Men in Prostitution: Perspectives, Identities and Problems.
Conference report
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Introducing Men in Prostitution

By May-Len Skilbrei and Astrid Renland

Prostitution is a phenomenon where gender plays an integral part. Cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity and structural differences between men and women form the background for the transaction of money for sex in heterosexual prostitution. Prostitution has been an important issue for many generations of feminists, and gender perspective is a must in this research. Still, we would argue that research on prostitution needs to bring in gender in a more complex way. The participants in the Network for prostitution research in the Nordic countries have been concerned with issues of gender and prostitution for a long time.¹ That was the reason why the network arranged the conference *Men in prostitution: perspectives, identities and problems* in 2005.² The question of men and masculinities in prostitution has been a central focus in the research of several researchers in the Network, and in arranging a conference we aimed at placing the issue of gender in prostitution, prostitution control and prostitution debates in the centre of prostitution research.

When talking about men and prostitution, most people will think of men’s role as the buyers of sex. Several of the papers at the conference were concerned with men who

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¹ The Network for prostitution in the Nordic countries was established in 2002 after a meeting of a handful of Nordic prostitution researchers at Norwegian Social Research (NOVA). In the years 2002-2005 the Network for prostitution research in the Nordic countries arranged seminars four times a year in cities in the Nordic countries and in Tallinn in Estonia and St. Petersburg in Russia. At the seminars, the 10-14 participants in the network presented their ongoing research project on different aspects of prostitution in a Nordic setting. Local researchers often participated and the group visited local social service centers directed at persons involved in prostitution. The network has received funding from NorFA/NordForsk programme *Gender and Violence* and the Nordic Institute for Women’s Studies and Gender Research/Nordic Gender Institute (NIKK).

² The conference was financed by The Research Council of Norway’s programme *Gender research: knowledge, boundaries, change. Men in prostitution: perspective, identities and problems* was a two-day conference with 13 plenary papers. The conference counted approximately 100 attending researchers, students, social workers, journalists and others from the Nordic countries, Estonia, UK, USA and Italy.
buy sex and took as their starting points survey data on the buying of sex, qualitative interviews with men who buy sex, as well as fieldwork at sites where sex buyers meet. The Danish sociologist Claus Lautrup presented findings from a new large survey study on Danish men’s attitudes towards and preferences in prostitution (Lautrup 2005). In his paper, Lautrup emphasised the question of Danish men’s preferences in prostitution, for example their preferences for Danish or foreign women. Danish prostitution markets have changed dramatically in the last ten years. The number of foreign women has increased dramatically, but still, many of the men in Lautrup’s survey reported that they preferred buying sex from Danish women. It is difficult to know why this is so, and why clients make the choices they do is an interesting question for further research. The survey showed that 14% of Danish men had bought sex one or more times, which is about the same proportion as in the other Nordic countries. Lautrup’s study attracted a good deal of attention in Denmark, among other things because there had previously been very little knowledge about the buying of sex. The quantitative studies on the buying of sex have played an important part in shifting the focus to the demand side of prostitution in many countries, and have laid the ground for qualitative research on what buying sex means for clients and how clients’ practices are formed. An important finding in this and other surveys is that there are few differences between men who have bought sex and men who have not. This knowledge is of great political importance, because it influences the understanding of the kinds of policies that are needed to change attitudes and practices.

The Swedish researcher Jari Kuosmanen presented both quantitative and qualitative research on men who buy sex in his paper “Buying sexual services: A question about generation and masculinity”. Kuosmanen has participated in several studies on sexuality and men who buy sex in Sweden, and in the paper he systematised earlier research on the issue. This highlighted the diversity in the portrayal and classification of the buying of sex. One of Kuosmanen’s most important points is that it is necessary to bring generation and ethnicity into the question of what influences the extent and meaning of prostitution.
The other studies on men who buy sex presented at the conference were based on qualitative materials. The Norwegian social anthropologist Ingrid Smette presented the paper “Prostitution Clients Dealing with Gender Equality: An analysis of client narratives in a Norwegian Context”. The paper presented an analysis which was a step onwards from a report she had issued two years earlier on men who buy sex (Smette 2003). Smette showed how clients relate to ideals of gender equality in their discussions amongst themselves on the Internet, not only in relation to ongoing political debates but also in relation to their own experiences with buying sex. The men are aware of the fact that buying sex is at odds with ideals about the relationship between men and women, and they deal with this dilemma in different ways.

The political scientist Anne-Maria Marttila from Finland presented a paper on the findings in her PhD project on Finnish men’s practices of buying sex in Finland, Estonia and Northwest Russia. Her paper ”Intersections of gender, sexuality and ethnicity: A study of Finnish male clients of prostitution” focused on how Finnish men, as prostitution clients, reproduce gender, sexuality and ethnicity as well as personal relations with each other, through the act of buying sex. Her material consists of narratives on buying sex that men have sent her, as well as interviews and observations at prostitution arenas in Finland, Estonia and Russia. An important finding is that the men construct buying sex in ”the East” as different from buying sex in Finland. They describe how being abroad lets them cast aside their everyday roles as husbands, fathers and sons, enabling them to be purely selfish in a different context.

Kirsten Stien, a Norwegian educational scientist, presented the paper “Men who are buying sex, is that also a matter of class and ethnicity?”. The buying of sex is often portrayed as having something to do with gender and sexuality and little else, and Stien’s paper brought the importance of context into the picture. Buying sex is an act linked to complex relations between gender, geography, ethnicity and class. The paper was based on a project Stien carried out in Northern Norway together with social anthropologist Britt Kramvig (Kramvig and Stien 2002) in local communities into which Russian women migrated. The “Russian” prostitution that emerged was based
in private residences, and the women entered social relations that were not only about prostitution. Stien and Kramvig discuss how the women and what they did was talked about among the men visiting these houses. The men’s experiences with belonging to an ethnic minority, being Sámi, and/or being marginalised as bachelors, meant that they often felt solidarity with the Russian women who were condemned in the local communities affected by increased prostitution.

The Swedish-American social anthropologist Don Kulick gave a paper on the portrayal of men who buy sex in Sweden. He presented an interpretation of Swedish campaigns against buying sex and research on clients, and described a shift from the view that buying sex is an act of normality to the view that buying sex is deviant. Kulick described how men who buy sex and even male sexuality itself were pathologised in research and politics because buying sex was understood as too vile an act to understand. Kulick concludes that this pathologisation is due to ideals about ”good sex” linked to a national identity, as the gender equality minded Sweden can only accept sex between equals. When prostitution policies are linked to a national identity project, it becomes difficult for other narratives about prostitution to be heard.

Male prostitution gets very little attention in Norway, as in most other countries. This is also true for social work in the field of prostitution. The lack of focus on male prostitution does not, however, reflect a situation where the phenomenon hardly exists. There is reason to believe that male prostitution is more widespread than we like to admit (Hegna and Pedersen 2002). In today’s Norway, male prostitution is not regarded as a societal and individual problem in the way female prostitution is, and one may ask whether this is due to this form of prostitution being romanticised or because homosexuality is still a taboo. The British sociologist Anthony Pryce presented the paper ”’Flesh’: The historical construction of male sex work”. The paper was on how male prostitution in some historical periods has been normalised and romanticised, while it in others has been demonised, and correspondingly the subject has entered and disappeared from public awareness. Pryce was particularly interested in the symbolic aspects of male prostitution and how cultural representations of this form of prostitution open up for different political approaches.
Pryce made use of images from antiquity and onwards to illustrate how male prostitution, sometimes involving a considerable age difference between the seller and buyer of sex, has been valued very differently in different periods.

It is not a given that a relationship is experienced in the same way by everyone involved. An act can be viewed as prostitution by one party, without being viewed that way by the other. Neither is it a given that something that looks like prostitution for observers is perceived as such by the participants. An unclear boundary between what is and what is not prostitution is particularly evident in studies on Western sex tourism. The British sociologist Joan Phillips gave a paper with the title “White women and black men: An old story continued?” at the conference. She spoke about her research on prostitution or prostitution like relations where young men in Barbados receive presents, cash and status through their relationships with female tourists. In many countries, there are local prostitution markets were women can buy sex. These women are most often white women from the rich West who buy sex from men from poorer parts of the world, often from former colonies (de Albuquerque 1999:90-91). Phillips discussed what the relationship between the buyer and seller of sex looks like in these relations, with a special emphasis on power. For the European women coming to Barbados as tourists, the beach boys are understood as the essence of “hypersexual black men”. The men who enter these relationships are young and often poor. Yet, the prostitution experience is not linked to an understanding of them as victims of the women’s exploitation of economic, historical, racial and age based privilege, neither in the local context nor in most research literature on male prostitution. Instead emphasis is on what the men get out of the relationships in addition to the money, such as status and sex.

In cases where women sell sex to men in tourist arenas one may also find that the prostitution takes place in a less explicit manner than in the tourist’s Western country. The Norwegian sociologist Jan Egil Aakernes presented findings from his MA thesis on young Western men’s understanding of their own experiences with buying sex in Thailand (2002). His paper, “Backpackers: Critics and Participants in Sex Tourism”, dealt with how young male backpackers did not understand their relationships with
Thai women as prostitution, because what they experienced did not live up to the assumptions they already had about prostitution. An important reason was that the women they had a relationship with did not remind them of women in prostitution back home. The men thus ventured into prostitution like relations while still condemning prostitution as such. Even though the men viewed the relationship as a romantic one, the Thai women saw it differently. The question remains what the relation is, when one party believes one thing and the other party something else. The backpackers’ assumptions about and rejection of prostitution can be linked to their criticism of mass tourism. The men understood their own relations with the local population as authentic, in opposition to mass or sex tourists, which they assumed entered into inauthentic relations with Thai people and Thailand.

Identifying prostitution can also be problematic in a Norwegian context. As prostitution is strongly associated with the heterosexual prostitution where women sell and men buy sex, it can be hard in other forms of prostitution to acknowledge it as such. The Norwegian sociologist Camilla Jordheim Larsen dealt with the issue of the boundary between prostitution and non-prostitution in her paper “Teenage boys hanging out with men in the neighbourhood”. She described her findings from a research project where boys got some rewards, such as access to alcohol and the payment of mobile phone use, in return for being available to adult men in their local communities (Larsen and Pedersen 2005). This mostly involved keeping the men company, but for some, it also meant being available as sexual partners. This transaction was implicit, and also in their conversations with the researchers, the boys were very unclear in describing what they had to give in return for money, alcohol and goods. The boys were very well aware that the men were interested in them sexually, but they seemed to manoeuvre to get as much out of this interest as possible without having to give anything in return. Larsen discussed this in terms of power: the relationship between the boys and the men is problematic, but the power relations are unclear as the boys have the power to reject, exploit and manipulate men who in terms of their sexuality are marginalised.
May-Len Skilbrei presented a paper with the title "Prostitution in court". The paper was concerned with the implicit gendered character of relations in prostitution, and the consequences this has for how prostitution is treated legally. The association between women and prostitution is important also outside prostitution, as girls and women risk being labelled whores if they fail to live up to standards of femininity. The client in prostitution is also implicitly gendered: when thinking about a “client”, most people will think of a man. In several countries, the slang for a client in prostitution is even a male name, like “John” in the UK, USA and Australia. An underexplored part of prostitution is the pimp/procurer. The pimp is a man by default as a woman organising someone else’s prostitution is often referred to as a “female pimp” or “madam”. This seems to undermine power and exploitation in relationships between the prostitutes and their female pimps, as this relationship is constructed in terms of family relations and the role of the manager as a helper.

