelling individually to Caribbean and South American tourist destinations led to question the assumption that international “sex tourism” covers “organized packages” (5, 14, 15). The idea that this phenomenon basically involves men from the “First World” was reconsidered based on the findings of studies of sex trips where trips of women from countries of the North seeking sex seem to outnumber those of men (16-18). Besides, in several places there is a significant presence of travellers seeking sex who are tourists from other “developing countries” and even from richer regions within the country. The most significant thing, however, is that the set of studies of international “sex tourism” led to reviewing the concept of prostitution to include different modalities of sexual and economic exchanges arising from the relationship between foreign tourists and local persons in the cities visited (14, 19-21).

What does the reference to different modalities of exchange mean? To show some differences between these exchanges, we have analyzed the heterosexual economic and sexual exchanges that take place in tourist circuits in Fortaleza, in northeastern Brazil. The author made a field study between 2000 and 2008 in this city with lovely beaches and intense night life, which has been considered the center of “sex tourism” in Brazil (22, 23). This is one of the poorest metropolitan regions of the country, located in a province marked by acute regional inequalities. In Fortaleza, sexual and economic transactions taking place in “sex tourism” circuits are far from fitting the idea of this phenomenon being a segment of the sex industry and limited to commercial sexual exploitation of children.

The first of these ideas was formulated taking into account the dynamics on places such as Southeast Asia (Thailand and Philippines), where since the 1950s spaces were offered for the recreation and leisure of American troops. After the wars in Indochina (1946-1954), Korea (1950-1953), and Vietnam (1958-1975), the infrastructure developed to provide sexual services to those soldiers was used to meet the increasing demands of international tourists. In this context, tourism policies were reoriented, establishing an “industrial” base for commercial sex

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consumption, with heavy investments in brothels, bars and other facilities for prostitution purposes (24, 25). In some parts of that region, sex tourism aimed at commercial sexual exploitation of boys and girls was highlighted and became the focus of a number of studies, some of which analyzed the different ways in which boys and girls are involved in commercial sex (26).

In Fortaleza, a city that became famous in the 1990s for what was then called the problem of "girls/prostitutes," commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth seems to have become endemic. Research done at the end of that decade and during the last years of the first decade of the 21st century, however, reiterates the idea that this problem is particularly related to the local demand. Both national and foreign tourists make up the clientele. Still, the main consumers of sex with adolescents, particularly with boys and girls, are local men<sup>5</sup> (27-31). During those decades, most of the foreign tourists seeking sex in the tourist circuits of the city were looking for young adult females.

However, such sexual exchanges hardly fit the concept of the sex industry. When sexual and economic exchanges involve prostitution (explicit negotiation of sexual services for money, which in Brazil is called *program*) they are more in line with an artisanal rather than industrial organization. It tends to be more an autonomous activity, usually occasional, that intersects with the tourist industry in the sense that prostitutes seek clients in beaches and bars frequented by the tourists in general.

On the other hand, relations with foreign tourists involve other types of sexual and economic exchanges, which are partially mercantile and different from prostitution that evoke the concepts of transactional or tactic sex. Such concepts deal with transactions involving nonmarital sexual relations, sometimes with several couples based on money offerings or gifts. However, in this modality of exchanges, participants are perceived more as boyfriend/girlfriend or lovers than as prostitutes and clients, and having sex in exchange for gifts is part of a wider set of obligations (32, 33). It is a matter of using sex to mitigate economic hardship, making it a flexible, contingent, and temporary activity in which pleasure, comradeship, and friendship are frequently involved (21).

In Brazil, like in other Latin American and Caribbean countries, the history of which is marked by colonial relations and the presence of slavery (12, 15), there is a long history of interpenetration between economy and sexuality that acquired peculiar nuances, based on a racial sexualization of subordination and poverty. Today, a range of exchanges—denominated *aid*—coexist with prostitution.

