

# Change or Continuity?

## *Female Sex Workers' Lives in the Dominican Republic*

**Abstract.** As a response to many studies in which the exploitative nature of sex tourism was pronounced, the work in review about the Dominican Republic emphasises that female sex workers are local agents who take advantage of their clients, transforming their bodies into resources for economic independence, while challenging structures of patriarchy and inverting gender relations. Neo-liberal economic reforms led to a change in the household's income distribution and gave female sex workers, on a practical level, the possibility to increase their economic independence and status. However, as the paper argues, sex workers' agency is very limited within well-defined structures and gender roles are not transformed on an ideological level. The paper puts into perspective sex worker's lives and shows the importance of not losing sight of structural forces such as economic constraints and familial obligations, and alerts researchers not to apply Western concepts of emancipation.

### *I. Introduction*

International tourism is a growing industry throughout the world and the fastest growing sector in the Caribbean. For the Dominican Republic, it 'has become central to economic development programmes' since the early 1980s (Sanchez Taylor 2006: 42; cf. Cabezas 2004: 992). With this development, a particular form of tourism was also moving to this region: Especially during the last two decades, sex tourism<sup>1</sup> spread to almost all parts of the developing world, notably to the Caribbean. However, this is not a recent phenomenon: Already in 1961, Frantz Fanon noted that the developing world, especially South America and the Caribbean, was becoming the 'Brothel of Europe' (Fanon 1961, cit. in Kempadoo 2004: 115).

Female prostitution or sex work in this region has been highly discussed and differently interpreted, depending on the particular feminist school of thought:<sup>2</sup> In the Second-Wave Feminism beginning in the 60s, U.S. feminists like Andrea Dworking and Catherine MacKinnon saw, similarly to the First Wave at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 'larger forces like patriarchy and economic inequality'

---

<sup>1</sup> Sex tourism is defined on the basis of Kibicho (2009: 1) as international tourism whose principle motivation is the consumption of commercial sex relations. This tourism typically links tourists from Europe or North America with sex workers in the Global South.

<sup>2</sup> Male sex work has also been discussed, however, as this is a more recent observation, studies about male sex workers are still rare; see, for example, Gregory (2007) and Kibicho (2009).

as responsible for the existence of prostitution (Dank 1999: 17). Hence, sex workers should be helped to quit the sex trade rather than condemned, as their engagement was not their fault but due to societal forces (Dank 1999: 10). The arguments of these 'structuralistic feminists' as they are named in this paper are predominantly victim-oriented and portray sex workers as unable to freely choose sex work (Dank 1999: 2-3).

Studies about sex work within the Caribbean were conducted mainly in Anglophone countries and were macro-oriented.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, female sex work with international tourists in the Dominican Republic has not been a topic for research before two doctoral studies the late 1990s (Brennan 1994 and Cabezas 1998) opened this field. Since the bigger part of the debate has been abstract and lacking empirical research and attention to local voices, these ethnographic studies can be understood as a response to generalising, macro-oriented depictions. On the basis of micro-level research, such 'individualistic feminists' argue that imageries of 'sex workers as helpless victims are at odds with the reality of sex workers who have taken initiative' to engage in the sex trade (Dank 1999: 3; cf. Doezema 1998: 38).

Most ethnographies and articles from this second school depict the Dominican sex trade in very similar ways, focusing on the sex worker's perspectives: Contrary to assumptions about the solely exploitative nature of sex tourism based on economical inequalities and racial as well as gender hierarchies, the authors argue that female sex workers are neither powerless nor only victims of exploitation, but local agents who take advantage of their clients (Brennan 2004a: 88; Kempadoo 2004: 191). They make use of their racialised bodies and transform them into resources for freedom and betterment (Kempadoo 2004: 191), challenge structures of patriarchy and invert gender relations as well as economic situations of dependence (Brennan 2004a: 38).

While most writing is nuanced, it is striking that the interpretation is marked by optimism and an emphasis on female agency, savvy, resourcefulness, freedom or self-determination (cf. Brennan 2004a). On this basis, the present paper will argue that female sex workers in the Dominican Republic exercise agency only to a limited degree and within well-defined structures. Their

---

<sup>3</sup> Notably, such studies construct 'the Caribbean' as a state-like entity without specific histories and politics, thus running the risk of generalising; see, for example, Ellis (1986) and Momsen (1993).

responses are not creative in the sense of a voluntary decision, but driven by necessities and a limited number of possible alternatives. The decision of women to engage in the sex trade can make a difference in their daily lives. However, the desired upward mobility is almost never long-lasting and extremely dependent on unpredictable and not manipulable coincidences such as the tourists' mood and intention.

The paper also argues that the restructuring of the society which was caused by macro-economic changes *can* indeed provide conditions in which gender roles could be effectively challenged. However, what is completely underscored in 'individualistic writings', most female sex workers perpetuate existing gender roles: Even though they increase their economic independence, they stick to traditional gender ideologies. Therefore, while some aspects of gender roles are inverted, there is little transformation on the ideological level.