The British sociologist Jackie West was invited to the conference to give a paper on how focusing on gender in prostitution can also pose a problem. West’s main point was that focusing on individual destinies and gendered processes is a dead-end where prostitution ends up appearing to have something to do with individuals and where harm is linked to relations. Instead, she suggested, one might study how prostitution policies affect people who sell sex. West argued that a general problem when it comes to prostitution policies is that they are to a too large extent formed by gender concerns and individual dramatic stories. If one had instead treated prostitution like other commercial relations and developed policies based on experiences from other areas of society, the rights of people selling sex would have been taken better care of.

In planning the conference programme we aimed at presenting a variety of research on men in prostitution. We wanted to show which areas we have a good deal of knowledge about and which areas we know rather less about. We also wanted to highlight research that represents something out of the ordinary. Internationally there are now numerous studies aimed at estimating how many men buy sex and the quantitative relationship between buying sex, other sexual relations, marriage, income, etc. Far fewer studies are concerned with the meaning buying sex has in
men’s lives. The papers focusing on the meaning of prostitution thus represent an under-researched perspective. In general, very little research has been done on men who buy sex. And particularly in the Nordic countries, few researchers are interested in men who sell sex. The third area where research is lacking is on the party organising other people’s prostitution: pimps/procurers and traffickers. Pimps and traffickers have in recent years attracted a lot of attention in media and politics, in the Nordic countries and other countries. However, this attention has been insufficiently matched by research based knowledge on the relation or the people in question.

Although we did find that research was lacking in these areas, identifying knowledge gaps was not the most important aim of the conference. The purpose was first and foremost to create a forum for academic discussion on prostitution and gender. It has been argued that much of prostitution research has been lacking in theoretical ambitions because of their descriptive and political nature (Brewis and Linstead 2000). Prostitution is a research area where many expect research to have a normative starting point and a political goal, i.e. to improve social or legal interventions. For prostitution research to have an analytical potential, it is also necessary to discuss research in forums where political applicability and descriptions of individual destinies are not the yardstick for good research.


References


West, Jackie (2000): “Prostitution: Collectives and the Politics of Regulation”, 

Danish Internet survey on clients ”Not just a body to body experience”

By Claus Lautrup

The aim of my presentation is to introduce you to a new survey on men buying sex. As the project is the first of its kind in a Danish context there were many questions we wanted to ask. Therefore it was a choice to try to cover as many aspects of the demand side of prostitution as possible. For this reason we chose to focus on a wide range of themes rather than concentrating on specific issues. The survey has no normative aim and doesn’t discuss whether or not buying sex is an acceptable act. Neither does it discuss the criminalising of clients. In Denmark the lack of knowledge on clients – who they are and why they buy sex – gives at this stage good reason to focus on research rather than making political decisions about a group of men we know so very little about.

The survey is sociological, which means that psychological factors for buying sex have not been in focus. The survey focuses on the social and cultural factors that may have an impact on the demand side of prostitution. We also wanted to find answers to client’s preferences for foreign or Danish women in prostitution. The number of foreign women selling sex in Denmark has risen considerably during the past 10-15 years. The question remains though if the growing number of foreign women in the Danish sex industry only can be explained as a reaction to Danish men’s demand for certain nationalities?

When I mainly refer to women selling sex – and not men and women - the reason is that only 3% of the men in this survey have bought sex from other men.
Through a research company, who provide internet based surveys; we sent questionnaires to 8.000 men who are part of the research company’s Internet panel. They have signed up to be part of the panel and are sent questionnaires – often about commercial issues (what coffees or telephones they buy). Out of 8.000 questionnaires sent 6.350 were returned. The research company had the background variables; age, profession, residence and marital status. If the men had a need for extra discretion, the questionnaires were attached with a link to a homepage where they themselves had to fill in background variables.

Additional 20 men – who mostly bought sex on a regularly basis – were interviewed over the telephone. The primary aim of the interviews was to put the results from the internet survey into a qualitative perspective. In this presentation I will mainly focus on the results from the internet survey.

In the material, we found that 14% had bought sex. The number is about the same in two earlier Danish surveys and is similar to Norwegian and Swedish estimates. In Denmark the number of women selling sex in Denmark has increased through the past 20 years. But according to this survey the number of men buying sex seems to be somewhat stable in the same period of time. Of course there are great uncertainties connected with surveys about sexual conduct. But on the other hand it is likely that the number of clients has been stable. An indication of this could be the growing competition in the sex industry and the fact that the prices on sexual services have been more or less the same through the past 20 years.

When we search for reasons as for why some men buy sex, we rarely raise the question why other – the majority of – men don’t. As you see 86% haven’t bought sex, this too is of relevance to analyse. The 86% were asked why they hadn’t bought sex.

Of men with no experiences of buying sex, 53% have never considered buying sex. The second most used answer was that they couldn’t get turned on by having sex with a prostitute (20%). The men were asked if they would consider buying sex in the
future. More than three out of four refused the idea. Most married men have never considered buying sex, while more single men would consider buying sex in the future. The older the men are, the more likely they are to never having considered purchasing sex. The younger men are, the more likely they are to consider buying sex in the future.

To conclude on this, it is often emphasised that buying sex is possible for all men. However, the majority of men from this survey haven’t bought sex. Most of them explain this with the fact that the possibility never have crossed their minds, they couldn’t get turned on by buying sex from a prostitute or because they think it is wrong to buy sex from another person. To buy sex may be most men’s possibility, but the majority of men haven’t used it and wouldn’t do so even if they had the chance.

One of the most significant results in this survey has been the identification of the relation between early debut as a client and later regular client conduct. The younger men are the first time they buy sex, the more they seem to buy sex on a regular basis later in life. And perhaps not surprisingly, the older the men are the first time they buy sex, the fewer times they buy sex later in life.

We found that there is a great variation in how often men have bought sex.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 time</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-5 times</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-12 times</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 12 times</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>101%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you look at the number of men who have bought sex in total, 60% have paid for sex one or few times, while just under one third have bought sex on a regular basis
(meaning over 12 times totally). The numbers are comparable with Prieur and Taksdal’s study from 1989.

Married men and men living in relationships have most experiences with buying sex. Of course it is possible that some men bought sex before they entered a relationship, but if you look at the client activity within the past 12 months, the tendency gets confirmed and relationships doesn’t seem to moderate the coherence.

The assumption that men buy sex because it is their only possibility of getting sex is thus not supported in my research. From the interviews it was obvious that men in relationships bought sex, because it was non-committal or they bought the sexual services their partner wouldn’t give them.

The group of men who have bought sex most times within the 12 months are independent/self employed men. Men buying sex on a regular basis are white collar workers, skilled/unskilled and self employed men. From the large number of white collar workers, we can conclude that from a demographic point of view, men from most occupations who buy sex.

Interestingly enough, I found that 62% of the clients have talked to others about it. This is in contrast to the tendency in the 20 qualitative interviews where most men said they have never talked to anybody about their experiences with commercial sex. Most young men share experiences of buying sex with their friends (97%) and with regard to professions, skilled/unskilled and self employed share experiences with their colleagues more than white collar workers.

A possible explanation can be that some male dominated workplaces have a more explicitly or implicitly accepting attitude towards buying sex. This may also have an impact on some men’s motivation to pay for sexual services.

The argument supports Bridget Anderson and Julia O’Connell Davidson (2004) when they claim that buying sex often is a social act, and is a reaction to the social
surrounding’s expectations. Buying sex seems in this survey – to some extend – to be a social event rather than an individual.

With inspiration from Sven Axel Månsson (1998) and Sandell et al. (1996) I constructed three groups of clients. They are categorised after the frequency of buying sex and marital status. The categories are: Super consumers/relationship: This category represents men in relationships (married or unmarried) who buy sex on a regular basis. Super consumers/single: This category represents single men who buy sex on a regular basis. Experimenting men: This category represents men who have bought sex once or a few times in their lives and who are either living alone, married or in a relationship.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clients</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Superconsumer / Relationship</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Super consumer / Single</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimenting men</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Every fifth client is categorised as a super consumer in relationship, while the group of single super consumers are less than 10%. The remaining 71% are the experimenting men who have bought sex one or few times.

The 14% of men who had at least once bought sex, were presented to a range of motives for buying sex. I shall present you for the three most used answers. Most (60%) answered that their primary reason for buying sex was “Something I wanted to try”. The second most used motive was (36%): “To buy sex is synonymous with non committable sex”. The third most used answer was (30%): “The situation presented itself”.

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If the answers are related to the three types of clients described above, a vast majority of the experimenting men, almost seven out of 10 men, have bought sex because it was something they wanted to try. In comparison less than half of the men who buy sex on a regular basis used the same argument. From this finding I conclude, that buying sex for some men in some environments seems to be perceived as sexual experimentation.

The second most used argument of non committable sex is mostly used by super consumers, who are either in relationships or single (64%). There is a tendency that the younger the married men are, the more they use this argument. Only one fifth of the single super consumers answer that they buy sex because it is their only way of getting sex. Only 11% of the clients buy sex because they have special needs. Actually, 97% of the clients in the survey buy ordinary sexual services like oral sex and ordinary sexual intercourse, and only 8% buy sex because it is their only possibility of getting sex. Thus most of the stereotypes as for why men buy sex are not verified in this survey. I am not going to discuss the motives the interviewed men gave for buying sex as they didn’t differ from significantly from other qualitative research done by researchers like Sven Axel Månsson (1998), Prieur and Taksdal (1989), Ingrid Smette (2003) and Elin Kippe (2004).

Another important issue is the men’s preferences in terms of the women’s nationality: Who do they want to buy sex from?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Danish women</td>
<td>65%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asian women</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern European women</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African women</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other nationalities</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The number of foreign women who sell sex in Denmark has risen through the past 10-15 years. This led me to ask the question whether or not this is a reaction to a demand for foreign women in the sex industry or maybe the increasing number of foreign prostitutes leads to an increasing demand.

23% of the respondents who have bought sex, have only bought sex from Danish women. Others have either bought sex from foreign women or from both foreign and Danish women. The men were asked if they prefer a certain nationality. More than half of the men have no preference for nationality. Only about 40% thinks that nationality is of some or of great relevance. Despite the increasing number of foreign women in the Danish sex industry most Danish men have either no preference for a certain nationality or prefer Danish women. If an increasing supply leads to an increased demand, we don’t know. But from the number of foreign women in Denmark selling sex and the preferences of the clients it seems obvious that some men frequent the women because they are available, not because they are of a specific nationality.

Most men in the interviews did not prefer to buy sex from foreign women. The reason was that they thought that some of the women may be forced to sell sex and may be victims of trafficking. It was striking though that the men were convinced that they themselves would be able to decide if a foreign (or Danish) women is selling sex out of free will. If she didn’t, they wouldn’t want to buy sex from her.

The title of this survey “Not just a body to body experience” is a quote from an interviewed man. It reflects a contradictory explanation some clients use. One the one hand they see prostitution as a market based relation. On the other, they have a desire to buy tenderness, intimacy and mutual affection. As both Kippe (2004) and Smette (2003) have argued, this can both be real needs and a way of legitimising paying for sex.