Among low and middle-low strata persons, this notion represents economic contributions that, though significant, are not the main source of livelihood (34). In the context of sexual and emotional relations, *aid* and sex are interchanged. If the *program* evokes the notion of contract, the *aid*, which is part of a tradition of hierarchical exchanges, involves notions of protection, care, affection expressed in contributions for economic survival and consumption. The money value of the gifts varies depending on the social class and material resources of the man, as well as his generosity and degree of commitment in the relationship. Contrary to prostitution, the sexual and economic exchange modalities under this category are not stigmatized and the highest degree of respectability is attained when this *aid* leads to a lasting and stable relationship.

In rewarding this *aid*, women offer sex, companion and, sometimes, household care providing clean clothes, food, attention and care in case of an illness. In the case of a lasting *aid*, people grow closer and the relationship turns into a place for developing sentiments. Sometimes it is "romantic love" but most of the time these feelings are associated with respect and considerations, considered among the popular strata in Brazil as traditional sentiments when starting a family.

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In Fortaleza, before the growing economic crisis affecting countries such as Portugal and Italy from where a significant number of tourists came seeking sex, European tourists called the attention of different categories of women. There were young women from the low and middle-low strata interested in improving their living conditions and also migrating. Some of them were involved in prostitution and others were only involved in aid relationships. But among these women pursuing foreigners, there were also local middle-class, liberal professionals or public servants, between thirty and fifty years old, disenchanted with the local marriage, love, and sexual market that privileged the young and who were also interested in travelling.

The re-creation of sexual and economic exchanges with foreign tourists modified traditional practices and gave them a new meaning. The practice of programs acquired new connotations. In the smooth flow and ambiguity that characterized the circuits covered by travellers seeking sex, some young women exercising programs tried to move away from space and body stereotypes attributed to prostitution and chose to do away with time limits and stipulating the value of the exchange. They thought that this way they could get more money from foreigners and have access to more lasting relationships. The difference between the space used for exercising programs and private life space narrowed when the young women brought men to their and their families' homes. Likewise, some times restrictions on sentiments associated with professionalism in the exercise of prostitution faded.

This blurred the frontiers between exchange modalities, between programs and tactic sex styles established by young women employed in different types of activities within the tourist sectors, working in hotels, hairdressing salons, bars, and restaurants who, receiving a minimum wage, replaced the local "old man who aids" with foreign tourists. The latter, sometimes younger, were considered more attractive than the potential local aid suppliers.

Benefits received from those foreigners, however, were not limited only to money. In their sexual relations with them, exchanges began to involve simultaneously sexual pleasure, opportunity to travel abroad and, in some cases, even marriage, which, according to the stories of the women interviewed, were infinitely more frequent with foreign visitors than with local men of higher social status with whom they had a relationship of aid.

The attraction foreigners exercised over these women cannot be separated from those fascination rooted in their social traditions provoked by the contact with idealized differences associated with men of higher social status. This was perceived by foreign men seeking sex who chose to travel to the northeastern part of Brazil knowing they had no success among women in richer states south of Brazil who, according to them, considered themselves of European origin, were not fascinated by foreigners and had their own means for travelling abroad.

For the young women in Fortaleza involved in international "sex tourism," the attraction exercised by these foreign visitors was expressed in the idealization of their countries of origin, the beauty they attributed to these men racially classified as whites, the appreciation of their masculinity styles, and most importantly, the care they provided expressed in greater economic support. The notion of care was precisely the key for replacing the local "old man who aids" with the foreigners.

As for the wider context of the local society, these exchanges also acquired a new meaning. In the case of poor and/or darker skin color young women who crossed racial and class barriers and sometimes migrated to Europe thanks to their relations with foreign tourists, aid relations began to be considered as a form of prostitution and, accordingly, stigmatized, in a process of cross-cutting gender classifications linked also to social class, skin color and sexuality. In that perception, the definitions of prostitution expanded not necessarily covering sexual practices, but

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social agents: women who embodied a racial and sexual poverty that, accompanied by foreign tourists, invaded the spaces for leisure of the local middle class.

