

# Absent Masculinity in Feminist Discourse on Sex Work

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## ABSENT MASCULINITY

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Men receive very little coverage as sex workers in academic discourse. Their contributions to the economies of third world countries are seldom acknowledged along with their female counterparts. A similar situation occurs with the presentation of women coerce girls to become prostitutes. There is little discourse involving the topic. Feminist discourse on the topic of sex work is limited to a female-centric industry that is operated by men. The primary discussion of male sex workers is through the frame of homosexual male prostitutes. Male sexual slavery is not discussed at any length in any academic articles. Some references to male prostitution are made in work on sex tourism, but the “beach boy” prostitutes get buried beneath layers of discourse involving the history of women in the sex trade in the Caribbean, essentially the men are cast off as a footnote in the research (Kempadoo, 2001b). It is important that these omissions be understood so that discourse may be equitably conducted and no group be excluded due to patriarchal myths or gender bias.

The global sex work industry is interpreted by Western society to be an act of violence against women (Kempadoo, 2001). This interpretation does not provide for the presence of men in the global sex trade in any capacity other than the oppressor. Most interpretations of men involved in the global sex trade and sexual tourism as having malicious intentions toward women. This interpretation limits the involvement of men to the role of the aggressive active force, as well as makes assumptions about their motives in the role of client. The absence of consideration for the male role in the sex work industry is visible in society through popular culture, but is also present in the lack of academic discourse involving men in sex work. In this

way, the research and philosophical discourse disregards men, while simultaneously holding them accountable for the existence of the sex trade and all transgressions occurring as a result of its existence. The absence of discourse involving men in the sex work industry in any significant way harms the overall strength of the mission of feminist discourse.

The issue of the global sex work industry is complex because it is not only the internationally loathed industries of trafficking and sexual slavery that are involved. There is also an industry of sex work that individuals consciously decide to enter. This form of sex work exists in almost every country in the world and is supported internally by local markets for sex as well as through sex tourism. The boundary between the types of sex work is in consent. Sexual slavery and human trafficking involve limited, if any consent of the sex worker, whereas prostitution, escort service, adult performance and similar fields of sex work are careers that an individual enters into willingly. Beyond the boundary of consent of the various fields of sex work are cultural and national boundaries. Sex work is an international phenomenon. Women and men from third world countries typically enter sex work and either have clients from other countries or are transported to other countries for work. In feminist discourse there is a habit of drawing the global sex work industry as a negative social institution. There are cases of sexual slavery, human trafficking and abuse of prostitutes, but those instances are not the whole of the industry. The sex work industry also contains men and women who work as prostitutes, escorts and performers of their own free will to support themselves or their families (Cates, 1989).

Feminist discourse targets itself at establishing equality between the sexes.

Transnational feminism accepts the same goal, but considers the importance of race on the construction and performance of gender across national boundaries. In the process of that discourse a discrepancy has occurred, allowing bias into the field. That bias focuses on the issues of women, as the sex that is traditionally viewed as being more oppressed by dominant world patriarchies. In this view of the patriarchal system there is no coverage of men because they are viewed as being empowered and able to change their own involvement in that system. The Western perspective of men does not allow for men to be portrayed as sexual victims because the phallus is the active agent in sexual activity. The position of women is well represented in feminist discourse because of the prominence of female theorists. Men are underrepresented in number of prominent feminist theorists. While the goal of feminism is gender and sex equality, theorists are more likely to advocate for their own sex.

Western notions of patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity do not allow for men to appear in contexts of objectification, such as being victims of the global sex trade. This blindness of patriarchy to such involvement appears in the context of academic discourse, popular culture and general discourse of society. The male-dominated academy produces knowledge that is desired by its constituency. As such, there is limited discourse throughout the academy on topics that would confront the hegemonic standard of masculinity or degrade it in any way. This includes the involvement of men as sex workers in the sex trade. Men quantitatively are less likely to be employed in sex work than women (Kempadoo, 2001b), but they have concerns unique to their involvement in masculinity which are not addressed by discourse and research that focuses only on female sex workers. Men who are studied in

academic discourse that are sex workers are typically also members of an already subordinated masculinity, such as being homosexual, or having an illness that renders them feminized, such as AIDS. A common factor in academic discourse involving men in sex work is a focus on men who have a sex work occupation by their own choice. Men who are discussed are not sexual slaves or are they in a group that has been coerced into sex work. In popular culture and societal discourse, the emphasis with regards to sex work is on the objectified female figure.