The 20 interviewed men described the violence or the force trafficked women can be victims of as a visible sort of violence they would be able to identify. All of them
stressed the fact that they wouldn’t buy sex from women who sold sex only for money. This might be a way of legitimating their conduct, but it might also be an indication that the clients are not without conscience.

Based on the knowledge produced in this survey, I recommend information campaigns targeting men generally, but also male dominated workplaces specifically. Most men had bought sex because they wanted to try it, and the younger the men were, the more they answered that they would consider buying sex in the future. If buying sex among some young or older men is seen as part of a sexual experimentation, this could be an element to challenge.

I also recommend the establishment of an anonymous telephone/internet counselling service. Most men in the interviews and about half of the men in the internet survey thought it would be a good idea to establish a counselling service for men who pay for sex. Every fifth of the clients from the Internet–survey who were in favour of a telephone/internet counselling service would use or would consider using such a service.

Yesterday the minister of equality in Denmark stated that a campaign targeting young men and a telephone/internet counselling service will be established. To focus on the demand side of prostitution is yet to be tried in Denmark. This study has not been concerned with the issue of prostitution policies, but I want to emphasise that there are many social initiatives in relation to clients that we should try before criminalising buying sex.

References


Buying Sex and Dealing with Gender Equality:
Client Narratives in a Norwegian Context

By Ingrid Smette

How do Norwegian men who buy sexual services from female prostitutes relate to gender equality? This question is at the center of the paper that I will present and I will begin by introducing the background for asking this particular question.

Heterosexual prostitution, where women normally take the position as sellers and men as buyers, has in the Nordic and other feminist movements been considered a key symbol of patriarchal oppression of women. Strategies to deal with clients have been an important issue in Nordic women’s movements since the 70’s (Svanström 2004). The law prohibiting the purchase of sexual services in Sweden, implemented in 1999, was explicitly aimed at communicating the message that buying sexual services is incompatible with a gender equal society (Smette 2003).

The dominant image of clients of prostitutes in a Nordic context is that of a man violating principles of decency and modern male gender roles (Prieur and Taksdal 1989, Månsson 2001). Men who buy sex are considered to be opposed to gender equality in various ways: Prieur and Taksdal (1989) argued that although the purchase of sex may have a number of different meanings for different clients, the underlying motivation will always be the desire to have power over women. The Swedish researcher Sven-Axel Månsson (2001) argues that in a Nordic context buying sex can in some instances be conceived of as a strategy employed by men in order to compensate for the loss of power induced by feminist struggles and subsequent changes in gender relations. Because the act of buying sex in this sense implies resistance to the goals in the struggle towards a gender equal society, it can be categorised as an anti-feminist act.
But how do male clients of female prostitutes themselves perceive the relationship between their participation in the prostitution market and their opinions on gender equality? Do the experience their participation in the prostitution market as contradicting with ideas of gender equality?

The aim of this paper is to investigate how Norwegian client narratives relate to public images of the client and how they position themselves in relation to ideas of gender equality. I will argue that the men in the study in their discourses relocated the issue of prostitution into other political domains than that of gender equality. I will use the concept “discursive strategies” about these processes of relocation. The use of these discourses must be seen as related to a desire to justify their involvement on the prostitution market and at the same time come across as ordinary men in terms of their ideas on gender. The discourses these men draw on will be conceptualised as the discourse on biological difference, the discourse on resistance against state disciplining, and the discourse on sex as recreation and liberal markets.

Methods and analytical perspectives
This paper is based on the material collected for a report on male clients of female prostitutes (Smette 2003). The report was commissioned by Pro Sentret, a Norwegian national resource centre on prostitution issues. The empirical material has two main sources: A substantial part of the written material originates from two web based discussion groups for male clients of prostitutes. The discussion groups were open, free of charge web pages that were discovered via links from other sex-related web sites. The main aim of the discussion groups was exchange of information about the indoor prostitution market in Oslo, Norway. Some of the discussions revolved around the experience of being a client of prostitutes. This material was generated by my observation and participation in the discussion groups. My participation was open, and the project, its goals and institutional relationships were identified for the participants.
I will not go into detail about the methodological questions concerning the use of Internet material as data but only briefly discuss the question of the validity of the material: Does the texts produced and posted on these pages give us information about what the clients really think about their acts? I have approached the problem of validity in the following ways: Firstly, I have looked at the material not just as text, but also as interaction. Thus, regardless of whether the statements reflect the authors “true” opinions, the statements that are produced generate a response which makes these utterances more than text monologues, but forms of social interaction. I have argued that in these interactions, there were certain patterns that I have chosen to describe by the term discourses. These will be dealt with later on in the paper.

Secondly, the material from these discussions was complemented by interviews with men recruited from these web pages. 12 informants were recruited for individual interviews, half of the interviews were conducted via phone and the other half took place face to face. One of the topics in the interviews was the men’s opinions on the activities and discussions taking place on the client web sites. The way these men related to the web sites provided additional perspectives on the meanings of the interactions taking place on the web pages.3

Other themes in the interviews were the men’s history as prostitution clients, opinions on women selling sex and perceptions of the experiences of women selling sex, views on love and relationships, knowledge and opinions about laws regulating prostitution. In most of the interviews the questions about the men’s opinions on gender equality were not asked directly. On the contrary, after having finished the initial analysis of the material and the commissioned report, I have been left with the sentiment that I had not been able to properly answer the question of how these men positioned themselves in relation to ideas of gender equality.

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3 The interviews were not taped but detailed notes were taken during the interviews and written up immediately afterwards. The length of the interviews ranged from 30 minutes up to a total of 10 hours of repeated, self initiated interviews.
In my opinion, this question is particularly interesting considering the fact that the men who volunteered for the interviews were rather young. With one exception, the men were between 26 and 34 years of age. As they were men of approximately my own age, I assumed that they, having grown up in the 70’s, would be familiar with and at least to some extent marked by the gender debates that have been an important part of Norwegian public discourse over the last 30 years. The fact that the majority of the men also had several years of higher education and seemed to be raised in middle class environments makes it reasonable to expect that these men would claim to be in favour of common ideals of gender equality, as these are often described as middle class. Consequently, there were several questions that seem relevant: Could an explanation for these men’s decisions to buy sex be explained by a conscious resistance or oppositions to gender equality, as the “compensation hypothesis” presented earlier would suggest? Would they have opinions on women and sexuality that were different – and more “old fashioned” than other men of their generation?

**Locating prostitution inside or outside of the political field of gender equality**

Through the interviews, whatever prior assumption I might have had about finding men with what in a Norwegian context would be considered old fashioned opinions on gender issues – was not directly confirmed. The interviewed men seemed to have “ordinary” opinions on general questions about gender, gender equality and gender roles. Some, however, held views about inherent differences between male and female sexuality, that were relevant for their opinions on gender equality, and I will return to these later on. However, the interviewed clients seemed to be familiar with the dominant image of the prostitution clients, and to a certain extent they were preoccupied with distancing themselves from this image, for instance through criticising “other” clients that did not respect the women they bought sex from.

The most prominent characteristic of their discourse on prostitution and gender equality, however, was how they claimed that prostitution *itself* did not represent a problem for gender equality. Svein, a man of 33, acknowledged that the reason why this was an issue in public debate was the fact that, most commonly, men are buyers
and women sellers. He argued, however, that even if many women in prostitution are oppressed, prostitution is not oppression of all women. “My opinion on women is not influenced in a negative way because of prostitution”, he says. Another client, Krister aged 28, claimed that "If you tell one of the girls working from a flat that she involved in prostitution because of lack of gender equality, she will laugh at you”.

One interview partially represented an exception to this view. I will present Olav, a man in the beginning of his thirties and a father of two small children here to make it more obvious what the other men did not say. Olav’s case is interesting because he in the beginning of the interviews says that one of the main reasons why he feels bad about buying sex is because he perceives it as an act that contradicts his views on gender equality and his political views in general. For him; being a client and a man in favour of gender equality is a contradiction in terms. What in the practice of prostitution did he experience as incompatible with his opinions on gender equality? In the interviews Olav brings out two points: One is that he feels that what he doing when buying sex is “degrading to all women”. He thinks that selling sex is harmful for a woman’s self respect and it will necessarily discredit her in the opinion of others. His other point concerns the respective roles of men and women in prostitution: The fact that almost only women sell and almost only men buy, illustrates that this market is a product of male dominance in society.

Olav emphasised that he had great respect for the women from whom he bought sexual services. His respect was related both to the difficulty of their profession, but also to the quality of the services they offer. Olav’s relationship to prostitution was in itself ambivalent, characterised by his desire to quit, his attraction to it and the contradictions he experiences by engaging in these acts. It is of course possible that Olav’s preoccupation with gender equality is a product of the interview being an interaction with a female academic, whom he probably expects to have critical views on men who buy sex. During the repeated, self-initiated interviews, the gender equality theme became less present. Nevertheless, what distinguished Olav from the other men that were interviewed is the way he acknowledges the locating of prostitution in the field of gender equality.
The other informants did not state that prostitution posed a problem for gender equality in general. In the following section of this paper, I will show how the interviewed clients and the clients discussing on the web pages engaged in discourses that relocated or transferred prostitution into other political domains than that of gender equality. By exploring these different, although sometimes overlapping discourses, I will try to show how a self-representation as an “ordinary man” in favour of gender equality is maintained and that any apparent contradiction between the practice of buying sex and being in favour of gender equality is solved.

**The discourse on biological difference**

“Men are not as selective with respect to partners as women. Being able to spread your genes is important for men, whereas women benefit more from remaining with one partner. A classical biological explanation, yes, but I believe it is like this”.

This claim was made by Petter, a single man in his late 20’s. He argues that the biological nature of men’s sexuality is “the force” the causes men to buy sex, and in fact, the reason why prostitution is an inevitable social phenomenon. Petter was not alone in making these claims. A recurring theme in the answers to the question “Why is it mainly men who buy sexual services?” – posted by me in the discussion forum – was that it was due to the influences of testosterone and men’s genetic dispositions. Implicit in this discourse is a specific understanding of *biological* difference between male and female sexuality. The need for prostitution is thus explained by the fact that men need sex more than women do and that consequently, both single and married men sometimes feel the need to see a prostitute for sex they cannot get elsewhere. This biological argument was important also in explaining why women do not “need” to buy sex – a woman can always find a man who is willing to have sex with her.

This conception also led to the claim that men are always ready for sex, expressed in this citation from the discussion group: “Why a man never declines an opportunity to have sex? Because of primordial instincts and hormones. A man who turns down a
chance to prove his manhood is barely a *man*, only a male subject [*mannlig individ*].” The emphasis on sex drive can be interpreted as an element in constructing client behaviour as a product of normal masculine behaviour, and consequently a strategy to construct themselves as “normal” men. A further implication of this process of the normalising the purchase of sex, is the assumption that manhood is defined by a strong sex drive.

Some of the informants were particularly preoccupied with and opposed to what can be termed the feminist perspective of socially constructed sexualities. The argument has been that sexual difference is socially constructed and serves to defend and maintain societal structures that keep men in power. Some of the interviewed men argued that this understanding disregarded differences that are objective facts – not culturally contingent constructions. Stian is one of the men holding this view. He is in the beginning of his thirties and has bought sex regularly for eight years. Part of the reason is that he wants more sex and other kinds of sex than his female partner is willing to engage in, and although he believes that this is partly due to difficulties in their relationship, he also believes that this is related to biological differences between men and women.

