

Sex Tourism

Carol Jones explores the complexities of exploitation and criminality behind the term 'sex tourism'.

Crime and criminal justice systems across the world are of more immediate relevance to us than ever before. The leisure industry has grown as economic opportunities have provided people with the potential for spending increasing amounts of time 'on holiday'. Overseas holidays have become increasingly popular and accessible. The latter part of the 20th century saw a global explosion in the breadth of tourist entrapment that continues to be marketed to the ever more exacting customer. At the same time, the assumption that tourism is necessarily a 'good thing' for the local community has come to be questioned, as tourism academics have begun to examine the problems introduced by travellers and their effects on the cultural, social and economic standards of an area.

One particular tourist pursuit that addresses the populist notions of exploitation and criminality is that of sex tourism and, more specifically, sex tourism involving children. While the sexual

Sex tourism is, consequently, a complex concept and goes far beyond the immediate images of men travelling to the far east or the red light district of Amsterdam for sexual gratification from prostitutes or children.

perversity of depraved men from Westernised societies is held to be responsible for a growing market in child prostitution, alternative studies such as that by the International Labor Organization (ILO) refer instead to the earning potential of children in developing nations and their role in the economic demands of the family and state (Kempadoo in Kempadoo and Doezema 1998). The expansion of the sex tourist industry can thus be explained in terms of both demand and supply.

The notion of 'sex tourism' is not, however, new. In the 17th century Richard Lassels wrote that tourists would "travel a month together to Venice for a night's lodging with an impudent woman" (*New Statesman*, 1998). And even earlier, in the late 15th century, the sailors who shared in Christopher Columbus' travels to the 'New World' introduced an epidemic, believed to be syphilis, which, during a period of intense military activity, was spread throughout Europe and beyond. Its origins and intensity were reflected in its variety of names; the 'French disease' was adopted by Italians and English; Russians referred to it as the 'Polish disease', while the Japanese called it the 'Tang disease' (Tang denoting China) and the Indians called it the 'disease of the Franks' (Crosby 1972:125 in Clift and Carter

2000). The spread of a new venereal disease purportedly from Columbus' mariners illustrates the probable first link between foreign travel and a sexually transmitted disease and parallels the more recent AIDS epidemic. Accordingly, the traveller in search of sex is not a phenomenon of the late 20th century and in spite of improved communication and education, the risk to travellers and contacts continues to be a problem.

But what, precisely, is a sex tourist? How many of us have at some time been lulled into booking a holiday lured by glossy media images of sun, sea, sand and a tanned and relaxed attractive group of young people? Does the imagery put forward by tour operators and travel agents to sell holidays constitute an allure suggestive of sex tourism? Does such imagery suggest sex as an ingredient of the holiday and so by definition make all who respond to the ads by booking for a particular destination sex tourists?

The cultural and social acceptability of 'the sex tourist' is diverse. Muroi and Sasaki (Sinclair, 1997) make reference to the practice popular until the 1970s of sending Japanese business men on sex tours as a way of rewarding them for their hard work. Wives and girlfriends in general accepted this form of 'bonus' but, even where they did raise objections, the men still went, since to refuse would invite derision from their colleagues. In contrast, the Australian male sex tourist, apparently, turned to large quantities of alcohol in order to break down

inhibitions and free him from a sense of responsibility for his actions (Kruhse-Mountburton in Lanfant et al 1995).

Sex tourism is, consequently, a complex concept and goes far beyond the immediate images of men travelling to the far east or the red light district of Amsterdam for sexual gratification from prostitutes or children. Ryan (in Clift and Carter 2000) identifies the complexity of the theme and distinguishes the various categories that have been identified, while dispelling the media-invoked impression that sex tourism has purely negative connotations in which prostitutes are victims of "stolen sexuality" (Dworkin 1988).

Globalisation produces its own obstacles as transnational crime takes on an ever more pervasive role. Increasingly, illegal activities are spreading that were formerly contained within physical boundaries and the development of the World Wide Web has provided an added dimension through which crime can operate. This has been graphically illustrated in the reported conviction of members of a paedophile ring, the Wonderland Club, who operated from the privacy of their homes and work places, and came to the attention of English law enforcement agencies following the arrest of one of the club's members in



'Free Sex', Ni Nyoman Sani, Indonesia

This painting can be viewed in colour and is available to purchase on www.novica.com product ID 37579. Neither Novica nor the artist represent the views stated in CJM.

the United States (www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4134561,00.html). But while media spin speculated on the ease with which these men could indulge in their illegal activities because of the global capacity of the Internet, it fails to identify or rationalise the degree to which such activities took place prior to and in spite of the lack of Internet access. Such media glare does however highlight less legal practices of those who choose to seek out children for sexual gratification. The prostitution of children is a moral panic of contemporary industrialised societies. The criminalisation of such acts has taken on a global perspective as extraterritorial laws have been adopted by increasing numbers of countries whereby perpetrators of sexual abuse against children overseas can be punished in their home countries (www.rb.se/ecpat/tourism.htm).

While Westernised, industrialised nations condemn and criminalise the actions of those sex tourists who derive sexual gratification from children, Muntarhorn throws a hefty spanner into the works by reminding us that, in spite of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* defining a child as anyone under the age of 18, the age of consent for sexual intercourse can be between 13 and 17 years (1996: iii). As we condemn those societies that advocate child brides and 'underage' sex it should be noted that the Criminal Law Amendment Act in England and Wales raised the age of consent for girls from 13 to 16 years only 116 years ago and the same

Act, until repealed in 1967, effectively criminalised homosexual acts between consenting male adults in response to Victorian sensitivities.

The cultural and social perceptions which members of a Westernised nation accept as civilised and intrinsically 'right' struggle with the perceived victimisation of children through sexual exploitation by sex tourists. However Montgomery (in Kempadoo and Doezema 1998) in her ethnographic study refers to the biases that we expound without listening to or understanding the very 'victims' of sex tourism. Such perspectives may encourage us to further question the legitimacy of focusing solely on criminalising those

activities which societies in general terms deplore. Media spin will ensure that sex tourists, in particular those who derive pleasure from 'children' will be castigated and demonised for the protection of their 'victims.' However, in societies dependent on tourism and where prostitution provides (for children or adults) far more remuneration than other jobs, it is clearly also necessary to tackle the economic pressures that underpin the supply side of the sex tourism equation.

Carol Jones is a researcher at the University of Plymouth and a first-year Ph.D student. Her thesis is on tourism and crime.

References:

- Clift, S. and Carter, S. (2000) *Tourism and Sex; Culture, commerce and coercion* London: Pinter.
- Dworkin, A. (1988), *Letters from a War Zone: writings 1976-1987*. London: Martin, Secker and Warburg.
- Kempadoo, K. and Doezema, J. (1998) (eds.) *Global Sex Workers: rights resistance and redefinition*, London: Routledge.
- Lanfant, M. F. Allcock, J.B. and Bruner, E.M. (1995) *International Tourism: Identity and Change*, London: Sage.
- Muntarhorn, V. (1996) *Sexual Exploitation of Children*, Geneva: Centre for Human Rights.
- New Statesman Ltd. (1998) 'Some like it hot – and will travel there' in *New Statesman*, 7, August 1998.
- Sinclair, M.T. (ed) (1997) *Gender, Work and Tourism*, London: Routledge.

The cultural and social acceptability of 'the sex tourist' is diverse.