
CONSUMING SEX – Finnish Male Clients and Russian and Baltic Prostitution

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Introduction

The practices of men who buy sex, “the invisible men”, have been largely ignored by academic discussion – despite the recent visibility and immensity of prostitution and trafficking businesses. The Finnish political debate surrounding the issue of prostitution has concentrated on criminalization of buying sex. There has, however, been little discussion on the different masculinities and sexualities involved and how the buyers of sex are situated in the prostitution and trafficking discourses, both on local and global levels. It is, after all, the clients of prostitution, who, for the most part, finance the entire business and sustain the trafficking in women and girls by demanding new and exotic “products”.

The lack of academic research on men buying sex is, for the large part, due to the difficulties in getting in contact with and getting information on these men.¹ The buyers of sex have remained invisible and anonymous while the attention has mainly concentrated on the prostitutes and, to some extent, on the procurers. In the sex trade discourse, secrecy has surrounded the client position to a great degree. The research carried out by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in 2002, showed that it is most often the prostitute who is considered to be a central agent in the context of prostitution and trafficking. In the Baltic countries, when asked who is to blame that girls/women are trafficked abroad for the purpose of prostitution, most of the respondents thought that “it is the girls/women themselves, since they trust everyone too much”. To the question what should be done to combat trafficking women abroad for the purpose of prostitution, most people considered that the traffickers should have more heavy punishment. Although, when comparing the prostitutes and the clients in the same respect, a larger number of the interviewed held a view that the girls/women rather than the clients should be punished (IOM 2002).

The public opinion may often be misled by the invisibility of the client in sex trade on account of which the problems surrounding the phenomenon are not easily associated with the buyers of sex. In this sense, criminalization of buying sex (even the debate on it) could serve to bring the clients out of their “hideout”. In Finland, where the criminalization has recently been under discussion, the buyers of sex are, to a large extent, worried about their situation were the bill criminalising the customer in the sex trade to pass (as it most likely will). This has put the buyers in a paradoxical situation where they would like to have their voice heard on the matter, but without a face. Activated by the discussion around criminalization, they are willing to come to the fore, yet anonymously. We have seen interviews of “faceless” men on Finnish television and articles on anonymous men in various magazines. This is also where the new information technology has come to the picture: the buyers of

¹ In concentrating on men, I am not suggesting that the customers of sex trade are exclusively men. Female customers, however, are extremely few and especially so among the Finnish clients of Russian and Baltic prostitution (where they are almost fully absent).

sex debate the matter of criminalization of clienthood on web sites, various discussion forums and via e-mail.

The role of “demand” as a driving force behind sex trafficking and prostitution has been stressed for example by Donna M. Hughes. According to her, “[t]he trafficking process begins when men and pimps create the demand for women and girls to be used for prostitution. Where the demand for prostitution is high, insufficient numbers of local women and girls can be recruited.” (Hughes 2002). Here I would also draw attention to the enormous gap in the living standards between ‘the East’ and ‘the West’. The opening of borders between the former socialist and the Western Europe has meant that, since the late 1980s and early 1990s, the demand and supply of commercial sex have met each other. This has resulted in the growth of the whole sex business which has further accelerated the trafficking business, profiting from available and cheap “products” – bodies of women and girls – in the “East” of Europe, in order to meet the pressure of demand in the West.

An explanatory factor for the growing demand and “invasion” of commercial sex has also been the changes in the gender culture and sexual liberation during the last couple of decades: Values underlining individualism and hedonism have resulted in the placement of the client’s pleasure before the abuse of the prostitute. It has also been suggested that sex trade is an important medium of a struggle for power between the genders (Näre 1994, 6-7).

In 1995, it was estimated that nearly 10 % of the Finnish men have purchased sex in Finland or abroad at least once (OSCE, Finnish Report on Trafficking in Human Beings 2002). Finnish sex trade is not limited only within the borders of the country but sex tourism to Russia and to the Baltic States (and to the Far East) is also a major element in the Finnish prostitution discourse. As Sven-Axel Månsson has pointed out, “the global effects flow from both ‘periphery’ to ‘metropole’ and vice versa” (Pringle & Pease 2001, 249). For example, not only do thousands of Finnish men go on “sex tours” mainly to the neighbouring countries in the East, but it has also been estimated that approximately 90 % of the prostitutes working in Finland today are foreigners, majority of whom come from Russia and the Baltic States and the most of whom are Russian-speaking (Ojala 2002; OSCE 2002)².