The way prostitution is explained by biology can be argued to be a way of relocating prostitution to a field where it cannot be challenged, because of the inevitability and inalterability of biological facts. The claim that their involvement in prostitution is a result of biology, not their personalities or political choices, can be seen as a way of dissociating their practices in prostitution from their views on gender equality, and also as a refusal to discuss prostitution as a gender equality issue.

**The discourse on resistance against state disciplining of the individual**

“I don’t look at [buying sex] as related to masculinity. I think it is a socially pitiful act and I would never admit to buying sex. However, to me, buying sex is a sort of thrill and it represents a world in opposition to a completely unbearable Christian paradise. [...]” (from the discussion forum)
A second discourse that will be explored here is one that presents prostitution as an attractive phenomenon because of the taboo and secrecy that surrounds it and the way it is perceived as conflicting with the ideals of mainstream society. Buying sex can thereby be interpreted as a sort of resistance to the strict disciplining of individuals performed by the state, a sort of disciplining that also involves compliance with specific ideas about gender and gender equality.

Conceptualising involvement in prostitution as a sort of “security valve” for the “dark side” of one’s personality has some specific consequences for the how the relationship between buying sex and views on gender equality is conceptualised: By locating prostitution as something related to one’s “dark” side, it becomes possible to claim that one is actually a decent person in favour of gender equality. But the “orderliness” of society in general can sometimes be too much, and buying sex - an activity that is excluded from this orderliness - provides a person with a sense of freedom and relief.

Prostitution could be interpreted as particularly well suited to fulfil this need, as it is in a very concrete sense a world apart. Hence one does hardly risk to be confronted with the contradictions in one’s behaviours and ideals. In this reasoning, it seems that there are also elements from the biological difference discourse present: The ideal male, according to gender equality ideals, is impossible for a masculine nature to embody, according to Stian. This discourse also sometimes implies an overt resistance to the attempts of the state to control individuals; also when it comes to sexual practices. In this sense, this second discourse is related to the third discourse that I will discuss here.

The discourse on sex as recreation and service in a liberal market context

“Sex is not something sacred, excluded from the ordinary market.” (Arne)

Former research on clients has often pointed to how clients of prostitutes are holding an illusion of authentic feelings on the part of the prostitutes (Finstad and Høigård
Men in Prostitution: Perspectives, Identities and Problems. Conference report

1986, Prieur and Taksdal 1989, Sandell et al 1996). The predominant claim by the men in my material was that whether the feelings portrayed by the prostitute were real or not, was of little importance. The clients claimed to be looking for an illusion that worked: This idea can be related to the concept of “sex as recreation”, introduced by Bernstein (2001). Bernstein argues that the demand for commercial sex has increased during recent years, and that this tendency must be related to a new cultural model of sexual intimacy. In this model, sex motivated by recreation is becoming legitimate and challenges the conception of sex motivated by love as the only form of (culturally) legitimate sex.

Many of the clients interviewed in this study, as well as those participating in the web discussions, were explicitly talking about themselves and their participation in the sex market as comparable to clients involved in any market: Transactions are based on the exchange of money and services, and availability and demand are critical mechanisms.

Arne, in his mid twenties and single, is one of the men who construct the act of buying sex as a “pure” market exchange. At the time when he volunteers for an interview, he buys sex on the indoor market once a month. He has bought sex of street prostitutes a couple of times, but he has stopped, as, according to him, “there is too much coercion” on the street market. Arne prefers private apartments rather than massage parlours, the latter being “too public” for his tastes. He thinks that paying for sex is pleasantly straightforward, expectations are clear and transparent on both parts, and there is no alcohol involved. Mutual involvement in the sex is a plus, but not a must. “It is a service, so if it is good acting, it is good enough”. Just as others providing services must expect to be evaluated and criticised, Arne thinks that those who provide sexual services must also expect clients to have opinions on them and their services, and that they discuss this between them, for instance on web pages.

How does this liberal market prostitution relate to gender equality? Arne considers commercial sex to be a result of “free choice” on both parties involved. If the woman selling sex is inflicting harm on herself because of her choice, the client cannot be
blamed. Some of the men, who were participating in discussions on the web, celebrated the women involved in prostitution as progressive, liberal women who had the courage to challenge old morale and traditional understandings of what women and sexuality should be like. When discussing choices to enter prostitution based on lack of money, the argument would still be that it was better for these women to have clients than to have no money, and that they could have chosen a different way to make money. Another argument that was sometimes presented was “If I don’t buy, someone else will”.

The discourse on commercial sex as a form of recreational service that can legitimately be obtained in a market context can be seen as yet another way of locating prostitution in other political fields than the field of gender equality.

**Relocating prostitution outside the field of gender equality: Conclusions**

Although the discourses I have presented above are related and overlapping in some respects they do represent different ways – or perhaps strategies – for relocating the practice of buying sex outside the political field of gender equality, where official discourses generally place it in a Norwegian context. What do these strategies reveal about the extent to which prostitution is acknowledged as a gender equality issue?

Interpreting the male sex drive as a biologically given fact that cannot be influenced by changing gender roles, or explaining the thrill of prostitution as related to the taboo that surrounds it, can be interpreted as discoursed that *implicitly* acknowledge prostitution as a gender equality issue. These discourses can be seen as direct opposition to certain aspects of the gender equality discourse, and the form of relocation of the prostitution issue implied in them, is therefore perhaps not so radical after all.

The third discourse, however, sex as recreation and a service in a liberal market context can be seen as a more radical relocation strategy: I would argue that it in a more fundamental way than the two others discards gender equality, or gender, as an
issue in prostitution at all. In the framework of a liberal market, gender equality is not necessarily a political issue at all, and gender equality is whatever happens when individuals are granted the freedom to do what they choose.

It can thus be claimed that the ethical questions in prostitution, for these clients, are conceived of not as an issue of attitudes to gender, but as a matter of where individualism ends and collective responsibility begins. This contention does not imply that I hold that prostitution is no longer a question of gender and gender equality. It is however, necessary to investigate empirically in what ways gender is constructed and made relevant for various men’s attitudes to commercial sex.

We must also consider the implications of the tendency that is often termed commercialization of sexuality for the meanings of prostitution, as was also pointed out by Bernstein earlier in the paper. Although the empirical realities of Giddens’ claims about transformations of intimacy in Western societies today are often disputed, it seems that conceptions of sexuality as detached from relationships and love can be of relevance for understanding the meanings of commercial sex in Western societies today.

Through the client narratives in this study, the relationship between gender equality and commercial sex is revealed as more complex than a compensation strategy hypothesis suggests. Consequently, a one-dimensional focus on client behaviour as a more or less conscious anti-feminist strategy, risks not grasping the complex meanings of commercial sex in Western society today.

References


Boys hanging out with men in the neighbourhood

By Camilla Jordheim Larsen

Background
This presentation is based on a recently finished report on sexual exchange relations among youth-at-risk (Larsen and Pedersen 2005). Roughly, the aim of the project was to dig deeper into sexual exchange relations that teenagers experience.

The background was a large quantitative study which conveyed that 2.1% of the pupils in secondary schools in Oslo, reported having exchanged sex for payment. And the number of boys reporting to having done it, was significantly higher than that of girls (0.6% of girls and 2.1% of the boys) (Pedersen and Hegna 2003). We wanted to know more about what actions and what situations the adolescents referred to, when reporting this, and also we wanted to investigate what exchange relations that might not be included in such terms.

We also based our research questions on a qualitative study based on in-depth interviews with social workers (Hegna and Pedersen 2002). They had pointed to various relations in which sex and money or other goods were intermingled, in a somewhat “impure” way, and which were hard to categorise. We wanted to hear the adolescents’ own accounts of relations like that. What had happened? What did it mean to them? One of the relations we found is the one I am going to talk about here; “teenage boys hanging out with men in the neighbourhood”.

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4 This study was designed and supervised by Professor Willy Pedersen, at the Department of Sociology and Social Geography, University of Oslo, and Centre of Norwegian Social Research (NOVA). We were three researchers on the project; Sveinung Sandberg, Willy Pedersen and I.
Method
To get data on this rather sensitive matter, we chose to do in-depth interviews, lasting between one and a half and two hours, with young people who – according to the statistics mentioned above - would have increased risk of having sold sex. In all, we interviewed 60 boys and girls, between 13 and 25 years of age. Most of whom were in their mid-teens.

We recruited them from three different samples. The first sample consisted of 15 young people in rehabilitation for drug addiction. The second sample consisted of 15 9th and 10th graders in special schools for pupils with various sorts of learning- or adjustment problems. The third sample consisted of 30 teenagers recruited from the city centre of Oslo. We took care to select those who seemed to hang out with no specific errands.

The aim was to collect a variety of stories by teenagers in different life situations that could be related to higher levels of risk, but at the same time was what we would consider “ordinary kids”. It should be noted, however, that these samples are strategic and not representative.

“Men in the neighbourhood” - main pattern
We started collecting data in the rehabilitation centers. We found that a large proportion of the boys for some period of time in their early and mid teens had known an adult man in their neighbourhood, whose house was open to boys of their age. The similarity of the accounts was striking: The boys seemed to be welcome to come and go as they liked. The man would have attractions ready for them, like fire crackers and casino games. They would offer alcohol and cigarettes, or also cash money. They described the men as ordinary adults with jobs, living on their own. Only one of them seemed to belong to a criminal drug scene, and he also sold Rohypnol to kids. The other men only had legal drugs, as far as we know. Though, alcohol and cigarettes is, of course, illegal to minors.
More than half of the boys from the rehabilitation centers told stories like this. The informants in rehabilitation had grown up in different places all over the country, so geography did not seem to make a difference. Hence, we assumed that the stories reflected a common youth experience. However, as we carried on with our interviews in the other two samples, we didn’t hear the same stories, although we asked questions about such experiences in numerous ways throughout the interviews.

The teenagers in the city- and special school samples differed considerably in terms of drug experience; some had none whereas others had plenty. In the data analysis it was easily detected that the few stories of what we started to refer to as “men in the neighbourhood” were told by boys more experienced with drugs than the average. All the informants who told such stories had experimented with heavier drugs than cannabis. Although this is a qualitative study we therefore assume an association between drug use and such visits. These kids may also be regarded as more needy and vulnerable than most.

Interestingly, however, not all had developed heavy drug problems at the time they frequented these men. What is the significance of this? Why is it first and foremost these kids that have these experiences? One reason might be that their spare time was less organised, so that they needed something happening to pass time. Another reason might be that they were more sensation seeking than most, and searched for exciting things to do, and enjoyed a parent-free zone where alcohol was allowed. Yet again, it might be that the men themselves, in one way or other, managed to hook up seemingly vulnerable boys that might be willing to get sexually involved for money or emotional support. Some of the boys had a hard time at home, and may have appreciated a “second home” where they could hang around and relax and get some attention.