This paper will first explore the macro-economic background since the 1980s to trace the advent of the Dominican tourism industry, which brought about sex tourism as part of the informal economy. On the basis of this broader context, the implications of macroeconomic reforms on women will be explained with a special focus on gender roles. Thereafter, I will take a closer look to the micro-level and depict individual stories, to make the perspectives and experiences of the sex workers visible. Finally, I will analyse these accounts, interrogating the role of structure and agency and questioning whether sex workers do indeed invert traditional gender roles.

## ***II. Contextualising the Dominican Republic***

### *The Transformation of the Economy*

Since the late 1970s, a substantial transformation has occurred in the Dominican economy:<sup>4</sup> The production of primary agricultural products for export (mostly sugar cane and its side-products) was successively replaced by export-oriented manufacturing and international tourism (Gregory 2007: 7). To

---

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed account about major changes in the political economy of the Dominican Republic since the late 1970s see Safa and Antrobus (1992), de Oliveira and Roberts (1993), Momsen (1993), Betances (1995), Safa (1995a, 1995b), Barriteau (2001) and Itzigsohn (2009).

understand this radical change, the following part will briefly trace this transformation.

Due to unfavourable terms of trade<sup>5</sup> and a steady decline in sugar prices since the late 70s, the Dominican Republic turned away from its agricultural economy. Instead, the government tried to attract foreign investors and to promote employment by creating so-called *zonas francas* (free trade zones, also export processing zones), in which 'barriers to trade' such as tariffs, quotas, taxes, bureaucratic requirements and restrictions on capital repatriation<sup>6</sup> were lowered or eliminated. A currency devaluation mandated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) considerably reduced the cost of labour and led to the increase in the number of workers in *zonas francas* (Safa 1995a: 292).<sup>7</sup> Further adjustment measures led to increased privatization, a redirection of government expenditures from social services and basic consumer goods towards debt servicing, a reduction in public sector employment and furthermore contributed to a general increase in the unemployment rate (Cabezas 1999: 94, Brennan 2004a: 122, Sanchez Taylor 2006: 42, Gregory 2007: 27-30). The impacts of these policies were highly gendered: With the reduction of agricultural production, men were losing their jobs in the sugar plantations while development strategies favoured young female workers.<sup>8</sup>

Simultaneously to these economic changes the first direct regular flights connecting Europe and the Dominican Republic were established in the early 80s and first European cruise ships arrived, resulting in an extreme increase of international tourists.<sup>9</sup> As a result of low labour costs and steady declining air fares,

---

<sup>5</sup> When the United States cut sugar quotas in the early 1980s to protect their own plantations in Florida, the Dominican Republic lost its biggest export partner (Safa 1995a: 292).

<sup>6</sup> The 'Foreign Investment Law', which was passed in 1995, opened economic key sectors to foreign direct investment (FDI) and abolished all restrictions of capital repatriation (Gregory 2007: 27). As a result of this law, the majority of banks, sugar refineries, manufacturing and assembly plants were owned by foreigners (Girvan 2000).

<sup>7</sup> The cost of labour decreases from US\$ 1.33 per hour in 1984 to US\$ 0.56 in 199 and the number of workers in free trade zones increased by 900% between 1982 and 1987 (Safa 1995a: 292).

<sup>8</sup> About 60-80% of the workforce in the *zonas francas* were women (Safa 1995b: 89). Elson (1995) asserts that 'employers have a preference for employing women for labor intensive work, particularly young and single women' (168) because of their assumed higher productivity, patience and concentration, leading finally to a 'feminization of the proletariat' (Sassen 1999: 84). For a detailed explanation of the preference of women and the bigger impact of structural adjustment policies on them see Elson (1995).

<sup>9</sup> The number of international tourists increased from 89.700 in 1970 to 1.6 million in 1992 (Gregory 2007: 24). Initially, most of the new tourists came from Canada and the United States but they were soon outnumbered by Germans (Brennan 2004: 54; Kempadoo 2004: 115). The average annual growth rate of tourist arrivals between 1980 and 1994 was always over 10% and the tourism sector accounts since 1994 for about 13% of the Dominican GDP (WTO 1998: 13, cit. in Brennan 2004: 233).

the Dominican Republic was among the cheapest beach vacation destinations for Europeans (Brennan 2004a: 78). The construction of all-inclusive hotel resorts and dozens of small and mid-sized hotels came along with the expansion of restaurants, gift shops and bars and led to a visible growth of the Dominican tourism industry throughout the 80s and 90s.<sup>10</sup> However, in the same way as most export-processing businesses were owned by foreigners, tourism-related businesses were soon dominated by western expatriates, and local small-scale entrepreneurs such as beach vendors were rapidly replaced by German shops and beer gardens (Brennan 2004a: 54).

The formation of a new tourism infrastructure resulted in the arrival of many work-seeking migrants from other parts of the country and neighbouring Haiti, however, the tourism industry failed to create sufficient job opportunities. Only a limited number of low-skilled people found jobs at the lower echelons for low wages, such as gardeners, maids, waiting staff, cleaners or entertainers (Kempadoo 2004: 118, Gregory 2007: 24, 83). Additionally, as most all-inclusive hotels offered their own restaurants, groceries, laundry, clothing merchants and beauty saloons, there was little need for the tourists to leave the resort (Brennan 2004a: 78). Consequently, small local businesses could not benefit from the presence of international tourists (Brennan 2004a: 86) and were unable to compete with internationally-owned bars, pubs or bakeries, which appealed to the tourists through language, imported goods and traditions and had the necessary networks to hotel owners. In addition, the import of goods involved a rise in consumer prices (Brennan 2004a: 80) so that, among other things, supermarket prices became barely affordable for the local population (Kempadoo 2004: 120). Furthermore, due to the foreign management of almost all hotels and related facilities most of the financial benefits remained in or were repatriated to Germany, limiting economic benefits for Dominicans (Kempadoo 2004: 116).