Growth in global interchange, both in the form of cross-border population movements and “virtual movements” have benefited varying actors and organisations in the trafficking business. These “sexploitation organizations” (Hearn & Parkin 1995, 68-72) exploit sexuality of the ‘Other’ for the benefit of managers and owners of the various organisations in the sex industry. This discursive power over the ‘Other’ stems from economic inequalities and hierarchies in relation to, for example, gender, class, age and ethnicity.

The sex industry as a whole encompasses complex economic, cultural, social and political factors. Therefore, a multidisciplinary approach is needed in order to understand the networks and complexities surrounding the trafficking in women and children and the interconnections of different agents – pimps, clients, prostitutes, brothel managers, taxi-drivers, hotel owners, etc. – in the trafficking context.

In addition to the need for multidisciplinary, there have been calls for “conceptual clarity” as to how, for example, trafficking, sexual exploitation and sex trade (and their agents) should be defined. The inaccuracy of concepts and the different use of them by different countries, agencies and institutions complicate the regulation and dealing with the trafficking business. This has caused trafficked victims to having been wrongly identified as prostitutes and illegal immigrants, and thus have been left without proper assistance and protection.

Laura Keeler and Marjut Jyrkinen stress the need for deeper analysis on the structuring of the identities of men, such as how the masculinities are created and maintained in the prostitution

² In the Russophobic mood of “transitional” nation-states after the Soviet period, the Russophone women have often formed the most marginalized group. Novikova 2002, 79.

discourse (Keeler & Jyrkinen 1999; also Campbell & Storr 2001). According to Sven-Axel Månsson, most of the factors behind sex trade lie in masculinity and thus prostitution can be considered particularly “a male problem”. (Jakobson 2002, 23-25). However, the social practices of men buying sex have largely remained unknown.

In this paper I aim to approach the subject of prostitution by discussing the ways Finnish buyers of sex reproduce masculinity and ethnicity as well as related gendered power expressions. More than trying to uncover the reasons for the men’s practices, I am interested in how the men buying sex experience a prostitution encounter and how this is interrelated with their “other life” and surroundings. The paper is based on an analysis of 24 texts from and 5 personal interviews of Finnish clients of prostitution (received and carried out in April and May 2003)³. I have also, on a daily basis, followed Finnish internet forums dealing with commercial sex during the last 12 months. Into this paper, I have incorporated some themes that have surfaced in the narratives of these men.

Who Is He? The Buyer of Sex

The invisibility of the men buying sex is apparent also in language: There is to be found numerous words referring to a woman who offers sex in exchange for money. In comparison, according to Laura Keeler, there seems to exist only three English slang terms for “the clients of prostitutes” – or “the buyers of sex”: “trick”, “John” and “punter”. Of these three at least “punter” is mostly unknown in America (Keeler & Jyrkinen 1999, 8). There exists also an expression “kerb crawler” in English language which refers to the men driving around in their cars seeking for women for sexual services (Campbell & Storr 2001). The use of the term “client”, which I mainly use throughout this paper, has been criticized of being too normalising in referring to the buyers of sex. I recognise the problem, but in short of a better term, when analysing prostitution from a viewpoint of a man paying for sex, I find it usable. For prostitution is indeed (sex) trade and the clients are the main financiers of the sex industry.⁴

Despite his anonymity and invisibility, the client is thus a central agent in the sex business. This is also why there is a need for a better understanding of the client position within the discourse in order to better deal with the phenomenon. I agree with Julia O’Connell Davidson on that “unless we are willing to face the fact that the people who use prostitutes, are not monstrous ‘Others’ but are actually members of our society, produced by us, we are in danger of formulating policies that, at best, do nothing meaningful to address the problem, and at worst, intensify the vulnerability of those already most vulnerable within prostitution.” (O’Connell Davidson 2001, 35; see also Campbell & Storr 2001, 96-99)

When I began my research project, I had many preconceptions and prejudices against the clients of prostitution. Since I received the first e-mail from a shy and asocial 25-year-old student, I have, however, been forced to rethink the preconditions for my study. I have found out that the buyers of sex are not a homogenous group by any means: they can be pleasant, unpleasant, interesting and irritating – mostly ordinary people. The dehumanization of them only disguises the complex social, economic and cultural relationships within which commercial sex takes place.