Two of the accounts of the visits were like this:

- We used to play cards, and we might win various sorts of things. It was dead exciting to be there. It was fire crackers and a whole lot of teenage-stuff.
- That he had bought for you as prizes?
- Yes. And we could win money too. But we always had to do something to get it; we always had to earn it. As I remember, it was really exciting and fun to go there. But, of course, we never left empty handed, there was always something.
- Do you remember how you knew about him?
- Yes, you would hear about him. That you could play games there and... like fortune games and you would get some money to start out with, and then you could win quite a lot of exciting stuff. Not like a whole lot, but like a thousand kroner or something.
- That’s quite a lot, isn’t it, in that age?
- Yes... and you got drinks, and you could make yourself some food. And when you left, you would have some extra money after winning in that game. It just ruled, as I recall.

**Do the findings point to teen prostitution?**

The boys all took it as a matter of course that the man had a sexual interest in them, and that he also might be sexually aroused by having the kids around. Still they didn’t give much heed to this. As one informant put it: “He got a bit annoying sometimes, but it wasn’t a problem”. Still they took precautions like never going there on their own and never staying the night, both of which the man encouraged them to do.

They expressed a certain ambiguity when describing them, as mentioned. Here are two accounts:

- What do you think his motives were? Did he just want to hang out with you or did he want closer contact?
- I think he wanted more than that. ‘Cos he was very interested in porn movies and...
- Did you watch together?
- No. But he wanted us to. And he wanted to call me, and he told me of things he’d done with friends of his, like he said they’d wanked off together, and that
was perfectly normal, and things like that… so I guess he thought that that was something we could do too, you know. But I just wasn’t interested. And I was old enough to understand what sort of a pig he was, anyway.

This was a quite negative description, but still we didn’t get the impression that he had ever felt unsafe. Still, the adult’s attempt to breaking the boy’s own boundaries were evident. And let’s not forget – this boy was on the brink of drug addiction and thus more vulnerable and more in need of money than the average kid. Another informant put it this way:

- Sometimes he would make approaches, like hinting at things, and he would be a bit forward. But… there was a lot of people around, you know, so we just laughed at it. We didn’t worry about it.
- What sort of things did he say?
- Well, things like… he suggested games like… you know, joining him in some other room and things like that.
- What games would that be?
- Hide and seek in the dark and things like that, I don’t remember exactly.
- Do you think he suggested it so that he would get a chance to touch people in the dark?
- Yes, of course, but nothing happened when I was there. We were able to say ‘no’ and push him away. But… he had a thing about young boys, no doubt.

All of these suggestions were of a type that could be easily withdrawn, and most can be seen as innocent youth activities. Still, it is easy to see that the same activities could open up for erotic contact. The erotic approaches thus took the form of hints, followed by retreat, if the boys did not seem interested; the boys didn’t feel coerced or forced into sexual relations, but were made aware that the pocket book was open and that benefits would come, if they were interested.

Some of the men were less cautious about showing their interest for young boys. For instance, one informant said he would receive 500 kroner for recruiting new boys to
come and visit. Sometimes the man would point out specific boys he wanted him to bring along with him. A striking feature was that the boys were all positive that that the men hoped to have sex with them at some point. Yet, none of them described sexual encounters.

What did we, in fact, find? On the one hand the pattern is plain: Only boys with a certain amount of experience with illegal drugs had this experience. On the other hand the pattern is utterly unclear: Nobody told of sexual relations, but all of them thought the men had a sexual interest in them. They also believed others to be sexually involved, and hints were made that more intimate contact would be rewarded with money - or *more* money, that is. Earlier studies also point to such relations as possible and probable arenas for teen prostitution.

In a smaller study from the 80s (Hanssen 1984), one man like this was interviewed. He estimated that he would establish a sexual relationship with four out of ten of the boys hanging out at his place. This might be exaggerated or it might be precise, we can’t tell. But in any case, it fits well into the hypothesis that for most kids, the visits will be totally innocent and harmless – which was the impression we got from the informants in our study - but that some of them will get involved in sexual relationships of a dubious and possibly abusive character.

From the outside the power relation between the man and the boys is seemingly simple: The man is the adult, he is the owner of the house and he has the money. The boys are vulnerable adolescents with various needs. The boys do have some power, however. They are in a majority and some of them have developed the physical strength of an adult. They come voluntarily. Furthermore, the relationship in question is a stigmatised one and the man is in danger of accusations of child abuse. For example, one of our informants told us that he and his friends once had beaten the man up, and that the man had had to escape out the window in the third storey. He was probably both injured and scared, but the instance was never reported. -What would he have said to the police about his relationship to the boys?
How did the boys relate to the man? Mostly they seemed to enjoy his company, but they didn’t seem to develop a close emotional relationship with him. Among each other, they talked about him with a mixture of sympathy and mockery. On the one hand, they liked him, the visits and the gifts; on the other hand, they pitied him, and in some sense mistrusted him. For example, one of the men was given the nickname “Pedo-Lars”. But all in all, they seemed to focus more on the activities and the company of their friends, than him as a person. His house was like a youth club to them, only without the regular prohibitions.

**How should we categorise these experiences?**

If we assume that some teenage boys do have sexual relations with men like this, we are faced with a new question: What terms should we use to describe such relations?

- Prostitution, sex work, sex sale or survival sex?
- Sex?
- Romantic relationship?
- Friendship?
- Sexual abuse?

The words give dramatically different associations and implications.

Let’s first take prostitution or sex sale (sex work clearly doesn’t fit!): To be defined as such, the payment should be the condition of the sexual action taking place. But what if the kids were equally absorbed by the money, the atmosphere and the sex? What then? Even our informants found it hard to distinguish their motivation for coming. They enjoyed it, but they also looked forward to the money. Only one of them said he came solely for the money.

What are the consequences if we choose to call it prostitution? First of all, it is illegal to buy sex from people under the age of 18 in Norway. So this means that the adult would be judicially liable. The age of consent is 16, which makes the nature of the
relationship crucial should a seventeen year old be involved. If we chose to call it “survival sex”, the consequences remain the same, but then the boys’ difficult position is emphasised, as well as the adult’s responsibility. For this reason one can argue that the word prostitution should not be used about minors at all – because the client becomes less visible and thus seemingly less responsible for the transaction. The term “sexual abuse” also focuses on the uneven power relation, and the adolescents’ right to be protected from sexual invitations from adults.

In what cases would relations like these be instances of abuse? The formal way of seeing it is through the legal framework: what is legal, and what is not? According to the law it is illegal to have sex with people under the age of consent, which in Norway are sixteen. If the boys we interviewed had in fact had sex with the man, it would have been illegal. But if the same thing had happened a year later, it might have been just “sex”. Thus, if such a case had made it to the court room, the line between sex and prostitution would be of vital importance to the outcome.

Another way of seeing it is through the eyes of the people involved: Was harm done to anyone? Did the boys themselves feel abused? This will of course differ a great deal, since we cannot, of course, assume that there is a clear and unambiguous pattern fitting all cross-generational sexual relations. But such a way of defining it might yet again differ from the legal definition. If some boys for instance wanted to experiment sexually - and for instance used the relationship to confirm a sexual identity - both the terms “prostitution” and “abuse” might be a stigmatising label that would do more harm than good.\(^5\) On the other hand, a subjective definition of abuse might also include actions that would not be judged illegal; if the victim none the less felt that their boarders had been crossed.

The widest definition of sexual abuse would be that the adult person in some way or other used the boys as a means of sexual arousal. Using such a wide definition, even

\(^5\) After saying this at the conference, I was accused by one of the listeners of giving homosexual adolescents less sexual and judicial protection than heterosexual adolescents. This is not my intention. I solely point to different angles from which such a situation may be interpreted, and to the fact that formal and personal interpretation sometimes may be at odds.
the visits we have presented here would be included. The problem is that such a
definition is based on inner feelings that are not accessible. However, the boys
themselves seemed to use such a criterion when they called the men by name as
“Pedo-Lars” or referred to them as pigs. They were aware of the men’s “real”
motives.

Conclusion
The only reasonable conclusion is probably that we must apply different terms to
different relations in situations like this. One interpretation does not suffice. If there is
a criminal offence involved, however, the law is unambiguous – and it has to be. Even
though the stories that we were told were strikingly similar, the character of the
relations between the adults and the teenagers are likely to differ greatly. Some of the
relations might be labelled (unconventional) friendships, giving the boys a “second
home”; others might be better labelled prostitution and/or sexual abuse.

In the cases of our informants, the most fitting term would probably be
“unconventional friendships” – unconventional because of the age gap, but also
because of a stronger exchange element, and a more obviously uneven power
structure, than what is normally connected to the term friendship. Also, the friendship
is probably linked to a certain amount of risk of getting involved in prostitution-like
relations or even sexual abuse. And needless to say, adolescents should not need to
run such a risk.

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Intersections of Gender, Sexuality and Ethnicity:
A study of Finnish Male Clients of Transnational Prostitution

By Anne-Maria Marttila

This presentation derives from my ongoing doctoral study with a focus on Finnish male clients of transnational prostitution in Finland, Estonia and North-West Russia. In the study I’m particularly interested in the ways Finnish men – as prostitution clients – reproduce gender, sexuality and ethnicity as well as their practices and networking in prostitution. The material includes written biographical narratives from and interviews of Finnish male sex buyers and several months of observation of client practices and market mechanisms of local prostitution in Southern Finland, Tallinn (Estonia) and Vyborg (Russia). Interviews of Estonian and Russian prostitutes and sex workers in Tallinn and Vyborg and of Estonian, Russian and Finnish experts were also conducted. A secondary material consisting of discussions on a Finnish and international webforums dealing with commercial sex supports the primary material.

In the following presentation I will focus on Finnish sex tourists in Estonia and Russia. I will first give a brief description of the historical and societal context in Finland and the neighbouring area during the last couple of decades. I will finish off by presenting some results of the study so far.

The transnationalisation of prostitution in the Nordic-Baltic area
The fall of the communist regimes and the opening up of borders in Eastern Europe had a significant impact on the structure of regional prostitution. Within the Finnish sex trade both societal and political changes and, as suggested by a Finnish feminist philosopher Sari Näre (1999), changes in gender culture and sexual liberation during
the last couple of decades resulted in growing demand for, and an “invasion” of commercial sex.

As is true of most Western countries, typical of the Finnish prostitution culture is sex tourism to the ‘East’: every year thousands of Finnish men travel, mainly to the Baltic States, Russia or the Far-East, with the intention of buying sex. The Far East has been a traditional destination for sex tourists, but the proximity of the Baltic States and Russia and the opening up of borders and the subsequent easier travel to the former socialist countries has increased sex tourism to the neighbouring areas.

I will shortly look at the transnationalisation process of the regional prostitution since the late 1980s from two angles in relation to its agents. Firstly, Finnish sex tourism to its eastern neighbouring countries is not a new phenomenon. Much like with all other tourism, there was sex tourism from Finland to the Soviet Union even before the collapse of the Soviet system and the opening up of borders. As there was officially no prostitution during the socialist regimes, prostitution related activities were less visible than today but well known in the tales of the Finnish travellers to the Soviet Union. Towards the end of the 1980s, cross border movement of people became both easier and more frequent, which created a working condition for a flourishment of ’hostility industries’ providing sexual services for wealthy western travellers. At the end of the 1980s even a casual tourist or a business traveller had no trouble in finding a paid escort in Tallinn, Vyborg or St. Petersburg. One of my interviewees, 46-year-old ”Matti” (2003) remembers how ”everything changed” on the Finnish and regional prostitution markets in the course of the 1990s. In the 1980s, ”Matti”, for example, had concentrated his use of commercial sex on renting porn films which were, as he said, “very expensive back then”. The increased supply and subsequent lowering of prices in the 1990s, however, brought along an enormous change for ”Matti” as well. As he described, compared to watching porn films home alone, “it felt wonderful to be able to slip a ’FIM 20’ in the panties of a striptease-dancer”.