Men who are involved in sex work are distinct from the women who work in sex work both because of biology as well as sociological factors. While men are not physically in as much risk as women in terms of bodily violence during sexual activities, they have other concerns of a more social nature, such as the perception of their peers, who may view them as feminized. Identity formation is essential to the self-esteem of men that value masculinity. Men in the sex work industry are in a position of great vulnerability to their peers, social sanctions and to their clients.

Men are mentioned in discourse on sex work as oppressors, complicit facilitators (Kempadoo, 2001b) and as clients of prostitutes and other sex workers, but their roles in the global sex trade are never addressed in their existence as individuals. In grouping all men as oppressors and women as victims, the nuances of the sex industry are lost, and in essence the negative aspects of the sex industry are viewed without respect to the positive or neutral aspects.

Perhaps the most visible involvement of men in sex work is as clients. Military men are common consumers of sex work services. Brothels are often established outside of military

bases which are staffed with large numbers of heterosexual men (Kempadoo, 2001). This correlation is thought by some theorists to be a result of the requirements of the masculine identity. The Western conception of masculinity requires regular occurrences of heterosexual sex to maintain the masculine identity (Davidson, 2011; Hinojosa, 2010). Kempadoo uses the example of a United States Navy ship that began docking at St. Maarten to illustrate level to which military men seek out sexual services (2001). In the example, the ship's population spent approximately 200 dollars per person on sex workers each time the ship was docked. The use of sex workers by military personnel is not typically an issue that occurs in the United States itself, but happens in "Other" countries, those that are non-Western. The importance of this distinction is that there is a cultural separation, which makes the sex workers exotic and allows for the military personnel to objectify the sex workers that they hire (Kempadoo, 2001). In the example given by Kempadoo, the sexual tourism industry accommodates military men by supplying additional sex workers when their ship is scheduled to be docked. It is in this way that the sexual tourism industry encourages the continuance of the use of prostitutes in military culture and encourages an objectified view of women of color. Outside of military men who encounter sex workers by way of their institutional affiliation and expectations of a culture of masculinity, there are businessmen, vacationers and others who utilize the services of sex workers while traveling (Davidson, 2011). The men who hire sex workers are not given significant consideration in research or academic discourse beyond a flat role of being the clientele that provides money to the sex work industry. Their reasons for hiring a sex worker are not discussed in any detail, so it is impossible to determine if there are social constructs

that influence men to seek out prostitutes, or if it is a biological dependency that drives these men to hiring prostitutes.

On the other side of the spectrum, men who are sex workers work contrary to Western notions of masculinity. When viewed through the Western lens, these men are subordinated. In non-Western cultures the disgrace of being a sex worker is less than in Western cultures where masculinity is prized, but each culture has its own set of values that determine how such work is viewed. In Gambia, sex workers who define themselves as “beach boys” or “bumsters”, form their identity on their sex work. They are primarily associated with the tourism industry, offering their services to visiting vacationers and other tourists. These beach boys perform sexual acts that are consistent with the myths about the Black male body and its associated sexual performance. Beach boys perform both homosexual and heterosexual activities for payment. They pride themselves on their virility and the marketability of their sexual skills when related to their ability to impress wealthy-white Western clients. These men are objectified and ultimately their behaviors reinforce racial stereotypes. Gambian beach boys are valued for their large penises, sexual aggressiveness and their overall “primitive” style of sexuality. Other than biological considerations for penis size, it is a rehearsed social script enacted for the benefit of the white Western customer. In addition to the gaze through which they are objectified by outsiders, the boys are also abused by groups inside their own country. In 2003 the beach boys were considered to be a nuisance to tourism and were captured as groups. The government groups involved forcibly shaved the heads of the beach boys that were captured, robbing them of one of their identifying characteristics and one of the elements that comprise their identity. The beach boys of Gambia report being in their field of work primarily

