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Consuming the Other. Prostitution Clients on a ‘Transnational Red-light District’

Anne-Maria Marttila, M. Soc. Sci
Researcher, doctoral student
Department of Social Science History/ Political History
University of Helsinki, Finland
anne-maria.marttila@helsinki.fi

Abstract

With the focus on Finnish male sex buyers, this paper explores the consumption of sex on a ‘transnational red-light district’ in the border area of Finland, Estonia and the Russian Federation. Characteristic of this regional scene is that the structure of the market is strongly ethnised and gendered: women from the former socialist countries act as service providers and the more prosperous ‘western’ men as customers creating the demand. The paper argues that the recent transnationalisation process, in the form of both cross-border population movements and ‘virtual movements’, has not only made the prostitution market ideal from the consumers’ point of view but has also changed the client practices and assisted creation of prostitution related networks of men. The paper is based on an ongoing doctoral study on Finnish clients of transnational prostitution in Finland, Estonia and Northwest Russia. The material includes interviews of Finnish sex buyers and observation of client practices and market mechanisms of local prostitution in Helsinki, Tallinn and Vyborg. Interviews of Estonian and Russian prostitutes and sex workers in Tallinn and Vyborg were also conducted. A secondary material consisting of discussions on a Finnish and international webforums dealing with commercial sex supports the primary material.

Introduction: the transnationalisation of prostitution

It is fair to say that the contemporary sex trade knows no international borders. Characteristic of the industry is continuous movement across the borders by prostitutes, their clients, and ‘third parties’ (procurers and other organizers). Political and social changes in the former socialist countries, easier and more affordable travel and technological innovations have revolutionised the patterns and structure of the global sex industry. Currently, the main global routes of cross-border prostitution lead from east to west and from south to north, that is, from the poorer, often Eastern European or Third World countries to wealthier, industrialized countries.

The regional and local prostitution markets are becoming increasingly ethnicised. A typical feature of the setup in almost all parts of the world is the division into poor immigrants and members of minority groups acting as service providers and the more prosperous majority as customers creating the demand. In India, for instance, thousands of women come from Nepal and Bangladesh to sell sex to the Indian middle class, which is growing more and more prosperous. Within Europe, migration and travel for prostitution purposes is concentrated around sex workers traveling from the Russian Federation and other former socialist countries (in addition to the more traditional countries of departure in Asia, South America and Africa) to Southern, Central and Northern parts of Europe (UNODC, 2006, also Skilbrei & Polyakova 2006)¹.

Statistics, however, often tend to ignore the two-way character of prostitution related travel. Whereas the sex workers tend to move mainly from the poor regions to the more prosperous West or North, a growing number of clients travel in the opposite direction. This ‘flow of demand’ has drawn considerably less public (or academic) attention than the movement of immigrant prostitutes or trafficking in women and girls for prostitution purposes. It is hardly surprising that statistical research on ‘sex tourism’ has been non-

¹ According to the United Nations’ Trends in Total Migrant Stock: The 2005 Revision, the estimated number of female migrants in Europe has more than tripled from 1985 to 2005.

existent: due to the fact that the sex tourists' primary, or only, motivation to travel is only rarely related to prostitution it is practically impossible to give any estimates about the clients' travel for prostitution purposes. For example, out of the men that I met in sex bars in Tallinn and Vyborg, only a small number were there primarily for paid sex².

There is a localized link between demand and supply: the flows of movement often interconnect in the border regions, and many border areas between 'East' and 'West' or 'North' and 'South', for example, have effectively become transnational red-light districts, where the gendered and ethnicised demand of the wealthy and the supply of the poor are encountered in their most visible form. Such regions include, for example, the border regions straddling Germany and the Czech Republic, and Finland and Russia. The border between Germany and the Czech Republic (highway E55 along the border, to be exact) has even been called 'the largest brothel in Europe' (Deutsche Welle 2003).

This paper represents an attempt to shed some light on the poorly documented practices and experiences of male sex tourists' and sex buyers' on a 'transnational red-light district' in the border area between Finland, Russia and Estonia. I will suggest that the increased movement of people, a high turnover of prostitutes, as well as the new information and communication technologies have together made the regional prostitution market ideal from the consumer's point of view.

The ethnic structure of prostitution in Finland, Northern Estonia and North-West Russia: an overview

There was sex tourism from Finland to Estonia and Russia even before the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, the opening up of borders and the subsequent easier travel between the 'East' and the 'West'³ in the late 1980s and early 1990s set the scene for and facilitated prostitution business and led to an increase in sex tourism to the former socialist countries.