Only estimates exist on the proportion of present Finnish customers on the prostitution markets in Estonia and Northeast Russia. The proportion is generally
considered to be significant, especially on a seasonal basis. According to estimates of the Tallinn police, Finnish men amount up to 45% of the clientele for the local prostitution on a yearly 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 sex clubs in central Tallinn (sex worker A, 2005). In Northwest Russia the proportion of all foreign sex buyers is estimated to be around 60% (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.6

Economic factors seem to move not only the sellers, but they also attract the buyers: for example, a portion of the 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 up of borders and the expansion of the sex industry. According to him the Estonian and Russian prostitutes also receive a better price for their services in Finland, and are therefore usually willing to cross the border. For example women from Northern Estonia and Northwest Russia are known to take day trips to Finland for prostitution purposes. Likewise, Finnish men living in the border regions sometimes go on one day shopping trips to, for example, Vyborg. In addition to paid sex, diverse consumer goods sold at lower prices than in Finland are also purchased, such as fuel, cigarettes and alcohol. On the whole, various motives and modes of tourism are extensively intertwined in the Finnish tourism into the neighbouring region.

The second view to the transnationalisation of the prostitution market is that of the sex workers. It has been suggested that, since the breakup of the Soviet Union, foreign

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6 The Finnish sex tourists to the neighboring area are mainly men, with very few exceptions. Upon my visits to many striptease clubs in central Tallinn during the spring of 2005, I saw only two women among the hundreds of men. The women were young Finns in their late twenties or early thirties. A male striptease show was given to them in the sex-club we were in. Also an employee of another sex-club told me that female customers are rare, and that male striptease, therefore, is always private. According to him, this was also due to the fact that the male clients do not seem comfortable watching the male dancers.
prostitution came to Finland in two waves (Kauppinen, 2000). The first wave followed immediately after the break-up, in the beginning of the 1990s. This was the time when the rouble crashed in Russia and the money people may have had, no longer had any value. Consequently, some female tourists ended up selling sex in Finland in order to make money for everyday shopping. This period did not, however, last long but was soon followed by a second wave in the middle of the 1990s. This new wave was more professional and organised and it became reasonable to talk of a ‘flush’ of sex clubs in Finland. In other words, what was distinctive for this second wave was the mushrooming of sex business, and a broad recruitment base for sex work. This had a background both in the political and social changes in the neighbouring area and the economic depression in Finland in the beginning of the 90s. At this stage also an influx of domestic prostitutes entered the market. The media treatment of the issue worked in favour of the flourishing sex business and was an efficient channel of marketing for the entrepreneurs of the industry. Towards the end of the decade, the boom of sex clubs was, however, 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 sex.

Characteristic of the present prostitution business in this area is the continuous movement over the borders by prostitutes and their clients. According to the Finnish National bureau of Investigation (Leskinen 2003), the movement of prostitutes is particularly high in Finland. This is apparent in the talk of the Finnish prostitution clients as well: they seem to value this variety of ‘supply’. Also the sellers of sex have stressed that the clients want variation (Høigård and Finstad 1996).

**The Finnish prostitution clients and sex tourists**

It is neither possible nor productive to try to make any profile of a ‘typical sex buyer’. As has been shown in several studies (e.g. Månsson 2001, O’Connell Davidson 1998, Sandell et al. 1996, Prieur and Taksdal 1989), prostitution clients are no social ‘others’, different from the rest ‘us’ – as they often have been represented in public
view. Having observed Finnish sex tourism in Tallinn and Vyborg, I have also noticed that simple definitions such as a ‘prostitution client’ or a ‘sex tourist’ are not, in many cases, feasible. Looking from a different angle, a sex tourist is often a husband or a boyfriend on a weekend or a business trip in, for example, Tallinn or St. Petersburg. The men that buy sex can therefore not be perceived only as prostitution clients (nor as husbands or business men) but they hold a range of discursive identifications.

For example, the men that I have been in contact with are anything but a homogenous group: The age distribution is between 20-63 years (32 men). They come from different social classes, many are single, but most of them are married and approximately half of them have children. Motives for buying sex vary, but are rather well in line with the motives presented in the earlier studies of clients of prostitution. There are, for example, ‘supercustomers’, ‘intimacy avoiders’ or ‘rejected’ as presented by Sandell, Pettersson, Larsson and Kuosmanen (1996).

Also the Finnish sex tourists are a heterogeneous group. For example, for most of the men visiting brothels in Tallinn or Vyborg, commercial sexual encounters are not the sole reason for the travel: it is often combined with a weekend- or business trip to the city which includes paid sex. Paid sexual services are not difficult to find, even upon first visit to Tallinn, as the services are openly advertised in travel guides, directed mainly at Finnish travellers. However, even though for most of the ‘sex tourists’ the motive for travel is other than paid sex, a group of Finnish men visit Tallinn, Vyborg and other nearby cities essentially for the purpose of sex tourism, and often on a regular basis. These men usually are habitual users of paid sex, for whom it is a part of everyday life, and a central part of their sexuality. These men are also better aware of the local prostitution culture and practices than the occasional ‘sex tourists’. The buying of sex has traditionally been regarded as a lone practice and usually not even talked about with others. It, however, appears that social networks between the buyers have, during the past couple of decades, become more frequent with the help of, for example, new information and communication technologies. Also a Danish internet survey for prostitution clients (Lautrup 2005) indicated that, during the last couple of years, buying sex has become all the more social practice among men. My
study, on the other, indicates that this socialisation of men buying sex is particularly typical of sex tourists abroad.

I argue that buying sex is a contextual practice. As a part of contemporary, transnational sex industry the use of paid sex may appear as very different according to when, where and from whom sex is purchased. The experience of and motives for a commercial sexual encounter may vary accordingly. Consequently, client typologies may actually freeze what is in fact a highly dynamic situation. For example, it has become evident that the distance from home does have a major relevance to how the buyers of sex perceive the prostitution encounter and especially whether it takes place in- or outside the home country.

Fulfilling fantasies abroad

Many of the Finnish clients of prostitution have described their sex tours abroad as “going to a different reality”. With this, they refer to the leaving of values, morals, expectations and responsibilities as a husband/boyfriend, a father, a son, a friend behind and being able to be “purely selfish”. Exotic and wild ‘East’ – as it is often described in the narratives of prostitution clients – has become ‘a playground’ for many Finnish clients of prostitution.

In public debates, both in Finland and in Estonia, it has been argued that unless the Nordic and Baltic countries and Russia are willing to cooperate on controlling the transnational prostitution and trafficking in persons in the area, Estonia and the other Baltic countries and Russia end up becoming red-light districts for the Nordic countries. Even though the public attitude towards prostitution is rather liberal and tolerant in Estonia, there has also been discussion of Estonia ending up a ’European Thailand’. This fear is not completely unfounded. In the web forums, it is evident that the former socialist countries are nowadays considered by some sex tourists as “sexual havens” or “oases” in Europe. On various websites Tallinn is claimed to be a city full of top-quality women and cheap beer. Russian and Baltic prostitutes (and women in general) are often described as more “beautiful, passionate and willing to
please” than, for example, Finnish or other Nordic women. Some foreign travel agencies have even begun to advertise Tallinn as a ‘new sex capital of Europe’.

**Sex tourism as (homo) social activity**

While buying sex is usually considered an individual and lone activity, sex tours appear to include more (homo)social engagements. The networking of the clients also seems to have advanced the commercialisation of sex business – at least from the Finnish clients’ point of view.

The networking of prostitution clients is visible not only in the streets of Tallinn, but also in web contexts. Especially in the web talk, one can recognise paid sexual encounters having become highly commodified and closely specified transactions. Men know very well where to find certain kind of services and certain kind of prostitutes and also share this information globally in the web. For example, in Finland, a well known online advertiser for prostitution – in addition to maintaining a list of ‘students’ (in other words prostitutes) to be contacted for sexual services7 – it provides a forum for communication for prostitution clients.

In the webtalk of the sex buyers, experiences with different women and the quality and price of their services, as well as prostitution practices in different countries are being discussed and compared. Contact with other clients seeking sexual services is useful in the sense that men discuss with each other about where and how to find best “girls” (as the Finnish prostitution clients call prostitutes).

Some of the users also belong to a “Gentlemen’s Club” to which one can apply to through the Sihteeriopisto-site. The ‘Gentlemen’s Club’, among other things, arranges

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7 The list usually includes ten countries with approximately 500 prostitutes. Since August 1, 2004, new legislation has criminalised advertising of prostitution in Finland. Publishing prostitutes’ advertisements is now seen as a form of procurement (http://www.om.fi/26337.htm). As a result, Sihteeriopisto.net closed down its list in the beginning of August. In less than three weeks, the list was published again. This was enabled by selling the site to Netherlands.
sex tours to Estonia and has a private discussion forum for members. The club also provides members’ benefits and lower prices for example in sex bars in Finland and in nearby countries. They arrange meetings and parties, often in Tallinn, where new or potential members are also invited. For example, one of my interviewees (a long time member of the club) is an active organiser of these parties in Tallinn. For the party, they usually hire a large apartment in centre of Tallinn, where men can stay overnight and bring in prostitutes. The most frequent visitors in Tallinn also have regular prostitutes who are invited.

By providing a legitimate space for communicating with each other the web boards have also enabled construction of social bonds and collective identity among the prostitution clients. This appears to have an empowering effect on them: there is debate, for example, on “the clients’ rights” and other common interests. The forums and chat rooms thus act as a space for the homosocial bonding of men who buy sex.

The homosocial communication is not only visible in web contexts, but in the sex clubs as well. When conducting an interview in a sex bar in Helsinki I noticed most of the clients appeared to be disinterested in the dance performances given by the women. Between the performances, the dancers moved from table to table, sat beside the male clients, even on their lap, but still most of the men kept talking to their male friends and seemingly ignored the women. I asked the interviewee whether this was a common practice. He said, ”it is not just the girls and their performances but the atmosphere” (“Jorma” 2003).

Conclusion
As most social institutions, prostitution is a meeting place of multitude of spatial realms: regional or territorial, social and, nowadays, even virtual. The development of new information and communication technologies has decisively changed the structure of international sex trade. A virtual sex tourist does not necessarily ever have to leave his/her screen. Access to global communication technologies permits users to carry out their activities in the privacy of home.
Paid sex is perceived by many prostitution clients as a specialised space where arrivals or transits project alternative worlds. For some clients, this space compensates the less pleasant real as a surreal, imaginary space out of everyday duties and roles. In modern society, where the boundaries between gender roles have become exceedingly blurred, an arena such as a sex club – where the traditional male order and power still exists – may offer some men a social space of male emancipation and manifestation of heteromasculine hegemony, something that is no longer considered as socially appropriate in the outside world that stresses the development of equality between the genders.

Prostitution as a whole can also be seen as an ethnospace where millions of western sex tourists travel every year attracted by the ethicised and sexualised stereotypes of ‘exotic’ prostitutes. Racism is a part of sex business but on the other, it is the very difference and exotism that attract clients to the prostitution markets in Eastern Europe and the Far East. There is a thin line between xenophobia and xenophilia.