In summary, neither the tourism industry nor structural adjustment policies resulted in a lasting improvement of the economic situation for the majority of Dominicans (Betances 1995: 129). Neither wages in the *zonas francas* nor in the domestic or in the tourism sector could keep pace with monthly living expenses. As

---

<sup>10</sup> The establishment of new tourist resorts during the 90s entailed a proliferation of internet web sites such as the *World Sex Guide* or *TsmTravel* that advertised the Dominican Republic as sex destination (Gregory 2007: 33).

a result the gap between wages and necessities had to be compensated with other activities: The informal economy increased gradually throughout the Dominican Republic,<sup>11</sup> of which a majority was clustered around the tourism industry (Gregory 2007: 26, 30).

### *Gendered Consequences*

Since men could not find employment in the *zonas francas* and the agricultural sector, in which they were typically employed, was reduced, they were particularly affected by under- or unemployment. This led to a reduction of the total household income and thus brought greater financial responsibilities for women (Cabezas 1999: 95) who were working in the *zonas francas*, within private houses as domestic servants or in the services sector catering to foreign tourists (Brennan 2004a: 130; Sanchez Taylor 2006: 42; Gregory 2007: 31). Their income became more important than ever before (Brennan 2004a: 122) and made women the family's 'bread winner' (Safa 1995a). As new heads of the households they were forced to 'improvise livelihoods, wholly or partially, through informal economic activities' (Gregory 2007: 30).

For low-educated Dominican women with children legal wage labour opportunities were very limited. In addition to this, promising economic advances led to the engagement in sex work<sup>12</sup> as alternative source of income (Gregory 2007: 7). Sex workers were considerably better paid than they would have been in any other formal or informal activity (Kempadoo 2004: 60)<sup>13</sup> and were better able to afford plenty of leisure time (Brennan 2003: 157). Besides this economic advantage, humiliation, abuse and hunger experiences which were closely associated with domestic service as well as a great gender inequity in households or consensual unions<sup>14</sup> with Dominican men resulted in the women's decision to opt for sex work

---

<sup>11</sup> Kempadoo (2004: 116) estimates that the informal sector is the fastest growing economic sector with at least one informal worker for every employee in the formal economy.

<sup>12</sup> The category 'sex worker' is neither in the Caribbean, nor in the Dominican Republic a homogeneous one, as hierarchies exist according to education and nationality (Kempadoo 2004: 82) and employment within this trade is extremely diverse and can include several forms of commercialized sexualities such as pornography, erotic dancing, phone sex or street prostitution (Dank 1999: 2). Due to the hidden character of this business there is no quantitative data about the number of female sex workers within the Dominican Republic.

<sup>13</sup> For the work in *zonas francas* a woman earns about 1000 pesos (about 100 USD in the mid-90s) a month, whereas sex workers can earn normally around 500 pesos per sexual encounter (Brennan 2003: 156).

<sup>14</sup> A 'consensual union' is a form of cohabitation by a man and a woman whose relationship is not formally ratified by laws (customary marriage). The couple can have offspring and do not have to live

in order to make their living (Brennan 2003: 157; Kempadoo 2004: 60). However, depending on the individual marital or familial relations, social networks and the number of children, female sex workers are subject to the duty to share their income (Brennan 2003: 177).<sup>15</sup>

### *Machismo & Traditional Gender Roles*

The Dominican sex trade is shaped by legal regulations as well as religious and traditional ideas about proper male and female behaviour. Sex work in the Dominican Republic is not prohibited 'in an expressed manner by any legal text' (Soledad Valdez 1996 in Cabezas 1999: 115). However, it is not allowed to support third parties. This legal condition entails a major distinction of the Dominican sex trade: the sex trade does not operate through pimps (*chulo*) or pimp-like brothel owners, nor is it tied to the drug trade or trafficking (Cabezas 1999: 116, Brennan 2003: 155). For this reason sex workers are basically 'freelancing' (Brennan 2004a: 23): They 'exchange sexual service on *their* terms and *their* conditions' (McClintock 1993: 2, emphasis in original). They decide the price, how many hours and in which nightclubs or bars they work and with whom they engage in sex (Brennan 2003: 155), leading to personal autonomy and control over the sex worker's activities and earnings (Kempadoo 2004: 66).

While the legal context seems to favour women's emancipation, it is partly counteracted by traditional notions of gender roles influenced by religion, such as the expectation to be a virgin before marriage and practice monogamy (Kempadoo 2004: 83).<sup>16</sup> The fact that sex workers are marginalized as 'whores' in the Dominican Republic is 'a reflection of the patriarchal double standard' which dominates most Caribbean and South American countries (Kempadoo 1999: 33; cf. Safa 1995). This double standard is expressed by the prevailing ideologies of *machismo* and *marianismo* (Stevens 1994: 9): The former is 'a system of male superiority and dual standards [...] [that] greatly restricts women's freedom and makes them highly accountable to men, who, in turn, enjoy freedom of movement and action with virtually no accountability' (Seitz 1994: 201). The complementary

---

together necessarily in a household. Sex workers who are married to foreigners usually maintain relationships (consensual unions) with Dominicans (Brennan 2004: 31).