My entrance to the subculture of the clientele of prostitution, was by no means easy because of the invisibility of the phenomenon. I began by systematically going through annual volumes of eight Finnish adult magazines from 1990 to 2003. This gave me a picture of the “terminology” of the clients. This was further helped by following a discussion on Finnish internet forums dealing with

³ These are part of the research material for my PhD thesis dealing with the Finnish male clients within Russian and Baltic prostitution.

⁴ The global sex trade has been estimated to be the third biggest area of the international black market economy (after the illegal weapon and drug businesses). Hearn & Jyrkinen 2000, 68.

commercial sex. In March this year one of these forums agreed to publish an advertisement for my research.

The buyers of sex that I have been in contact with are, as I said, not a homogenous group: The age distribution is between 20-60 years. They come from different social classes, some are single, but most of them are married and approximately 50 % of them have children. Average age is 38 and on average, the first time they bought sex was at the age of 26. Most of them have at least high school education and many also have a university degree. One must, however, keep in mind that I got in contact with these men through the Internet. Although a large part of the Finnish people nowadays have access to the Internet, it can still be considered to divide people on grounds of, for example, periphery and urban district. Therefore, most of the respondents to my advertisement live in southern Finland, only three out of 25 are either from eastern or northern Finland.

These men are mostly clients of adult prostitutes but some of them mention having, knowingly or unknowingly, also used girls of 16-17 years for the purpose of sexual exploitation (especially when buying sex abroad). Some of the respondents only buy sex in Finland but most of them are also sex tourists mainly to Tallinn and St. Petersburg area, but to the other Baltic countries as well. In their "online" discussion, Tallinn is often called "southern Helsinki". 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 Finland. I shall discuss this further later in the paper.

The men have been very positive about my research and have been willing to talk about their experiences and views. The cooperativeness of the buyers of sex have been brought out also in earlier studies, for example, by Varsa (1986), Prieur and Taksdal (1989), Sandell, Pettersson, Larsson and Kuosmanen (1996).

"A Man 'Online' Seeking a Woman"

The development of new information and communication technologies have extended the possibilities of trafficking in persons, not only as actual border crossings, but as trafficking of virtual *images*. Therefore, there have been calls for widening the definition of trafficking in human beings for the purpose of sexual exploitation to include also *the virtual aspect*. A report for the Council of Europe referred, for example, to the role of marriage agencies and pornographic material in the Internet as how trafficking also works without persons physically crossing borders. Thus, trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation should not be defined "purely as a transnational phenomenon, involving a crossing of borders, but could also be said to exist in cases where the victim did not physically leave the country and where images were transferred." [Council of Europe (EG-S-NT) 2003].

On a Finnish internet forum, pictures of prostitutes with contact information are being displayed. They include Finnish, Swedish, Russian and Baltic prostitutes and according to the clients, pictures do not always represent the actual persons providing the services. Thus, some of the photographs may never have been intended to be used to advertise the women in them as prostitutes. Some of the women may not even know their photographs are on web sites. Even though the faces of the women are mostly covered, it would not be difficult to recognize a person from these photographs.

New technologies, Internet, television, mobile and phone links, provide anonymity, disguise, privacy, speed, novelty, exotism and easiness for the users. Also communication among men seeking sexual services is useful for the buyers of sex: men discuss with each other about where and how to find "girls". They also make "reviews" of women and their performances. On a Finnish Internet forum, these are called "test drive -reports". Many of the respondents, especially the younger ones, to my advertisement on a Finnish forum dealing with commercial sex, had purchased sex for the first time through this particular forum. The easiness, anonymity and communication with "others alike" provided by the new technologies, with no doubt lowers the inhibition to buy sex by normalizing the behaviour and images as well as legitimizing the sex industry and providing "a virtual support community for users online" [Council of Europe (EG-S-NT) 2003].