because the wages are better than what they could have if they were to be employed in more traditional lines of work, such as mainstream tourism or the fishing industry. The money earned through prostitution was for some beach boys adequate to support their extended families and sometimes their friends. The sex tourism industry gave them the opportunity to enhance their self-esteem and confidence in themselves, which for some lead to careers in the mainstream tourism industry later in life. The abuse of the Gambian men involved in the beach boy occupation in an attempt to make them not marketable did not receive any negative response from human rights groups or groups that advocate for rights for sex workers (Nyanzi, Rosenberg-Jallow, Bah, & Nyanzi, 2005).

Not all male sex work is as optional or as identity oriented as that of the Gambian beach boys. In some third-world countries where the heterosexism demanded by Western militaries is not maintained for military masculinities, and boys and men become victims of sexual urges and hostile sexual outbursts of other men. An example of this can be seen in the interactions between the government military in Sudan and boys who have been enslaved in south Sudan. The military employed by the north rape the enslaved boys in the south for the purpose of humiliating the boys, as well as ensuring their compliance. Homosexuality is prohibited in the Sudan culture, even in circumstances of rape, and as a result the boys are never seen as “men” in their culture, and are disgraced. Resistance to the sexual advances of the military personnel was often punished by death, forcing the boys to submit to the sexual abuse of their captors. Often in this culture, the boys who are raped are prosecuted for homosexuality and are eventually put to death (Sliwa, 2004). There is no ill effect for the military men due the interpretation of homosexuality in the culture only encompassing acts that are seen as passive,



or feminine. The man who is penetrating in the sexual act is not considered to be a homosexual, while his victim is considered a homosexual. The military men are thus unpunished for their participation, while their victims are put to death. While this type of abuse is not as prevalent as forms involving the rape of women by dominant militaries, or other imperial forces, it is a problem which impacts the lives of a subjugated population.

Some countries have strong sexual tourism and human trafficking associations, which are well documented by academics. One such case is the relationship between Thailand and Japan. Tourists from Japan frequent Thailand to buy the services of Thai prostitutes, and there is a stream of indentured women and sex slaves that are imported into Japan to fulfill the needs of Japanese men. Japanese men seek out the types of sexual interactions that occur between themselves and Thai sex workers due to a cultural environment that prizes men over women, and as a result has a population with more men than women. This situation places men at a disadvantage by limiting the availability of wives (Dinan, 2002). The limitation of available women in Japan is not only significant because of the quantity of women available, but because of the limitations on the ability of the male partner to be selective in his choice of sex partners. Giving Japanese men even less choice is the preference of some Japanese women for Black men. This preference, which is sometimes referred to as the fetishization of Blackness, subordinates Japanese men due to the size of their penises and overall approach to sexuality. The black men who are of erotic interest to Japanese women have larger penises, but are often used as status symbols for the Japanese women who have sex with them or marry them (Cornyetz, 1994). Neither the problems of the Japanese men or the black men that take their

place are considered in discourse. Black men are considered as a racialized sexual object, but they are not considered as men or as individuals for their involvement.

The homosexual identity is marginalized in most countries, as it is not included in the dominant notions of “natural sexuality” (Grewal & Kaplan, 2001). As a result of this marginalization and the cultural views which result in homosexual acts being a punishable offense in many countries, either in the past or the present, it is homosexual acts which are the most sought after service of men in the sex work industry. Cultural norms and social stigmas of homosexuality generated demand for an underground industry in which men could have sex with other men without the social complications of a relationship, which could destroy the man’s career, or end his life, depending on the culture. In the United States men created networks of places where sexual acts could be arranged discreetly. Discretion was a cornerstone of gay male prostitution in the United States. Some men hire prostitutes based on their ability to “pass” for straight men. In some instances this is for the safety of the client, in other instances it is merely a preference of the client to have a sexual partner that he considers more masculine. In more modern times the stigma in the United States is far less harmful than it was previously, but some men still wish to maintain a heteronormative identity, or find that prostitutes introduce fewer complications than seeking a relationship. More recently the Internet has become a tool for connecting potential clients to prostitutes. Perhaps an irony in the changes in male-for-male prostitution is a recent change in the types of men who offer their services, in a survey conducted in 2003, most of the prostitutes identified themselves as being aggressive, masculine and sexually in the dominant position or as a “top” (Pruitt, 2005). In other countries the purpose of male-for-male prostitution is similar. Men who have