² Instead, most of the men were there for business or on a conventional tourist trip.

³ 'West' and 'East' here refer to the mental image of them rather than the geographical area.

Besides the easier travel, increasing international migration, tourism and business travel, sexualised media representations of 'eastern prostitutes' (Keeler & Jyrkinen 2002) and socio-economic differences between the Nordic and Baltic countries and Russia have had a significant impact on the growth of the prostitution market in the region.

One of my interviewees, 46-year-old 'Matti', remembers how "everything changed" on the Finnish prostitution market in the course of the 1990s, compared to the 1980s when sex industry was invisible and marginal in Finland (see also Varsa 1986). 'Matti', for example, says he had concentrated his use of commercial sex on renting porn films which were, as he said, "very expensive back then". The 1990s brought along an enormous change for the sex buyers as well. As 'Matti' described, "it felt wonderful to be able to slip a 'FIM 20' [a small bill] in the panties of a striptease-dancer" [instead of watching the films on one's own] ('Matti' 2003). Towards the end of the decade, the boom of sex clubs was over, but the changes within the Finnish sex industry were to stay. Generally speaking one might say that, since the early 1990s, the massive gap in the standard of living between Finland and its eastern neighbours resulted in the meeting of demand and supply in commercial sex⁴.

The mobility of the agents involved in prostitution, foreign prostitution in particular, makes it difficult to provide reliable estimates about the overall number of prostitutes or the ethnic structure of local markets. For example, women from Northern Estonia and North-West Russia are known to take day trips to Finland for prostitution purposes (e.g. Kontula 2005). Likewise, Finnish men living in the border regions sometimes go on one day shopping trips to, for example, Vyborg. In addition to paid sex, sex tourists tend to purchase diverse consumer goods sold at lower prices than in Finland (such as fuel, cigarettes and alcohol). On the whole, various motives and modes of tourism and consumption are extensively intertwined in the Finnish tourism into the neighbouring regions (Marttila 2007).

⁴ Finland and the Russian Federation (sharing a 1,300 kilometer-long border) have a disparity in standard of living that is among the greatest between two bordering countries in the whole world. The Finnish-Russian border also constitutes one of the main outer borders of the European Union and thus forms one potential transit area for organised crime groups to enter the European inner markets, including prostitution markets.

According to the estimates by the Finnish National Bureau of Investigation, the proportion of foreign sellers in the Finnish prostitution market is estimated to be significant, as much as 95 percent (Leskinen 2003, see also Aromaa and Lehti 2002). In her study on prostitution in Finland, Anna Kontula has, however, questioned this number and claimed that the number is substantially less, around 50 percent (Kontula 2005). It is presumed that a large majority of the foreign prostitutes consists of Estonian and ethnic Russian women originating from Estonia⁵, but there are also Latvians and Lithuanians (Leskinen 2003, also Kontula 2005). My study does not aim at a quantitative coverage of the field, but a considerable majority of my informants had usually purchased sex from a Russian or Estonian women (or ethnic Russian in Estonia), both in Finland and abroad.

Likewise, only estimates exist on the proportion of Finnish customers on the prostitution markets in Estonia and North-West Russia. The proportion is generally considered to be significant, especially on a seasonal basis. It is estimated by the Tallinn police that foreign men (most of whom are Finns) amount to 45 percent of the clientele for local prostitution in Estonia on an annual basis (Pettai and Kase 2002). This estimate was supported by a sex worker I interviewed in Tallinn, who said that Finns are by far the largest client group in the sexclubs in central Tallinn (sex worker A 2005). In North-West Russia, the proportion of all foreign sex customers is estimated to be around 60 percent (Kolpakova 2005). There are no figures on the proportion of Finns, but especially close to the Finnish border, for instance in Vyborg, it is likely to be significant.

Albeit there only exist estimates about the ethnic structure of local prostitution markets, it has become obvious that sex tourism from Finland to Russia and the Baltic states is an essential part of the Finnish prostitution discourse. Traditionally Thailand has been a main destination of Western sex tourists, but the proximity of the Baltic states and Russia has made them more attractive to the Finnish sex buyers. Economic factors seem to move and attract not only the sellers but the Finnish buyers as well. For example, a portion of the

⁵ According to Irina Novikova a "fear of Russians" prevailing in the post-Soviet states has contributed to the ethnic Russian women having become the most marginalized group in society (Novikova 2002, 79).