A hedonistic demand and a large and varying supply have met in a way that seem to have developed a new kind of consuming culture and consuming habits in the sex trade. Commercial sex appears as consumption and buying sex as not resorting to commercial sex but as a conscious, consumer choice. The buyers of sex are no longer considered as “losers” or “men who can’t have sex otherwise” – as they traditionally have been stereotyped.

References


Men in Prostitution: Perspectives, Identities and Problems. Conference report


Men who are buying sex, is that also a matter of class and ethnicity?

By Kirsten Stien

In this very short paper, I am going to make visible some elements within a society that has had, and still has, a relatively large population of men who are buying sex. We don’t know the exact numbers of how many and how and how often, but it is done quite openly, and the prostitution activities have been introduced to a large public through articles and programmes in local as well as national media.

Britt Kramvig and I undertook a study in this society in 2002 that is located in the part of Norway that shares border with the former Superpower USSR, two days Russia. From the end of the cold war and the opening of the border, this part of Norway became both a transit port and an end station for Russian women and men travelling west, seeking different kinds of occupations. In the beginning they sold goods as glass, clothes, crafts and cigarettes, but very soon the state authorities put an end to this kind of trading, pointing to the Russians lack of work permits. The trade didn’t stop, but changed from goods to bodies, so to say, and now selling sexual services became the main business.

A small municipality in this area, far north, but close to Russia, became the centre of these activities. But why did the municipality of Tana become the centre for Russian women selling sex to Norwegian women? What was the matter with Tana?

For several centuries Tana has been a geographical and trading centre for the different groups of people living in this area. First of all, Tana is a meeting place for the Sámi people who have reindeers at the mountain plateaus and on the other hand, the Sámi people who are fjord fishers.
Secondly, Tana has a great amount of Norwegian people, especially working in Civil services, but also in farming. Thirdly, Tana shares border with Finland. Shopping and visiting friends and relatives in the Finnish border towns are very common, at least for the Sámi people. It may be right to describe Tana as a melting pot when it comes to being a place for different ethnic and cultural groups. Tana is quite a modern multi ethnic society, having different open locations, which may be Sámi/Sámi, Sámi/Norwegian, or perhaps Sámi/Norwegian/Finnish – but it doesn’t stop there. In addition Tana has a famous and well known salmon river. During the summertime tourists from European countries visit Tana, often on a regular basis, and they need local expertise when they fish from the river banks, hoping to catch a big salmon. In order to sum this up, my viewpoint is that Tana is no simple homogenous society, Tana has lots of different cultural and ethnic spaces, very few coded only for one of the groups. Most of them are coded in an open, diverse and sophisticated way. So of course the Russian women were wished welcome, what else could the men, being part of a society that has tradition for responding to others request, really do?

In terms of class, it might be right to say that Tana, as other modern societies, is challenged by structures which evaluate and give positions based on formal education. This means that those who haven’t been able to attend teaching programmes in order to gain educational skills end up as less powerful and valuable than those who have. Tana has alternative systems of recognising capabilities, for example being a great salmon fisher, being part of a powerful family, being a good communicator etcetera. These systems of being able to take and hold important positions, is changing, diminishing, and it seems as if certain groups of men are more vulnerable in coping with changes in how status is distributed through formal systems.

In an attempt to draw some conclusions, I have tried to describe the society of Tana from a perspective which gives credit to what I find as quite sophisticated manners when it comes to how people from different groups interact with each other. The very experience with different ethnic and cultural groups brings forth communicational strengths and the changes in class identities and values leads to a need of using these
skills in order to establish new meanings. Being a part of the prostitution field in Tana, these skills are welcomed and given status inside their setting.

I think one could say that some groups of men in Tana needed to establish new meanings in their homosocial boundaries and settings, there were an urge for new topics, new tasks and new performances – as a result of the decline of the values of the class they belonged to.
Men in Prostitution: Perspectives, Identities and Problems. Conference report

Prostitution in court

By May-Len Skilbrei

When we started to prepare this conference, we wanted to find speakers who did research on different aspects of men or gender in prostitution. Often the focus in prostitution debates, but also in research, is on women who sell sex, and we wanted to change this by arranging a conference where the mistake of only focusing on women was not repeated. We also wanted to find speakers who have done research on men in the different positions within prostitution: men as sellers and buyers of sex and men as third-parties in prostitution, which are men that functions as traffickers and pimps/procurers.

We found several interesting projects on men as sellers and buyers of sex, and I am very happy with the variety of empirical work and perspectives that are represented at the conference, but looking at what empirical work that has been done, we found that what was clearly lacking was research directly on the third-party in prostitution; traffickers or pimps. I believe that there are many and interesting reasons for the lack of interest in the third party and I believe that the lack of knowledge have some real and important consequences both on a societal level, but also in day to day lives of women in prostitution. It also has consequences on how we conceptualize prostitution and are able to place it within a greater context. The theme of this paper is related to parts of the discussion before lunch: the relationship between social phenomena and the labels that we by necessity put on them in politics and court rooms.

I will talk about my own ongoing research on law in action in relation to prostitution and trafficking and bring up the issue of pimps from an empirical study I did eleven years ago. With law in action I mean how the laws we have are actually used in court. There are differences in the laws on pimpting in European countries, but that doesn’t mean that there are actual differences in how pimps are dealt with: laws on paper
might be something else than law in action. The presentation is based on work in progress, and as such the argument and empirical work is not perfectly presented, but I hope you will be patient with me.

Selling and buying sex is legal in Norway, as long as the seller is an adult. It is only organizing and making profit of other people’s prostitution that is prohibited. Therefore my theme here is appropriately law in action for third parties. We don’t normally see many cases in Norwegian courts concerning pimping, and we have only had one trial concerned with trafficking directly.

While we lack research-based knowledge on the third party in prostitution, we are not lacking on images of the pimps or traffickers. The images of persons who organize other people’s prostitution are vivid, and, as I will come back to later, those images are among other things, playing a role in court rooms. Pimps and traffickers may of course be both male and female, and we have had some cases where women have been sentenced for pimping in Norway. But the popular perception of a person organising or taking advantage of other people’s prostitution is that of a man.

American movies might be partly responsible for forming assumptions about pimps. In later years we also have seen the emergence of the figure of the eastern European traffickers, with links to organised crime and the war in the Balkans. This is also perceived as a man. In Norwegian, the term used on traffickers is even a “bakmann”; a man that stands behind.

There is a female counterpart to the stereotypes of the pimp; the madam, but she is much less likely to be portrayed as exploiting prostitutes. In Norwegian and many other languages, the name of female pimps is linked to motherhood. In Norwegian the term “whore mother” is widely in use, and the female pimp is constructed as something completely different than a proper pimp. It is no legal difference between male and female pimps, but I believe there may be important differences in how male and female pimps are dealt with. Because of these differences in perceptions it must be difficult for the police recognise women as possible pimps and the courts to treat
men and women accused of pimping the same. Women who have been on trial for pimping have explicitly made use of gender in their defence in court. An especially interesting and explicit example is from a trial we recently had here in Oslo, where a known brothel keeper was on trial for among other things pimping. She has been sentenced for pimping before, and she made use of womanhood as a way of differentiating herself from the pimp-label. She has over the past ten years made use of media in promoting the massage parlours she has run; it is difficult to imagine a male pimp being interviewed at a massage parlour. She has among other things been interviewed in the biggest gossip magazine in Norway, Se & Hør twice. In a country like Norway, where prostitution is quite modest and low key, she is indeed exotic. During her trials, the big newspapers covered her case extensively, and this has given her a chance to get her version out, as she has given interviews outside the courthouse. Her most important point in these interviews has been insisting that she is not a pimp even being on trial for being one and even though having admitted to organising other women’s prostitution at a massage parlour. She instead referred to herself as a “whore mother” or “brothel mother”, and corrected every journalist that used the term “pimp”. She said about the distinction between pimps and herself: “Pimps exploit and hit girls. The pimps I know live in big houses and drive fancy cars. I ride the tram and am on social welfare”. To a journalist she stated: “I’ve been a whore mother in the real sense of the word. I have taken care of my girls, helped them. When they have needed taking care of, I’ve been there, when they have needed a shoulder to cry on, they turn to me”.

She got away with it as well. Even though she was sentenced for pimping, almost all newspapers used the words she preferred, and in court, the prosecutor had problems because she got the audience laughing with amusing stories about daily life in her massage parlours. The prosecutor was not able to maintain a focus on her role as a pimp; instead she managed to shift the attention to her role as a helper and “mother” for “her girls”.

Almost at the same time, there was a trial involving two eastern European men accused of pimping, violence and rape of two trafficked women. It would be
unthinkable for the media to give those men the same chance to present their version of the story. The media coverage of the two cases was extremely different. The case with the two male pimps were also more extreme with clearer evidence of exploitation, but still, even when similar acts were described, the terms used were completely different. One of the men also claimed to first and foremost be a helper for the women, and this was taken as a further evidence of his cruelty.

When doing fieldwork in massage parlours eleven years ago I met with many of the same distinctions as the female pimp I described made use of. I concluded that the construction of the power relations between women as something else than pimping was an important part of the culture that arose in the growing massage parlour milieu in the early 1990’s.

I have met many women who are pimps according to the legal definition. But because they are women they are not recognized as such. Not even by the women who work for them. This is therefore not only a problem for law enforcers and society at large, but also for individual women. Doing fieldwork in massage parlours I discovered early that distinguishing between what pimps did and what their own manager did was important for the women. Having a pimp was looked down on among ethnic Norwegian women in prostitution. When the women I interviewed saw another woman with someone they identified as a pimp, they would gossip about it and criticize the woman for putting up with it; they were seen as stupid because they gave away money. The women’s own relations with third parties were not defined as pimping, but rather help or friendships. Pimps had an important symbolic meaning for the women. It was important for them that I and others understood that they were not victims or women without any power over their situation. Not having a pimp was seen as evidence of this, but their own definitions and perceptions had little to do with the legal definition of pimping, and a lot to do with the popular image of a pimp.

Gender was the most important marker of a pimp. Some of the women I interviewed said explicitly that they would not work for a man, even if he was a manager in the same way as their female manager. The reason for this was that having a male
manager would feel more like having a pimp. An important part of the ideology at the
massage parlours was that all the women working at the massage parlour were equals
and parts of a team. The manager should preferably be seen as a part of that team. The
ideal of equality meant that they arranged staff meetings where everyone had a right
to be heard, and where everyone’s opinions guided the everyday running of the
massage parlour. Another important part of the understanding of equality in the
massage parlour milieu was that the ideal was that the manager sold sex as well, at
least from time to time. The female managers of the massage parlours had previously
worked as prostitutes themselves full time. As the administrative work started to
increase, they did less and less prostitution themselves. But to assure that they did not
look like a pimp in the eyes of the women and the outside world, they continued to
take clients once in a while. Some said explicitly that they continued to take some
clients in order not to have the women working there turn on them.

The definition of a pimp was also linked to whether the manager had any say in what
type of sexual services the women offered. The women emphasized that the manager
should not interfere with what went on in the massage room between the women and
the clients. If a women didn’t want to have sex with a particular client or didn’t want
to have for example intercourse, that should be her own business, not the manager’s
business. One of the women said:

Here we have freedom in relation to work shifts and a nice employer.
Cooperating with her is easy. I have tried other jobs, but can’t stand
regular employer-employee-relations. Here, if I don’t want to take
foreigners, she won’t interfere. At other places you might be obliged to
that, and then there is no respect.