#### MOBILITY ACROSS THE BORDERS

In Brazil, the frequent association of international "sex tourism" with trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation purposes, led to focusing on mobility across the borders related to this association. In Fortaleza, the idea of travelling and living abroad was central for many of the women interviewed. Contact with foreign tourists and with local women who had married a foreigner and visited Fortaleza on holidays, showing their seeming success abroad, nourished those desires. Several of them, invited by foreign visitors, departed for northern Italy. In the multi-sited ethnography, there was a follow-up of these women in order to understand how these trips affected their lives and perceive how the change in contexts affected their relations with the tourists they had met in Fortaleza.

During the first half of the first decade of this century, Spain was considered one of the main destination countries for Brazilian women that had fallen victims of trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation purposes, among them, women who had travelled as a result of their involvement in international "sex tourism." This led to include in the ethnography some Spanish cities considered as particularly relevant in this matter.

In the debates on trafficking in persons, travel arrangements are relevant as they provide important elements to detect the existence of fraud, coercion, and organized crime networks, which are considered evidence of this crime. The analysis of the trajectory followed by the women of Fortaleza who were interviewed in Italy and of those who travelled to Spain from different Brazilian cities with "sex tourism" contexts—such as Natal and Rio de Janeiro—showed that there were different travelling styles. In this regard, travels arising from these contexts showed two modalities.

The first one characterized by travels arranged by foreign boyfriends, which involved no debts and a comparatively lower figure of contacts. Debts, however, are a constant element in the second modality that includes wider networks of persons with different intermediaries. These are the trips financed by clubs linked to prostitution in Spain.

In the cases analyzed, the invitation from foreign boyfriends allowed the women interviewed to leave Brazil under relatively safe conditions and free of debts and, for most of those who had exercised programs in Fortaleza, it meant a way out of prostitution. Such relations brought about marriages that could be included in the marriage migration category: "Third World" women who travel to marry men in countries of the North (35). Those who did not succeed in getting married could use the trip to exercise programs in Europe and return to Fortaleza in search for a new foreigner that would open for them the possibility of travelling and romance.

The stories of women involved in "sex tourism" in Brazil who travelled to work in the sex industry in Spain, refer a different panorama with totally mercantile processes and trips financed by club owners. These stories show an articulation of different agents, both in Brazil and abroad, which entails the mediation of foreigners and Brazilians in contact with owners and employees of facilities used for prostitution in Europe as well as debts. These trips are more in line with the concept of transnationally organized groups for the exploitation of prostitution.

Yet, the existence of such networks and the fact that they were never informed about the amount of the debt is not necessarily perceived by the women interviewed as aspects associated to crime or violence. This observation acquires meaning when analyzing these women's perception of violence.

#### VIOLENCE

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The difference between violence and crime contributes to analyze the appreciation of my interviewees. Guita Grin Debert and Maria Filomena Gregori reflect on the difference between the two terms (36). Crime implies the criminalization of abuses, the definition of the circumstances involved in the conflicts, and the settlement of such conflicts through legal means. Violence is a term open to debates on meanings, which implies a wider social acknowledgement—hardly legal—that certain acts constitute an abuse. To understand such meanings attention must be paid to the interactive processes where the stakeholders have unequal social positions.

The stories of the interviewees clearly outline the notion of violence. It is a physical or moral damage that some of them may have suffered while exercising prostitution and that most of them suffered in their love and/or marital relations. In the stories going around “sex tourism” circuits in Fortaleza, in each category of women, whether they were practicing programs or not, whether they came from a low or middle strata, one of them had experienced an act perceived as violence from the man that aided while abroad: private imprisonment, maltreatment or threats. Among women interviewed abroad, one recounted with horror the assassination attempt by a client which she considered as the worst violence ever suffered.

Violence also appeared in the stories about trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation purposes. Yet the conceptualizations of violence of those women were not necessarily related to the legal categorizations of the traffic in persons. According to their perceptions, trafficking was exclusively linked to slavery (in terms of deprivation of freedom), torture and mafias which, according to them, controlled migrants from other regions of the world, from some Eastern European countries, and from Africa. In their stories, however, aspects such as not knowing that a debt with interest had to be paid and/or that she would be “under surveillance” until the debt was paid, were not considered as analogous to being a slave and, therefore, were not associated with the concept of trade.