The new information technology has also enabled creation of “virtual homosocial spaces” in the Internet. Earlier, the buyers of sex did not have a legitimate space where to communicate with each other – at least not as anonymously and easily as nowadays. An Internetforum or chat has offered the clients a possibility to create virtual support (buddy) communities where women act as currency rather than subjects of communication (Thomson 1999,186). The few female users appear more as legitimizers of the masculine space. Not all of the respondents to my inquiry, however, felt any need for discussion and communication with other clients of prostitution. These men tended to be older and regarded this “online chatting” as an area of self-presentation mainly for younger men and for few “introverts” (as a possibility of creating “imagined” and artificial identities). The Internetforums have, however, enabled the construction of social bonds and collective identity among the clients of prostitution. This also appears to have an empowering effect on clients: there is debate, for example, on “the clients rights” and other common interests, but first and foremost it is a space for forming of and maintaining collective identities.⁵

The internet is not only a forum for discussion and communication but also a major advertiser for various commercial sexual services. In Finland there has been discussion on criminalizing also the advertising prostitution (Oikeusministeriön tiedote 3.7.2003). This, however, would only have serious effect on announcing on non-electronic medias. Technical possibilities of the Internet can make the geographical location of the server insignificant: national legislation can easily be neutralized by taking a hyperlink from one country to another [Council of Europe (EG-S-NT) 2003]. A Finnish server has already informed that were the aforementioned bill to pass in Finland, it will move abroad.

The men who use the Internet to find women for the purpose of sexual services and communicate with each other “online” on the issue, mostly seem to be travelling businessmen, well-to-do local men and students. The unstable economic and political situation has made the Eastern European countries the central sending countries of trafficking in women and girls while the countries of transit and destination are mainly situated in the Central and Western Europe. Also in the Southern Europe, especially the Balkans have become the major area of trafficking (as sending, transit and destination countries) on account of post-war instability and the demand by the NATO soldiers, humanitarian workers and UN officials (Tritaki 2003, 27). Globalization, the new information technology and the world situation have developed “a market of the buyer” in the context sex business.

Justifying the Action

Important element of the sex industry is, as pointed out by Hearn and Jyrkinen (2000, 69), the creation and maintaining of the clientele of the sex trade. In order to make the sex business profitable, it also has to be generally considered as acceptable a business as possible. In other words, it has to be normalized and legitimized.

The needs of the clients are socially constructed. The categories of a man and a woman are essentialized and naturalized: masculine sexuality is presented as uncontrollable and instinctual which inevitably requires satisfaction. This naturalization of the genders is well rooted in our society. Therefore, there are no difficulties in creating and sustaining the demand for commercial sex.

This “biologism” is extremely prevalent among the Finnish buyers of sex. As expressed by one of the Finnish clients: “*most of men are not monogamous and this characteristic easily directs a man into purchasing of sexual services.*” (Pekka, 49). This also works the other way around: a prostitute (and especially a foreign prostitute) is, in the prostitution discourse, usually constructed as “hypersexualised and enjoying one’s work”.

⁵ More about the communication between individuals and between an individual and technology in Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Free Association Press. London 1991.

Many of the Finnish buyers of sex seem to believe that "*trafficked girls are an urban legend*", as expressed by "Henrik" (35). On the other hand, some also think that the clients are helping the women (Pekka, 40+), but this mainly concerns the prostitutes outside Finland. The arguments of the men appear as *defensive*: it would seem that most of the buyers of sex are not able to – or do not want to – regard buying sex, and the prostitution business as a whole, as oppressive. This also partly explains the distancing, commodification and dehumanization of the women working as prostitutes.

The rejection of certain information on prostitution, and sex business as a whole, appears as if some men would try to "explain away" an abuse (and danger) in order to avoid blame and responsibility⁶, as well as the feelings of guilt. In addition to the men who didn't consider any immorality in their engaging in prostitution business, there were few men who expressed very clearly that they try not to think about the moral side of what they are doing. On the other hand, what they considered as mostly being wrong in their doing, was lying to the family and deceiving one's wife. Many clients of prostitution also appear to believe that they can tell from a behaviour of "a girl" if she is unwillingly working as a prostitute.