<sup>15</sup> Childless sex workers, who can spend their money independently on consumer items which are unaffordable for most Dominican women, are the exception (Brennan 2003: 177).

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed account on Caribbean gender roles see Stevens (1994), Safa (1996a), Derby (2000) and Barriteau (2001).

part is *marianismo*: According to this ideology, an ideal woman is characterized by an 'infinite capacity for humility and sacrifice' (Stevens 1994: 9). Furthermore, mothers should behave like a Madonna: virtuous and devote, living for and through their husbands and children (Stevens 1994: 9; Cabezas 1999: 109).

### ***III. A Closer Look: Case Studies from Sosúa***

The following chapter will take a closer look at the micro-level by depicting the experiences of sex workers in order to ground the impacts of macro-economic processes in particular everyday lives in the tourist town of Sosúa.

In her ethnographic account *What's love got to do with it?*, the anthropologist Denise Brennan (2004a) analyses the sex trade in the small tourist town Sosúa at the Dominican north coast. She draws on extensive research conducted between 1993 and 2003, including interviews with 50 female sex workers, their European clients, German migrants and business owners (Brennan 2004a: 224, n. 14). Due to the long research period and a variety of different perspectives on the sex trade, this multi-sited ethnography provides substantial insights into sex tourism within the Dominican Republic.

Sosúa enjoys the reputation of a place where 'anything could happen' and getting rich fast is no problem. It is one of these towns, shaped by tourism businesses which are often owned by Germans without offering sufficient job opportunities.<sup>17</sup> Due to the large number of international tourists, Sosúa is the country's centre of attraction for many Dominican women, mostly single mothers under 40,<sup>18</sup> who are migrating to the north coast from either rural settings where they had worked for low wages as a hair stylist, waitress, housemaid or farm labourer; or from the capital Santa Domingo where they worked in the *zonas francas* for little more money but many more hours of overtime. They move to Sosúa in the hope to meet and marry European tourists who sponsor first, their

---

<sup>17</sup> Sosúa is characterized by its trans-national community, which consists of migrants from within the country and Haiti, a German expatriate resident community mainly from the working and middle class, elderly Jewish refugees and their descendants (Brennan 2004: 13). Brennan (2004: 224 n. 14) estimates that about 25.000 Germans live at the Dominican north coast. Based on the large number of imported goods, German newspapers, German bakeries and 'discos instead of churches', Sosúa is labelled 'un-Dominican' by Dominicans themselves (Brennan 2004: 53).

<sup>18</sup> Two-thirds among 500 sex workers were single mothers with in average two children (COIN 1998 in Brennan 224 n. 13).



migration off the island including invitation<sup>19</sup>, visa and airplane ticket or, secondly, their children's education (Brennan 2003: 154; 2004: 22).

Brennan particularly criticises the media's monolithic portrayal of sex workers as passive victims as too simplistic. Instead, she depicts the Sosúa sex workers as agents who have, during the last decades, developed a strategy to capitalize on male sex tourists (Brennan 2004a: 155).

The following three stories can be seen as representative as their biographies are strikingly similar to those of many female sex workers within the Dominican Republic as well as in the Caribbean (cf. Kempadoo 2004; Gregory 2003; Cabezas 2003, 2004; Brennan 2003, 2004a, 2004b).

### *Elena & Jürgen*<sup>20</sup>

In 1993, Elena was a 22-year-old single mother. A couple of years previously she followed her older sister who migrated from the countryside to Sosúa to engage in the sex trade. A sex worker in Sosúa earned about 500 pesos (about US\$42 in 1993) per client, which is much more than the wages within the formal economy, largely regardless of one's educational background. Consequently, Elena soon became, as many sex workers alike, the 'breadwinner' (Safa 1995a) for her extended family, strictly speaking for three sisters, her mother, her child and a younger sex worker friend, either financing them directly or by sending remittances.

Elena got to know Jürgen, who was in his mid-40s, during his summer vacations as sex tourist. Jürgen belongs to these tourists who keep in touch with their sexual partner after their first encounter: He kept in contact with Elena through faxes and wired money. After several vacations he decided to move to Sosúa to save taxes for his construction firm in Germany (Brennan 2004a: 22, n. 4,5) and rented a two-bed apartment with running water and electricity for 3500 pesos: circa US\$292 in contrast to US\$37 for the shanty in which Elena had lived with her sisters before.

She and all of her sisters moved into the new apartment to enjoy the new commodities such as a shower, cable TV, a large refrigerator and an electric stove. Elena herself lived the dream of many sex workers: She was able to quit the sex

---

<sup>19</sup> An invitation letter which has to be signed by the host is required for visa applicants to many European countries when the visitor does not provide proof of tourist but private accommodation.