In parallel, violence was associated with national States and the police that was supposed to guarantee their rights, especially the migration police. In fact, in their stories that was the type of violence that was narrated with more rage and fear. They considered that actions to fight trafficking in person were another mechanism that came to reinforce the manoeuver of the Spanish government to deport Brazilian women illegally staying in Spain. In these women’s experiences, the main concern was the repression against prostitution and illegal migrants.

In these stories, the most painful violence was the one related to moral damage they suffered in their love/marital relations. This appears in the stories of Brazilian women who after being involved in “sex tourism” had quit the sex market after getting married, as well as in the stories of those who remained in the sex market abroad, providing sexual services.

The marriages resulting from relations that began in Fortaleza’s tourist circuits did not lead to Brazilian wives being sold, used in the sex industry or to physical violence. They do, however, refer to occasional tensions due to a symbolic type of violence. In the double transit—going to Italy and getting married—qualities attributed to these women like passionate “tropical sexuality” linked to the dark skin color that attracted those men, became the source of jealousy, mistrust and over control by them and their families. Control included their work relations and socializing, as well as important aspects that defined these women’s identity such as temperament and body language. Part of the difficulties in these relations stemmed from the fact that they began in international tourism circuits in Brazil linked to sex and race. Yet tensions seem to be associated mostly with the inequalities present in the relation accentuated in the Italian context.

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Among women who migrated as a result of their involvement in "sex tourism" and met their couples in the highly commercialized sectors of the sex industry in Spain, tensions were more acute. These interviewees tend to reaffirm a concept—found in studies of prostitution—related to the pressure these marriages undergo, frequently as a result of a double social stigma affecting women who are foreigners and prostitutes, as well as their husbands who are seen as pimps (37). In a distressed story of a Brazilian woman who quit her work as a prostitute in a club in Bilbao after she fell in love and married a customer of the club with whom she later had two sons:

He says that our relation is not normal because in a normal relation people meet in other places and not in a club. He keeps humiliating me and saying I am filthy ... And I keep putting up with it...

#### FINAL REMARKS

As shown in this text, there are different modalities of sexual, economic and emotional exchanges in "sex tourism." Such exchanges are not driven by demand but rather, and above all, by situations that place the visited population in a position of inequality thus encouraging the supply of sex. One of the main findings of the ethnography was revealing that "sex tourism" does not flourish in those contexts where the local population shows no economic/sexual interest in tourists seeking sex. In many cases, these contacts allow travelling abroad and such travels can lead to the practice of prostitution in another country but can also mean an opportunity to abandon the sex market through marriage.

In almost all the trajectories that were followed, one can perceive the dimensions of what the women interviewed consider as violence. Yet, rather than associating violence with aspects related to trafficking in persons, such dimensions are mostly associated with the relation with clients of women exercising prostitution on their own in Spain under unsafe conditions due to the *alegalidad*<sup>6</sup> of this activity in Spain and their illegal migratory status, the repression of migration police abroad, and symbolic violence in love and marital relations. The latter is associated with the unequal position marked by race and nationality that these women occupy as migrants, added to the stigma of prostitution.

#### NOTES

1. Abolitionism, in its contemporary version, is a prospect (and legal model) that tries to eliminate prostitution by criminalizing the conditions giving rise to it rather than the prostitutes.
  2. This is valid both for European and Latin American contexts, like Brazil (5).
  3. Securitization consists in making national security the core of the foreign policy of a State and is frequently translated as a military approach and as migration curbing measures (6).
  4. Regarding traffic, conceptual differences are favored by imprecisions in supranational legal definitions, such as the Palermo Protocol, and in the reformulation of national laws related to this crime.
  5. In the late 1990s, the foreign and Brazilian tourists, together, accounted for 35% of the clientele. During the last years of the first decade of this century the picture remained the same, with the peculiarity of a significant male presence (around 30%) among adolescents involved in commercial sexual exploitation.
  6. In Spain, prostitution is not illegal. However, this is neutralized by the criminalization of the prostitution environment and repression in the streets, fining both prostitutes and clients. This is a term coined in Spain by organizations defending the rights of women sex workers.
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