Consumerism

"Paid sex is normal sex. A woman who distributes, free of charge, a product worth paying for, is stupid." (Heikki, 50+)

The clients of prostitution tend to regard a commercial sex act as a service, "a luxury moment" which is often equated with, for example, a massagetreatment. Paying for sex is an act of consumption and further, one "where there should be no state intervention since it is an act between two consenting, adult individuals". Men buying sex do, of course, have different reasons for buying sex. Their views, however, on the actual act are very much alike: it is described as "a wonderful, relaxing moment", "indulgence", "an easy lay", being "with no pressure of performance", "a feeling of power", "immediate satisfaction", "feeling of independence". A woman is absent in these descriptions, but she can be traced as a surface⁷ (a body) by and upon which, "real" masculinity is reflected: "I got laid – therefore I am a man" (Hänninen 1994).

Not only is the personality of a woman insignificant but the *commodification of the female body* is highly particularized in the verbal acts of these men. On the Internetforums dealing with commercial sex, women's bodies are broken down into parts – breasts, bottom, legs, hair, skin, face, lips, eyes, nails... A female body is thereby made *consumable* by reducing it to a mere object but signified with nonpersonal attributes as, for example, ethnicity.

The buyers of sex communicate with each other online, seeking different "fetishized" bodies – or parts of bodies: "blond/brunette, black/white/brown/yellow colour of skin, well-developed breasts/bottom, long legs..." Varying individual desires can also be satisfied when new "commodities" constantly arrive from, as well as are available in, the exotic "East". Customers' demand for variety of options has also been highlighted by the prostitutes themselves (Høigård & Finstad 1996, 359-360). In Finland, the market is indeed the buyers': the turnover of the prostitutes is high, because many Russian and Baltic prostitutes usually stay in the country no longer than couple of weeks at a time on a tourist visa (OSCE, Finnish Report on Trafficking in Human Beings 2002). Thus, the present Finnish prostitution market seems to offer "something for everyone" from the viewpoint of a buyer of sex.

There has also been a strong tendency of normalization and legitimization of the sex trade. Sexual intercourse is, according to some views, seen as a human right (a view made particularly visible in the

⁶ According to Jeff Hearn, this is also typical of the talk of men who are violent to known women: violence is often minimized and excluded from the definition of violence. Hearn 1998, 183.

⁷ About the body as "an inscriptive surface", see e.g. Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies. Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Indiana University Press. 1994.

discussion on the criminalization of clienthood of prostitution). This rhetoric uses extremely individualistic and selective arguments where the rights of the 'one' go ahead of the 'other'. The clients of prostitution and many anti-criminalization arguments present the prostitution encounter as an act, a trade between two adult, independent individuals which is "of nobody else's business". What is being sold and bought is not the body of or the individual seller but the *service* which is offered *by* (the body of) a seller, namely, the prostitute.

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 trade⁸. 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 in Finnish society. This may have changed the masculine concept of honour, making the buyer of sex *a demanding customer*.

Fetishism

One of the narratives of the prostitutes' clients described in detail a sexual act with a coloured prostitute (there weren't any descriptions, as detailed, of an encounter with a white prostitute in the narratives of the respondents). The woman was described as sexually very active and her performance as "inexhaustible". As I pointed out earlier, describing the Russian and Baltic prostitutes as "skilful, beautiful and sexy" in comparison to Finnish prostitutes is also general among the Finnish buyers of sex.

As Sara Ahmed observes, "consumer culture involves the production of the stranger as a commodity fetish through representations of difference." (Ahmed 2000, 116). Difference of the Stranger is made visible in the narratives, but at the same time often praised – as a (materialized) object of sexual desire. This "fetishisation" of a (sexualized and ethnicized) Stranger is common in the talk of buyers of sex communicating in the Internet. Men who have "similarly concentrated desires" share information on "where to find best..." and the descriptions are often very detailed as well. The search for (a) superior feature(s) – fetish(es) is recognizable, for example, in "Henrik's" (35) story: he described his "obsession" of having to "try that one and that one...", without being able to stop.

According to bell hooks, "within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture". Ethnicity becomes constructed as the exotic through an analogy with food: a Stranger is "spicy and different". (hooks 1992: 21) Thus, the difference can also be consumed in order to make *oneself different*. A consuming self can create something that is not one or the other – s(he) can *become* something other. This is a reflection of the escalation of life rhythm in which 'just being' isn't considered 'living'. One must constantly 'become' (Ahmed 2000, 118-125). For example, young, beautiful, exotic women are often described as fetish-like objects in the narratives of the buyers of sex, and as often fetishes, they are also *collected*. The (power of) seductiveness of the object, the fetish (see Baudrillard 1990, 121-123), must, however, be denied by seeking all the more superior *object*.