<sup>20</sup> For anonymisation purposes Brennan (2004: 220 n. 1) changed all names of workers, tourists, interviewees, clubs, bars and hotels.

trade, send her daughter to a private school, lived in a middle-class apartment, received presents such as jewellery and perfume every now and then and dined in tourist restaurants (Brennan 2003: 160). Without doubt, the relationship to Jürgen increased her economic mobility enormously and transformed her and her dependent's lives *for the moment*.

Generally, sex workers stop using condoms for long-term clients (Brennan 2004a: 220, n. 10): In this way Elena became pregnant. Simultaneously to her pregnancy Jürgen started drinking, spent more time in German bars, with other sex workers and did not treat her any better than other Dominican men before (2003: 164). Finally, when Elena and Jürgen broke up, he took all of the new electronic devices from the apartment and moved back to Germany. He denied paternity and stopped sending money for her and all her dependents (Brennan 2003: 164).

Without Jürgen's cash flow into the household, Elena ended up in the same conditions as before: She lived in a shanty without water and electricity and had to take her daughter out of school (2003: 164). Instead of returning into the sex trade, she started working in restaurants and as a housemaid. Both financially and emotionally, Elena was better off before she met Jürgen than afterwards (Brennan 2003: 164). However, even though her hope for enduring upward mobility was thwarted, she still overlooked his infidelity and alcoholism and instead romanticized and idealized him (Brennan 2003: 164). A few years after the break-up, Elena married another German and the relationship again ended after a few months (Brennan 2004a: 26).

### *Nancy & Frank*

After Frank (28 years old) had spent several holidays with Nancy (23 years old) in Sosúa, he sent her an invitation letter, a plane ticket to Germany and a tourist visa, which was valid for one month (Brennan 2004a: 23). She stayed with him in a middle-class apartment and got to know his family, though both agreed not to talk about her job for fear of stigmatisation. Finally, they married and she moved to Germany, where they lived together for one year before they together moved to Sosúa. From this point on, her life history drew parallels to Elena's life. Soon after their move to Sosúa Frank stopped his financial support for Nancy and her son and spent more time with other sex workers and, in the end, moved back to Germany on

his own (Brennan 2003: 165). Nancy returned to the sex trade, deciding to work only with foreign men.

Like Elena, Nancy experienced a reversal of fortune: Ultimately, both lived in the same or even worse conditions than before.

### *Carmen*

Carmen, the third example from Sosúa, applied a ‘diversification strategy’: She worked with international tourists and Dominican men at the same time. She established long-term relationships or ‘consensual unions’ with Dominican clients in order to ensure a small but steady income for a bigger economic safety net (Brennan 2004a: 162). After some years, Carmen was able to build a house for her mother and her children in Santa Domingo. Later she married an Austrian, moved to Austria (Brennan 2003: 167) and was able to send remittances and clothes to her family and her closest friends in the Dominican Republic, all sex workers. Clearly, Carmen was the exception that proves the rule.

## ***IV. Reassessing the Sex Trade***

### *Agency vs. Structure*

For a long time, informal workers were seen by researchers as ‘passive economic subjects rather than economic actors – as those who had “lost out” in the struggle for “formal” jobs rather than as people attempting to win the struggle for a decent living’ (Cross 1998: 2). In contrast, ethnographic research suggests that informal workers are not lost but actively try to make globalisation work for them (Brennan 2004a: 88). They are actors, capable of making choices and conscious decisions to change their everyday life in the long-term (Kempadoo 1998: 9). Thus, sex workers are portrayed by the ‘individualistic feminists’ as women who autonomously, consciously and actively decide to engage in sex work as a way to achieve a relatively high income. This portrayal of sex workers creates an image where female agency is more decisive than the lack of viable alternatives, economic needs or social obligations.

On the other side, Brennan (2004a: 121) explains that Elena was forced to work in the sex trade, first, because of her lack of formal education and resulting limited wage labour opportunities, and second, once she was in the position of the

head of the household, she was not able to give up familial obligations. Similarly to the sex workers interviewed by Brennan, most of them expressed regret and named the family's expectations and the responsibility for their children as an obstacle to escape this work (Cabezas 1999: 108).

Sex work is quite often a 'survival strategy', yet what is denied by Brennan is illustrated by a 1998 survey among 500 sex workers in the Dominican Republic, where 72% of the participants stated economic needs as the main cause for their engagement in the sex trade (COIN 1998, cit. in Brennan 2004a: 224 n. 13). The same result was produced by Amalia Cabezas (1999: 105) who has also conducted interviews in Sosúa with 35 Dominican sex workers. Respondents mentioned their economic situation as a crucial motivation to engage in the sex trade. Similarly, an ethnography by Stephen Gregory (2007: 9) focusing on the sex trade in the small tourist town of Boca Chica at the Dominican south coast found that the decision to engage in sex work was primarily economically driven.

Although most of the women interviewed by Brennan stated that they have improved their own and their children's lives (2004a: 25), she admits that most of her informants did not like their work (176) and that Elena had lived 'the dream of many sex workers' when she was able to quit the sex trade (Brennan 2003: 160).