homosexual and have no socially allowed method for fulfilling their desire are left with only the already obscured sex work industry to meet their needs for sexual gratification (Tadele, 2011). Homosexual male prostitution is documented in academic discourse, but it is handled as a social problem and as a “moral aberration” (Scott, 2003). One of the important functions of male-for-male prostitution which is given limited discussion is the notion of spurious homosexuality. Foucault discusses the concept that until homosexuality was created by sexologists as a category it was not a structured existence and less deviant identities existed for “normal” men who would sometimes have sex with other men (Kaye, 2004). The limited coverage of such “spurious” homosexuality may be related to the fact that the men involved in such acts were not identified as homosexuals, and thus still a component of the patriarchal system, which would seem to be a non-notable status.

Current research involving male sex workers focuses on the experience of homosexual male sex workers and the relationship between sex workers and the transmission of AIDS. These men are viewed as having subordinated masculine identities, or as not really being men. During the 1980s AIDS became a problem for homosexual men. The spread of the disease exposed what to that point had been a hidden subculture in which men engaged in sex with other men in exchange for money or other favors. The reason that the occurrence of male prostitution became a public issue is because of a perceived public health risk as a result of the sexual activities of these men. The spread of AIDS revealed that more men take part in sex work trades than were previously suspected, as heterosexual women became infected. This revealed that some men holding heterosexual identities were engaging in homosexual sex either as sex workers or as clients of other men. The result of this revelation was a dismissing of those men

as socially problematic and focus given to the sex lives of male prostitutes during the rise of the AIDS crisis (Pleak & Meyer-Bahlburg, 1990). These men were not reviewed as victims of society or of the pimps managing their occupation, but were instead viewed as a societal problem and as the carriers of disease. Discussions of unions and protections for prostitutes do not include these men, as these men are stigmatized in such a way that does not allow them to be acknowledged as being more than a deviance of masculinity.

Masculine identities are constructed with control over social situations composing a significant component of the identity (Hinojosa, 2010), something which is not possible in a situation where the man is the commodity and there is a client paying for services. Due to a client base that is predominantly male, most male sex workers are homosexual, or perform homosexual services, which are not accepted in a hegemonic identity. Men who prostitute for other men find themselves in a feminized role, as they are objectified by other men for their bodies. These men spend time and effort toning their muscles and working towards moving their bodies toward an idealized masculine form. This effort and its result is often tied to the self-esteem of the male prostitute (Cates, 1989).

The sex work industry is a global trade industry. As such, the traditions, laws and social norms that surround the industry cannot be standardized. Because of the almost universal creation of the two gender system, there is the potential for Western feminist discourse to attempt to apply values of gender to the functions of sex workers in non-Western civilizations. The global sex trade involves the exchanging of people for the purpose of sex. Sometimes these exchanges are permanent, such as the exchanges involved with sexual slavery and human

trafficking. Other times the exchange is more temporary, such as through sexual tourism. In both forms, there are power relationships at work. The power relationships are the result of colonization and imperial influences exerted on the existing social structures. Capitalist globalization opened the world to those with significant monetary resources. This globalization is not an equitable exchange; as such the term transnational best applies, as it does not make an elusion to an equitable form of exchange. A Western lens imparts its own assumptions about aspects of culture, especially when considering matters of patriarchy. The Western lens sees the patriarchy and the two gender system as a natural order, and as such it is an immovable obstacle to objective research and discourse when considering non-Western cultures (Grewal & Kaplan, 2001). A Western view of sex work may be the cultural interpretations of the brothels of Nevada in the United States, or images of Arab slave girls from popular culture and film. To cross into a transnational understanding of sex work requires seeing each culture as separate and unique and not reading the global sex trade as a homogeneous industry that has universal constructs (Grewal & Kaplan, 2001). I present a transnational approach to the topic of men in sex work because the construction of masculinity and the development of a masculine identity are dependent upon cultural context. Furthermore, a large number of men who are involved in sex work are from non-Western cultures. A transnational view is essential to equitably assessing the impact of sex work on men from different cultures.