Finnish prostitution clients seek their way to Estonia and Russia because of the lower price level there. One of the sex buyers I interviewed revealed as one of the reasons for his sex tours to the Baltic states and Russia that he could not afford the higher prices in Finland. He thought he would not be able to purchase paid sex, at least on the current scale, if not for the opening of borders and the expansion of the sex industry ('Matti' 2003).

Commodification of the ethnosexual body

It became obvious in the narratives of the sex buyers, that paid sexual encounters have become highly commodified and precisely specified transactions. Men know extremely well where to find particular services and prostitutes and also share this information globally on the web. In Finland, a well-known online advertiser for prostitution has been the *Secretary Academy* (SA) website. The site provides a forum for communication for prostitution clients and maintains a list of 'students' – in other words prostitutes – to be contacted for sexual services. The list usually includes ten countries with several hundred prostitutes. Pictures of prostitutes working in different areas are displayed on the list.⁶ Men discuss where and how to find the best 'girls' (as Finnish prostitution clients usually call the prostitutes) with each other on the forum. Experiences of various women and the quality and price of their services as well as prostitution practices in different countries are being discussed and compared.⁷

On the Internet forums dealing with commercial sex, the personality of a single woman or prostitute is insignificant and the commodification of the female body highly particularized. Women's bodies are broken down into parts – breasts, bottom, legs, hair, skin, face, lips,

⁶ Since August 1, 2004, new legislation has criminalized advertising of prostitution in Finland. Publishing prostitutes' advertisements is now seen as a form of procurement. As a result, the Secretary Academy closed down its list at the beginning of August 2004. In less than three weeks, the list had been published again, facilitated by selling the site to the Netherlands.

⁷ It is notable (as observed also by Bishop and Robinson, 2002) that while the descriptions of prostitution practices in various countries may be extremely thorough and detailed, the men rarely comment on the social, economic or cultural situation of the countries they visit. Most of them seem to be surprisingly alienated from the socio-economic and gendered structures that enable their actions – or from the ways their activities contribute to maintaining or changing these structures. See also Månsson 2001.

eyes, nails and so on. A female body is made consumable by reducing it to a mere object signified by nonpersonal attributes such as ethnicity. Jeffrey Weeks (1985) has noted that a feature typical of our time is the speciation of sexuality, that sexual practices, subcultures and identities are becoming more divergent. R. W. Connell (2002), on the other, has shown that the commodification of male sexuality has gone hand in hand with the fetishization of sexual desire. Indeed, in the customers' narratives, the young, beautiful and exotic prostitutes were often described as fetish-like objects, and were also collected like such objects. This is recognizable in, for example, 'Henrik's' obsession (2003) (as he described it) with trying out new and different prostitutes, without being able to stop. He also lamented the pre-1990s, and nowadays occasional, shortage of new prostitutes on the local prostitution market. He was consequently pleased with the recent transnationalisation of the prostitution industry. Many other sex buyers also told me that they wanted to use the services of various prostitutes because they wanted new experiences⁸.

The (ethnic or sexual) difference of a prostitute is made apparent in the narratives of the Finnish sex buyers but at the same time often praised as a materialized object of sexual desire. It appears that for some men it is the very difference (from 'our' women, from everyday life) that is bought and consumed in prostitution encounters. In the web-discussions, prostitutes' appearances and performances were also 'reviewed'⁹. In these, often racist and misogynistic, 'reviews', Russian and Baltic prostitutes are usually considered to be more feminine, beautiful, sexy and willing to please than the Finnish and other Nordic prostitutes (or women in general). The "eastern girls" are described as "hot, passionate, blond bombshells", while 'oriental' (usually Thai) women are considered as "petite, hot-blooded, early-maturing and willing to please". This 'ethnosexualisation' is made good use of by the advertisers as well (Keeler & Jyrkinen 2002).

⁸ The clients' desire for variety has also been emphasised by the sellers of sex (Høigård & Finstad 1996, Sandell et al 1996).

⁹ The Finnish buyers call the reviews *koeajoraportti* (a literal translation: 'test drive report').