The portrayal of sex workers as purely 'strategizing for advancement' (Brennan 2004a: 212) tends to overlook structural constraints such as neo-liberal economic reforms which have shaped the possible paths of lives of all Dominicans (Gregory 2007: 4). Although they would have been able to engage in *zonas francas* or in the tourism sector, sex work was the best viable opportunity to 'get ahead' economically (Brennan 2004a: 212). All this shows that neither the sex worker's initial decision to engage in the sex trade, nor their continuing engagement were completely free.

To underline the strategic and active engagement of sex workers, Brennan emphasises how women tried to take advantage of men. The sex workers attempted to strategically transform commercialised sex into long-term relationships as a way out of poverty. A marriage to Europeans seems to be the fastest track to economic success and is the only viable option for Dominicans to legally migrate to Europe. Stories of improved livelihoods in the United States or in Europe stimulated the desire to work with tourists who will ultimately enable them to leave the country

(Cabezas 1999: 107; Brennan 2004a: 24). Brennan (2004a: 20-21) argues that sex workers pretend love and fulfil racialised fantasies of their clients in order to keep 'transnational ties open' (Brennan 2004a: 21) which could help them to 'get ahead' (*progresar*)<sup>21</sup> by securing remittances or visas.

In contrast, love is not always used strategically and 'performed' in a Goffmanian sense (Goffman 1959), but sex workers differentiate between sex work for a visa or financial help (*por residencia*) and sex work for emotional needs and romance (*por amor*) (Brennan 2003: 154). Similarly, Lerum (1999: 33) argues that sex work is not only about money, but can also be about companionship and romance.<sup>22</sup>

However, although Brennan (2004a) states that the conditions and experiences of sex workers are highly varied, even within the town of Sosúa, all but one of her examples represent tragic ends instead of permanent exits from poverty. In 2004, Brennan states, only a handful of sex workers have married and migrated from the island. Many more separated before marriage or got divorced before leaving the country, and even more returned to their home regions without major savings after about one year in Sosúa (Brennan 2003: 158). Thus, economic mobility is short lived and sex workers can almost never put their 'transnational plan' (Brennan 2004a: 88) into reality.

The sex workers' 'success' highly depends on contingent coincidences such as the sex tourists' intentions, emotions and economic situation. If sex tourists are not interested in long-term relationships or if they do not keep their promise regarding visas or money wires, the sex worker has no option but to start over.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, sex workers cling to exceptions and continue the positive discourse that is based upon fantasies and desires. Those who migrated to Europe return to their families to the countryside and face even downward mobility (Brennan 2004a: 26). However, negative stories do not find their ways into the daily gossip.

---

<sup>21</sup> Gregory (2007: 45) also uses verbs that stress movement and change to show the strategic usage of 'love' such as to overcome (*superarse*), to move ahead (*moverse*) or to turn things around (*resolverse*).

<sup>22</sup> Interestingly male sex tourists are often portrayed as agents who take advantage of female sex tourists; see, for example, Pruitt/LaFont (1995). Sanchez Taylor (2006) realises this double-standard in academic writings about male and female sex tourism, with 'female tourists being described as engaging in "romance tourism" (43).

<sup>23</sup> In this context, language might be a major problem, as according to Brennan most Spanish-speaking sex workers are barely able to communicate with their German clients (Brennan 2004: 23).

### *Inverted Gender Roles?*

Individualistic feminists argue further that sex workers' 'advancement strategy' leads to an inversion of gender relations and ideologies (Brennan 2004a: 38). They argue that female sex workers are not oppressed and passive objects of men, but active 'agents who make use of an existing sexual order' (Chapkis 1997: 29). By exploiting the tourists they can challenge the understandings of masculinity in the Caribbean, where traditionally men provide their income for their families. Similarly, Gregory (2007) argues that female sex workers disrupt 'structures and discourses of male power, claiming forms of agency and autonomy' (9).<sup>24</sup> Tripp (1997) has termed such a relationship 'reverse dependency' (cit. in Gregory 2007: 44): Suddenly, parents or husbands become dependent on their daughters, wives or girlfriends. In the same vein, Kempadoo (2004: 191) suggests that female sex workers contest dominant constructions of patriarchal regimes: They transform their bodies into resources for freedom and independence.

Certainly, men earn less money in both, the formal and the informal sector, than women who are in sex trade. International tourism brought capital which in turn opened up new opportunities for women and provided conditions in which gender roles could be effectively challenged. Female sex workers do have, on a practical level, *the possibility* to increase their economic independence and status (Brennan 2003: 165). Becoming the economic head of the household, for example, enables them to challenge hegemonic representations.

However, this does not necessarily lead to a reconfiguration in gender roles as most sex workers cling to traditional understandings of motherhood and frugality and yearn for marriage to men (Brennan 2004a: 131). They 'hold on to past conceptualizations of gender roles (even though their practice indicates otherwise)' (Brennan 2004b: 708). Studies indicate that Dominican women spent more of their earnings on nutrition and education of children than fathers and rearing children remains the role of the mother (Grasmuck/Espinal 1997, cit. in Cabezas 1999: 95). Financial support by the children's biological father, is also most unlikely as the fathers themselves are often without a job or underemployed or the

---

<sup>24</sup> Gregory (2007: 156) notes that especially lesbian sex workers account for the deconstruction of naturalised stereotypes of gender identities. They destruct the myth of 'natural male desirability' and challenge the male heteronormative imperative (163).

mothers are unaware of juridical procedures to secure provision or fear violence (Brennan 2003: 157).