Consumption of a gendered and ethnic 'Other', namely, a foreign prostitute, is a *process* in a sense that the Stranger is "produced, marketed and sold" by and through various agents. Through the commodification process, the stranger has become a *fetish*: an object which is signified by different attributes which interest different consumers. Jeff Hearn and Sasha Roseneil suggest that "consumption also constructs, even consumes, the consumer... People do consumption, and are 'done to', constructed, consumed by that consumption. Consumption is structure, process and agency."

⁸ The current values glorifying consumption, pleasure and immediate satisfaction of needs and desires (to read more see e.g. Hearn & Roseneil 1999 and Sulkunen, Holmwood, Radner & Schulze 1997) may also influence why many (especially) young women from the ex-socialist countries look for better chances to live up to this "artificial reality".

(Hearn & Roseneil 1999, 1). Zygmunt Bauman also considers consumption as “putting on and taking off identities” in the consumer market. In the consumer culture, individual subjectivity is established through continuous consumption. People are expected to be “‘free individuals’ according to the sense of ‘freedom’ as defined in terms of consumer choice.” (Bauman 1997, 14,127-140). The consuming of sex and women, can be considered a part of constructing the heterosexual masculine identity⁹ as reflecting the hegemonic notion of masculinity.

According to Mike Featherstone, consumerism is a symbolic area, on which individuals form collective identities. Accepting that there is no ‘essential’ identity to be discovered, the postmodern ‘subject’ constructs “whatever meaning they can from whatever bag of resources they have available to them”. The “humanist” notion of individual subjectivity, and of a universal “human nature” has been abandoned by postmodernists in favour of a notion of the individual as “a collection of quasi-subjects”. We consume for a variety of reasons, including social status, which have “a non-quantifiable, ‘symbolic’ value”. In this sense, ‘needs’ are socially constructed. (Featherstone 1991, 16-26,48).

To go further, Michel Maffesoli suggests that consumerism – “hedonism and aestheticism” – is not in fact, a “praise” of individualism but a manifestation of “pluralism, fracture and relativism” that “merge into a heterogeneity”. Maffesoli writes about “the cult of the body” in which “the body is constructed, cultivated and embellished under the eyes of others and for others to see. Thus even that which might appear as a sign of perfected individualism is in fact part of our tribal, collective hedonism.” “This re-epiphany of the body is by no means an individual or narcissistic fact... It is a crystallisation of individuality within a completely collective ethos.” (Maffesoli 1997, 22-28).

Fantasizing and Narrating (the Hegemony of) Masculinity and Ethnicity

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”. Different, exotic, wild, insatiable “East”¹⁰ has become “a playground” for many Finnish clients of prostitution. A different world is in the making and this “parallel universe” is played by the rules of a fantasy in which women are still under the traditional male power:

“It is as if I was a star in a good musical over a weekend and when I come back to Finland, I step out of the theater.”

“It [a sex tour to Estonia/Russia] is a show, a play which may be shocking for some people when I, as the spectator, let the players play and live their less fortunate role while I myself ‘light up a cigar’ and enjoy of what I see and experience.”

“This is part of that ‘great show’ that I need... and there is no feeling of guilt afterwards because it was a show, it wasn’t real.” (Matti, 46)

The everyday practices of individuals can be understood as plays in which people play the roles required by a particular tale (see e.g. Harré, 1993, 25). There is to be found a link from a ‘play’ metaphor to narration. By narrating our actions to ourselves as well as to other people, we rather logically maintain our personality within a constant change. With these “situated knowledges” (Haraway 1997, 24) and narrations we articulate and make sense of our ‘selves’ and our actions. The narrative may thus be considered a part of constructing our identities. A description of the ‘Self’ may be biographical, organised story of our identity, an idea of an ideal ‘Self’ or a narrative performance of the ‘Self’ (Ronkainen 1999, 73-74).

⁹ Here I take identity as defined by Stuart Hall: processual, dynamic and multiple. Hall 1999, 23.

¹⁰ “East” here referring to Russia, the Baltic States and the Far East.