As Sara Ahmed has observed, ‘consumer culture involves the production of the stranger as a commodity fetish through representations of difference’ (Ahmed 2000, 116). The ‘fetishisation’ of an ethnosexualised ‘stranger’ was apparent in the reasons, for example, ‘Pekka’ (2003) gave for using the services of several prostitutes, preferably of different ethnic background. One could say that racism is indeed an integral part of prostitution, but it is also the difference and exoticism that attracts clients to the prostitution markets in Eastern Europe and the Far East. The line between xenophobia and xenophilia thus seems to be unclear in the minds of sex buyers: difference both builds boundaries and makes one cross them. In this transnational red-light district in the border area between Finland, Estonia and North-West Russia, the difference is celebrated and consumed rather than sustained or reproduced. In this sense I agree with bell hooks, according to whom ‘within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture’ (hooks 1992, 21). The difference can also be consumed in order to make oneself different. A consuming self can create something that is not one or the other – s(he) can become something other, “a hybridity that does not belong to the one or the other” (Ahmed 2000, 119).

Consumption of sex in peer groups

Some of my informants were members of a ‘Real Men’s Club’ (translation of the Finnish name *Tosimiesklubi*) to which one could apply through the *Secretary Academy* website. The Real Men’s Club, among other things, has a private discussion forum for members. It also provides members’ benefits and reductions in sex clubs in Finland and nearby countries. Beside providing various benefits to its members, the Real Men’s Club also arranges sex tours to Estonia and other Baltic countries. These include meetings and parties to which new or potential members are invited. One of my interviewees (a long-standing member of the club) is an active organiser of these parties in Tallinn. According to him, for parties they usually hire a large apartment in the centre of Tallinn, where men can stay overnight and bring in prostitutes. The most frequent visitors to Tallinn also have regular prostitutes who they invite during these get-togethers.

By providing the opportunity for mutual communication with a negligible threat of being caught, both web-based communication and eastbound sex tourism have enhanced the building up of social ties and networks among the sex customers. The networking of prostitution clients is at its most visible in the webcontexts where appearances and performances are ‘reviewed’ for the use of other men. The social bonding between the sex buyers also appears to have an empowering effect on them and, again, it is the various webforums and chatrooms in particular that seem to have significantly contributed to their growing sense of communality¹⁰.

The sense of communality between the sex buyers was particularly visible on the webforums relating to commercial sex where customers discuss also topics such as ‘consumer rights’, that is the means of preventing the markets from overheating and the excessive rises in price levels. The example of a buyer’s point of view on paid sex below, which appeared on the Finnish Secretary Academy website in 2005, clarifies both the present commercialization and homosocialization of buying sex by Western men:

Just think how easy buying sex has been made for us men. They’ve fixed us a portal as fine as Secretary Academy. Just a few mouse-clicks, and you see the pictures of all the girls on offer, and if there is no picture, there’s at least their size information, even if it’s a couple of sizes down. The girls’s phone number is in the announcement, or you can order it from abroad for a reasonable price, if you dare to use your mobile to do it. There are even ‘discreet’ reports on some of the girls, written by some friendly ‘Real Men’.

* * *

The increased movement of people, a high turnover of prostitutes in Finland and its neighbouring countries, as well as the new information and communication technologies

¹⁰ This communality is not a completely new phenomenon. Many of its features are similar to those discussed by Antti Häkkinen, in the context of the male student culture of late 19th-early 20th century Finland, where males visiting brothels together also constituted a central feature (Häkkinen, 1999). I would not, however, see this as proof of the universality and transhistorical nature of prostitution (as suggested by some, for example agents in prostitution as well as outside observers), but as another token of the longing for the traditional gender order and male hegemony typical of western societies at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.

have together made the regional prostitution market ideal from the consumer's point of view. The development of the markets for commercial sex have also encouraged new kinds of consumer practices as well as promoted inexhaustible demand for new 'consumer goods'. It is obvious that, for some, buying sex has become a part of the general consumer culture. My interviewees, for example, talked about sex like about any other market activity (see also Smette 2003).

It seems that the way the interviewees talked about buying sex also aimed at changing the traditional perception of sex buyers as men who cannot have sex otherwise. Although some of the men took trips abroad in order to purchase sex at the lowest price, many of them wanted to give an impression that men who buy sex are well-paid and successful and buy sexual services because they *can*, not because they *have to*. Commercial sex thus appears to its clients along the lines of the hedonistic consuming culture and neoliberalist way of thinking, as one aspect of the overall commercialisation of Western society. From the clients' point of view, this *McSexualization* (Jyrkinen 2005) offers an opportunity of extensive personal freedom, within which sexuality appears a commodity and a way to free oneself from the constraints of everyday life and, in the Nordic context, from the burdens of a 'woman friendly society'.

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