This shows that heteronormative practices, especially with regard to parenthood and child rearing, do not become subject to dispute and contestation as argued by Gregory (2007: 49). In the end, women do have a double burden: They are responsible for both domestic and paid work (Elson 1995). By contrast, 'men openly enjoy freedom from gender ideologies that make demands on them to appear as working and sacrificing fathers' (Brennan 2004a: 227). Furthermore, they can even flaunt their unemployment as only 'savvy machos' could make money without actually working (Brennan 2004a: 227).

Additionally, male sex tourists want to 'break from demands of liberated European women' (Brennan 2004b: 709). These fantasies are serviced by the sex workers who consciously enact subordinated roles, thereby reinforcing stereotypes about women (Brennan 2003: 164).

Furthermore, the portrayal of sex workers as 'freelancing' workers who are able to set high prices is far too optimistic as many of them work on the streets for the price of their daily bread (Kempadoo 2004: 201).

## ***V. Conclusion***

The overall overemphasis of the sex worker's agency seems to have been driven by the disappointment about the victimization of sex workers in the media, the dominant human rights discourse as well as in structuralistic writings. Lerum critically notices that sex worker's voices 'remained at the outskirts of institutionalized knowledge' (1999: 34) and suggests to take their own words seriously and to build them into theories (Lerum 1999: 8; cf. Cabezas 2004: 1010). Certainly, the recognition of subjectivity and agency remains important as it is an integral part of social change (Kempadoo 1998: 8). However, it is also very important not to replace research by subjective statements so as not to confuse between categories of practice and categories of analysis.

The present paper has shown that the sex worker's lives 'are more marked by continuity than change' (Brennan 2004b: 707) and gender ideologies endure. Sex tourism does not necessarily lead to the contestation of dominant cultural versions of gender or destabilises the binarism between men and women. Instead, gender hierarchies persist as they are giving the actors some sense of security. This aspect

of security due to stability is overseen in most academic writings which either blame structural forces for the perpetuation of gender roles, or overemphasise women's agency.

It would be patronizing to portray all sex workers as having a 'false consciousness' (Simmons 138; Lerum 1999: 18) or simply as naïve, innocent victims (Doezema 1998: 38). However, sex workers should also not be glamorized as strategizing and purely 'entrepreneurial' (Paul 1997, cit. in Kempadoo 1999). This paper has argued that it is necessary not to lose sight of structural forces such as economic constraints and familial obligations. Even if women consciously decide to engage in the sex trade as a means to improve their economic situation, they do so choosing from a very limited set of alternatives, of which the sex trade is simply the easiest and most profitable one. Furthermore, as the examples discussed show, plans of upward mobility can rarely be realized. In the cases where significant improvements were made, this change was not enduring, and in addition it can not only be attributed to the sex worker's 'performance' but rather to contingent factors outside her reach, such as the tourists' mood and intentions.

It is also very important not to apply Western gender concepts. The cases have shown that it is risky to reason from the existence of women who are economically strong and independent that Dominican women want to be 'liberated' from traditional gender roles or patriarchy and achieve this through sex work. This points to the argument that viewing a shift in the distribution of income in families, households, consensual unions or marriages as necessarily leading to the inversion of gender relations is a eurocentric premise and influenced by normative assumptions about emancipation.

The individual accounts which were meant to lessen structuralistic arguments have indeed provided evidence that support these theories. However, more ethnographic research which is unbiased and takes account of both structural and individual factors is needed to fully understand this part of social reality in the Dominican Republic and other regions. In particular long-term studies could help provide an insight into social changes brought about by the growing sex tourism as well as other current transformations. The Dominican sex trade has a long history and is deeply embedded in social relations; it will most likely continue to be an integral part of the Caribbean landscape in the future (Kempadoo 2004: 85).



## References

- Barriteau, E. (2001): *The Political Economy of Gender in the Twentieth-Century Caribbean*. Basingstoke and New York, N.Y.: Palgrave.
- Betances, E. (1995): *State and Society in the Dominican Republic*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press.
- Brennan, D. (1998): *Everything is for Sale Here: Sex Tourism in Sosúa, the Dominican Republic*. PhD dissertation, Yale University.
- Brennan, D. (2003): Selling Sex for Visas: Sex Tourism as a Stepping-Stone to International Migration, in Ehrenreich, B. & Hochschild, A. (eds.): *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*. New York, N.Y.: Granta Books, pp. 154-168.
- Brennan, D. (2004a): *What's Love Got to Do With It? Transnational Desires and Sex Tourism in the Dominican Republic*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Brennan, D. (2004b): 'Women Work, Men Sponge, and Everyone Gossips: Macho Men and Stigmatized/ing Women in a Sex Tourist Town', *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 77, No. 4, pp. 705-733.
- Cabezas, A. (1998): *Pleasure and Its Pain: Sex Tourism in Sosúa, the Dominican Republic*. PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.
- Cabezas, A. (1999): Women's Work is Never Done: Sex Tourism in Sosúa, the Dominican Republic, in Kempadoo, K. (ed.): *Sun, Sex, and Gold: Tourism and Sex Work in the Caribbean*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, pp. 93-123.
- Cabezas, A. (2004): 'Between Love and Money: Sex, Tourism, and Citizenship in Cuba and the Dominican Republic', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 29, No. 4, pp. 987-1015.
- Chapkis, W. (1997): *Live Sex Acts: Women Performing Erotic Labor*. New York, N.Y.: Routledge.
- Cross, J. (1998): *Informal Politics: Street Vendors and the State in Mexico City*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Dank, B. (1999): Sex Work, Sex Workers and Beyond, in: Dank, B. & Refinetti, R. (eds.): *Sex Work & Sex Workers*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, pp. 1-6.
- de Oliveira, O. & Roberts, B. (1993): 'La Informalidad Urbana en Años de Expansión, Crisis y Reestructuración Económica', *Estudios Sociológicos*, Vol. 11, No. 31, pp. 33-58