One of the most important and interesting elements of transnational sexuality and transnational sex trade is the role of race. Race is important because in most cases it is a visible characteristic that distinguishes people from different nationalities. In sex work race is important because it defines the relationship, and in some cases is the reason for the

transaction occurring. The women who hire the beach boys of Gambia do not hire them because of their availability and low cost alone. While those may be factors, their race and the stereotypes associated with their race are more important. Gambian beach boys are identified by their developed bodies, dreadlocks and their dark skin. Beach boys are an embodiment of the Western stereotypes of Black or African sexuality (Nyanzi, Rosenberg-Jallow, Bah, & Nyanzi, 2005). This fetishization of their bodies increases their profitability as prostitutes, but it continues racist assumptions about Black bodies. The white Western tourists who hire the services of these men see them as a sexual commodity that will resolve their feelings of sexual desire for a sexual experience that is aggressive and primal. This type of tourism is allowed to continue without interruption, and the culture of the beach boys spreads to other boys who see the scripted sexual performance of the beach boys as being an example of Gambian masculinity that should be modeled and appropriated. This fetishization of black masculinity is also present in the sexual interests of some Japanese women (Cornyetz, 1994). While the situation involving the erotic interest of Japanese women in black men does not constitute sex work, as there is no direct payment for services, there is an aspect of objectification involved, which utilizes racial stereotypes to boost the status of the female.

The absence of males from sex work is a key attribute that limits the amount of discourse about the topic. Why are men absent from sex work? A sociological perspective on the topic gives two possibilities. The first is that men do not engage in sex work as often as women because of the impact it would have on the masculine identity. The second possibility is that women do not have the physical or social need for sexual intercourse that occurs in men. Limited information is available about either possibility. If men are absent from sex work

because of their construction of masculinity, then it is only a cultural limitation which inhibits their participation and the men who do participate are all the more marginalized as a result of their different status. If men are more absent from sex work because of the difference in demand for their services due to different attitudes of women, it would require that there is an somewhat widespread understanding of femininity which discouraged participation in that type of industry. Since there is no universal woman, there is not likely to be as much support for that idea as concepts that are driven by a heteronormative expectation of men to engage in frequent sexual activity. Such an explanation could be examined in the context of sexuality as a symbol of male conquest.

Another attribute that limits the academic discourse involving men in sex work is the patriarchal system. Inside the Western patriarchy men are the protectors and women are the protected. As such there is an additional criterion that interferes with discourse involving male sex workers. Male sex workers are not interpreted as needing protection because they are not viewed as being as weak or vulnerable as women and children, who are interpreted as needing protection from a career in sex work. Men who are clients are not interpreted as being socially harmed in any way, but their individual distinctiveness is lost, and therefore the harms they endure which results in them seeking the services of sex workers. As men are not seen as needing any type of protection, the amount of discourse regarding their mistreatment is limited, and there are few advocates in the academy for them.

The academic discourse involving female sex workers, female sex slaves and the trafficking of females focuses on their well-being and on the oppressions they must endure as a

result of patriarchal masculine influence (Kempadoo, 2001). Equivalent discourse does not exist for the humiliation, torture or social consequences that must be endured by men that find themselves in a similar situation.

Ultimately the lack of discourse involving men hurts feminist discourse. In attempting to achieve a goal of sexual equality, it is a necessity to see beyond the Western patriarchal lens and recognize where there are similarities in the experiences of men and women. While the hegemony of the West may not have many commonalities with women in Thailand, there are men and women, people, who exist at every stage between hegemony and women in third-world countries with limited power. By including men who exist in subordinated, objectified or otherwise marginalized positions, the distance between the sexes is reduced and equality may be reached more easily. Male prostitutes, escorts, sex slaves and “beach boys” have been absent from academic discourse in the past. Their absence represents voices of men and masculinities which are not heard in the call for sexual liberation and reforms of abusive social institutions.



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