As having a pimp was stigmatized, the women took care not to be associated with that
kind of relationships. When talking about pimps, this was always described as
something relevant for other parts of the prostitution market. For example, the women
had the impression that foreign women working in Oslo had pimps, and they based
this assumption on the fact that they had male managers. And they often believed that
women with a drug addiction were unable to take care of themselves and therefore
were easy targets for pimps. In the day to day life at the massage parlours, female
managers indeed interfered with their own choices, without that changing their perception of their situation.

In Norwegian society women in prostitution are clearly positioned as victims, not only of pimps or traffickers, but also of lack of other options, child abuse and psychological problems. It is understandable if that had consequences on their descriptions and understanding of their own situation. But insisting that their female managers were not pimps can also be a product of how pimps are portrayed in public discourse and popular culture and of how there are few available ways of recognising power relations between women. The lack of identification of female managers as pimps had consequences for the women. The massage parlours were initially described to them as all-women cooperatives, and this played a part in their decisions to enter prostitution. I believe it also influenced the women’s possibilities to oppose individually or collectively to the managers’ control. If the manager had been a man, it would be easy to reject any interference on his part as the women were highly sensitive to any signs of men’s power over women in prostitution. Women’s power over women, on the other hand, was made invisible by the family metaphors and idealistic assumptions about femininity.

As I already have touched upon, the lack of research based knowledge of pimps and traffickers may lead to the construction of powerful images that excludes some pimps from sight. This lack of knowledge leaves the role of pimp and traffickers open for our imagination. This is especially problematic since these images influence what goes on in court. When creating a perfect villain in pimps and traffickers, we risk creating images that are not recognisable for women who encounter the pimps or traffickers, or neighbours of organised prostitution, or the clients of prostitutes. People of flesh and blood don’t look like perfect villains. This may lead to a failure to recognise something as problematic when it’s not as extreme as in the movies or in the newspapers.

I mentioned earlier that I believe that there are important reasons for the lack of knowledge on the third parties in prostitution, be it pimps or traffickers. It is not only
due to difficult access to third parties for researchers. Doing my fieldwork I met lots of women that fit the legal definition easily. And social workers and law enforcers in Oslo have regular contact with men and women who in different ways are involved in prostitution or trafficking as third parties. I believe it also has to do with the fact that it is uncomfortable in certain ways. Trying to understand how the world looks to the other is an important ethical aim in qualitative studies. Learning more about the third parties to create understanding for their acts and attitudes seems morally wrong. Some would argue that one shouldn’t do research on clients either for the same reason because understanding an act is often construed as excusing the person doing it, and research can as such influence group’s claim for legitimacy. I therefore believe it would be very controversial if a researcher set the aim of for example seeing trafficking from the traffickers’ point of view. Would anyone even finance such research?

In some ways, pimps and traffickers serves the function of a perfect enemy, in opposition to the perfect victim; the women or child tricked or forced to sell sex. Research from other areas of society has taught us time after time that things rarely are black and white. When we are to create laws that are useful for working against trafficking and prostitution, we need to have a realistic starting point. We need to understand better all relationships within prostitution if we want to know what is actually going on, and not only do research on the sellers and buyers and assume our impressions on pimps and traffickers are correct.
## Appendix: Conference programme

### Men in prostitution: perspectives, identities and problems

April 21.-22. 2005 at [Håndverkeren konferancesenter](#) in Oslo

The conference is financed by the Norwegian Research Council’s program [Gender research: knowledge, boundaries, change](#)

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<th>Programme</th>
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<td><strong>April 21, 2005 10.00-16.00</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>10.00-10.10: Presentation of the conference and the speakers</td>
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<td>10.10-10.40: Claus Lautrup: &quot;Danish Internet survey on clients&quot;</td>
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<td>11.10-11.20: Break</td>
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<td>11.20-11.55: Jari Kuosmanen: &quot;Buying sexual services - a question about generation and masculinity&quot;</td>
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<td>11.55-12.10: Jan Steinum: &quot;Martin&quot;</td>
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<td>12.10-12.30: Plenary discussion</td>
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<td>12.30-13.30: Lunch</td>
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<td>13.30-14.00: Anthony Pryce: &quot;Flesh': The historical constructions of male sex work&quot;</td>
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<td>14.00-14.45: Joan Phillips: &quot;White women and black men: an old story continued?&quot;</td>
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<td>14.45-15.00: Break</td>
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<tr>
<td>15.00-15.40: Anne-Maria Marttila: &quot;Intersections of Gender, Sexuality and Ethnicity – A Study of Finnish Male Clients of Prostitution&quot;</td>
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<td>15.40-16.00: Plenary discussion</td>
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April 22. 2005 10.00-16.00
10.00-10.10: Introduction of today’s program

10.10-10.40: Jan Egil Aakernes: "Backpackers: Critics and Participants in Sex Tourism"

10.40-11.00: Camilla Jordheim Larsen: “Teenage boys hanging out with men in the neighbourhood”

11.00-11.45: Jackie West: "Men and gender relations in prostitution: the real issue?"

11.45-12.00: Break

12.00-12.30: Plenary discussion

12.30-13.30: Lunch

13.30-14.00: May-Len Skilbrei: “Prostitution in court”

14.00-14.15: Kirsten Stien: "Men who are buying sex, is that also a matter of class and ethnicity?"

14.15-15.00: Don Kulick: "400,000 Swedish perverts"

15.00-15.30: Plenary discussion

15.30-16.00: Closing remarks

The speakers

Claus Lautrup is a Danish sociologist working at The Danish Research Centre on Social Vulnerability. He recently published a report based on a quantitative Internet survey about clients in prostitution. 6,400 Danish men have participated in the survey and have answered questions relating to paying for sex. In addition 20 male clients have been interviewed on the subject. Lautrup will present the main points of his research and will seek to answer the questions as to why some men pay for sex while others don’t. The presentation will focus on answering why, how often, and under what circumstances men buy sex. Also subjects covering clients relation to Danish and foreign women and the client’s need to talk to professionals about their experiences with buying sex, will be discussed in the presentation.

Ingrid Smette is a social anthropologist working at NOVA, Norwegian Social Research. She has previously done research on clients in prostitution. She is currently working with research on youth with immigrant backgrounds and technology. More info at http://www.nova.no. The aim of her paper is to investigate how Norwegian clients in their narratives relate their practices as clients to ideas of gender equality. In a Norwegian context, the dominant image of clients of prostitutes is that of a man
violating principles of decency and modern male gender roles.

**Jari Kuosmanen** is a researcher and lecturer at the Department of Social Work, University of Gothenburg. In his research he has focused on various aspects of men and masculinities. For some years he has been interested in studying men and masculinities, for example Finnish immigrant men in Sweden, men who are sentenced to prison for sexual violence and men who buy sexual services. The study he is planning now is about men in different generations and their thoughts of and attitudes to prostitution and buying sex. Some studies show that there are interesting differences between younger and older sex customers, which can not only be linked to age. One of his questions is if men born in different decades in Sweden also have developed different kinds of masculinities and different attitudes to prostitution.

**Jan Steinum** is an artist educated at the Academy of fine arts in Trondheim, Norway, and at the Academy of fine arts in Prague, Czech Republic. His work consists of sculptures, videos and performances. He wishes to visualise different aspects of sexuality in his work, particularly gay sexuality. Besides working with exhibitions, he has showed his short films at several Gay and Lesbian film festivals in Europe.

**Anthony Pryce** is Reader in the Sociology of Sexual Health at City University, London UK. He is developing a programme of research that is addressing sexualities and health across the life course across social structures and discourses around marginalised populations such as prisoners, asylum seekers and sex workers. Current work includes the use of Internet sex chat rooms by men who may use them to rehearse new sexual practices and identities. This paper uses visual imagery to explore themes of aesthetics, transgression and commodification in the histories of male sex work.

**Joan Phillips** is a research fellow at Policy Studies Institute in London. She has done studies on gender, race and ethnicity, development, Caribbean return migration and sex work in tourism. Her paper explores the nature of the relationship between Barbadian beach boys and white female tourists. She explores the questions: is it love, romance or exploitation? Is this the re-enactment of a colonial story of the white mistress and the black slave?

**Anne-Maria Marttila**’s ongoing doctoral research project (2003-) examines Finnish male clients of prostitution as users of mainly ‘eastern’ (Russian and Baltic and to some extent, Far Eastern) prostitution. The practices and views of these men are analysed from the perspectives of feminist studies and critical studies on men. She particularly pays attention to the ways Finnish clients construct and identify themselves as gendered, sexual and ethnic subjects as well as to men’s practices and networking in prostitution. Marttila is especially interested in the intersections of sexuality and ethnicity within prostitution. The primary source for her study consists of texts from Finnish male prostitution clients and their personal, telephone and e-mail interviews as well as observation of prostitution practices both in Southern Finland and in Tallinn, Estonia.

**Jan-Egil Aakernes** is a Norwegian sociologist. In his paper Aakernes will talk about a group of tourists, so-called backpackers, who has a self-image as different from other
tourist. The young men he interviewed condemn sex tourism and sex tourists. He will discuss how this group participates in activities they as a rule object to. Aakernes will talk about how this group men who never would be with a prostitute back home still ends up in relationships that in many ways can be categorised as prostitution.

**Camilla Jordheim Larsen** is a Norwegian sociologist. In her paper she presents findings from a recent report on sexual relations on the grey zones between “ordinary” sexuality and prostitution among adolescents at risk. One important observation was that a considerable number of boys, in their mid-teens, visited men who took a sexual interest in them. During visits, the boys were often given money, alcohol, cigarettes etc. Larsen will discuss the power dynamics in such relations and how to conceptualise these experiences.

**Jackie West** is a sociologist at the University of Bristol. Her research interests are among other things the sociology of sexuality and economic sociology, the sex industry and prostitution and social policy. Her paper is on the knowledge production that takes place in the field of prostitution.

**May-Len Skilbrei** is a researcher at the Department of Criminology and Sociology of Law at the University of Oslo. She is a sociologist and has written several articles on prostitution, both based on an ethnographic study at massage parlours and in street prostitution and on analysis of prostitution politics in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The paper she will present at the conference is on the portrayal of men and women in Norwegian court cases involving prostitution, particularly in cases concerning pimping and procuring, which is the only part of prostitution relations that is explicitly illegal in Norway.

**Kirsten Stien** is a Master of educational science and researcher at the Centre of Child Welfare Research in Northern Norway. She has been doing studies on welfare services for children in Sámi societies, and studies of gender in connection to prostitution in a northern context. Studies on men have led to a wider diversity and complexity in descriptions of men, both in media and academia. Class and ethnicity are among the perspectives that give us richer pictures of men's lives. Stien will explore how this will influence descriptions of men in prostitution in her paper.

**Don Kulick** is a professor of anthropology at New York University. He is the author of the book "Travesti: Sex, Gender and Culture Among Brazilian Travesti Prostitutes" (University of Chicago Press, 1998). His recent work has focused on discourses of sexuality in Sweden, especially how public discussions and policies on prostitution are about much more than prostitution.