- Derby, L. (2000): *The Dictator's Seduction: Gender and State Spectacle during the Trujillo Regime*, in Beezley, W. & Curcio-Nagy, L. (ed.): *Latin American Popular Culture: An Introduction*. Lanham, Md.: Scholarly Resources, pp. 213-240.
- Doezema, J. (1998): *Forced to Choose: Beyond the Voluntary vs. Forced Prostitution Dichotomy*, in Kempadoo, K. & Doezema, J. (eds.): *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance, and Redefinition*. New York, N.Y.: Routledge, pp. 34-50.
- Ellis, P. (ed.) (1986): *Women of the Caribbean*. London and Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Zed Books.
- Elson, D. (1995): *Male Bias in Macro-Economics: The Case of Structural Adjustment*, in: Elson, D. (ed.): *Male Bias in the Development Process*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 164-190.
- Girvan, N. (2000): *Globalization and Counter Globalization: The Caribbean in the Context of the South*, in Benn, D. & Hall, K. O. (eds.): *Globalisation, a Calculus of Inequality: Perspectives from the South*. Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, pp. 65-87.
- Goffman, E. (1959): *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday.
- Gregory, S. (2003): *Men in Paradise: Sex Tourism and the Political Economy of Masculinity*, in Moore, D., Kosek, J. and Pandian, A. (eds): *Race, Nature, and the Politics of Difference*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, pp. 323-355.
- Gregory, S. (2007): *The Devil Behind the Mirror: Globalization and Politics in the Dominican Republic*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press.
- Itzigsohn, J. (2000): *Developing Poverty: The State, Labor Market Deregulation, and the Informal Economy in Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic*. University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Kempadoo, K. (1998): *Introduction*, in Kempadoo, K. & Doezema, J. (eds.): *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance, and Redefinition*. New York, N.Y.: Routledge, pp. 1-28.
- Kempadoo, K. (2004): *Sexing the Caribbean: Gender, Race, and Sexual Labor*. New York, N.Y.: Routledge.
- Kibicho, W. (2009): *Sex Tourism in Africa: Kenya's Booming Industry*. Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing.
- Lerum, K. (1999): *Twelve-Step Feminism Makes Sex Workers Sick: How the State and the Recovery Movement Turn Radical Women into 'Useless Citizens'*, in: Dank, B. & Refinetti, R. (eds.): *Sex Work & Sex Workers*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, pp. 7-36.

- McClintock, A. (1993): 'Sex Workers and Sex Work: An Introduction', *Social Text*, Vol. 37, pp. 1-10.
- Momsen, J.H. (ed.) (1993): *Women & Change in the Caribbean: A Pan-Caribbean Perspective*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press.
- Pruitt, D. & LaFont, S. (1995): 'For Love and Money: Romance Tourism in Jamaica', *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp. 422-440.
- Safa, H. & Antrobus, P. (1992): Women and the Economic Crisis in the Caribbean, in Beneria, L. & Feldman, S. (eds.): *Unequal Burden*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, pp. 49-82.
- Safa, H. (1995a): *The Myth of the Male Breadwinner: Women and Industrialization in the Caribbean*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press.
- Safa, H. (1995b): Gender Implications of Export-Led Industrialization in the Caribbean Basin, in Blumberg, R.L., Rakowski, C., Tinkler, I. & Monteon, M. (eds.): *Engendering Wealth and Well-Being: Empowerment for Global Change*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, pp. 89-112.
- Sanchez Taylor, J. (2006): 'Female Sex Tourism: A Contradiction in Terms?', *Feminist Review*, No. 83, pp. 42-59.
- Sassen, S. (2000): 'Women's Burden: Counter-Geographies of Globalization and the Feminization of Survival', *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 53, No. 2, pp. 504-524.
- Seitz, B. (1994): From Home to Street: Women and the Revolution in Nicaragua, in Yeager, G.M. (ed.): *Confronting Change, Challenging Tradition: Women in Latin American History*. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, pp. 197-210.
- Simmons, M. (1999): Theorizing Prostitution: The Question of Agency, in: Dank, B. & Refinetti, R. (eds.): *Sex Work & Sex Workers*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, pp. 125-148.
- Stevens, E. ([1973]1994): Marianismo: The Other Face of Machismo, in Yeager, G.M. (ed.): *Confronting Change, Challenging Tradition: Women in Latin American History*. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, pp. 3-17.