A fantasy plays a major role on prostitution encounter. It is both a way of explaining away the reality “*Ok, I pay for it but I am able to pay... The others work for me*” (Matti, 46) and a way of putting on and taking off different identities – as expressed by Bauman. Fantasy thus works as self-justifying and self-reflexive: gendered, sexualised and ethnised representations are (used as) a part of practices of the self. Through this “discursive representation”, masculine identity is *produced* as well as *performed*. In Judith Butler’s terms, gender is constantly constituted in relation to time and space. Gender is not ready, but produced by “stylized, repeated acts” (Ronkainen 1999, 66; Butler 1990, 24-25, 136 & 2000, 492; Nixon 1996, 13).

The normative definition of masculinity is, in the western culture, considered as “the most honored or desired in particular context” (Connell 1998, 5). This hegemonic masculinity crystallises well in Erving Goffman’s description of “a young, married, white, urban, northern heterosexual, Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports.” (Kimmel 1994, 125). This notion of hegemonic masculinity has, however, been criticized, for example, within the Critical Studies on Men and also by Connell (who were the first to introduce the term in 1979). Since, Connell has noted that hegemonic masculinity is always open to possible change and challenge and that masculinity(ies) is rather plural than singular (Hearn 2003; Connell 1998, 4-5).

The plural masculinities are found in social relations and often in hierarchical and exclusive relations. In these relations, masculinity is constantly questioned and thus has to be performed *discursively*. According to Michael Kimmel, masculinity is a homosocial enactment. “We test ourselves, perform heroic feats, take enormous risks, all because we want other men to grant us our manhood.” The central organizing principle of this western definition of manhood is homophobia. However, homophobia is, in Kimmel’s mind, first of all the fear of being emasculated by other men. (Kimmel 1994, 129).

The performing and underlining of heterosexuality is indeed a major element within the clients of prostitution. The identificatory processes are, however, less visible and more structural, cultural as well as historical than as expressed by Kimmel. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries Finland, clienthood of prostitution included more visible homosocial practices: it was, for example, a common practice among the young male students and was considered a kind of “male ritual”. However, in the course of 20th century, the legal control of prostitution decreased the use of prostitutes in Finland (Häkkinen 1995, 78-91, 110-111). Nowadays, when the “online communication” among the buyers of sex is easy, convenient and anonymous, the boasting of heterosexual masculinity is extremely common on forums dealing with commercial sex. The boasting, however, would rather seem to work to convince *oneself* of being a “Real Man”. It is also important to take into account the cultural processes that form the idea of what it is to be a “Real Man”.

As pointed out, masculinity appears as plural: not only is there a plurality of masculine identities *between* individuals but also the masculinity of an individual man is itself plural. Therefore, individual men can hold a range of discursive identifications: father, husband, son, worker, Finnish, taxpayer and so on. Discursiveness of an identity is “materialized” in *lived* identities which are situational, complex as well as fragile and tensional (Ronkainen 1999, 73-76). Two thirds of the buyers of sex that I have been in contact with are married and many also have children. Some of them also described themselves as living a kind of “double life” or “shadowy existence” for not being able to tell their wives, families or friends of their “hobby”.

A fragmented subject is a fusion of various contradictory and situational identity positions. Individual identity is plural, it holds different positions – unemployed, husband, racist, Christian – which seem rather contradictory. Suvi Ronkainen has considered how this contrast of identity positions is actually lived. The action in these seemingly oppositional discourses takes place within different places and spaces as well as different practices, social relations and ways of speech. Symbols and making of symbols are part of these practices. “They construct (and are constructed by) the relations between the agents in which the symbolic, material and discursive constitute the gendered bodies and subjectivities.” (Ronkainen 1999, 70-71).

Power

Some of the men appeared to be “reliving” their youth through commercial sexual intercourses with young prostitutes, as “Arto” (49) describes:

*“I feel as if getting back at the girls to whom I wasn’t good enough at the age of 19”.
“I have a desire to fuck someone ‘better’ than myself. ...young, beautiful, athletic...”*

“Matti” (46) had similar feelings: he also said he was “proud of” these experiences and felt them as empowering:

“It feels nice to have young girls competing for me... If only the girls that didn’t want me when I was younger could see me now...”

A fantasy may also be a desire for mastery over one’s life. It may work as changing the imbalance of power in one’s life – as it appears to the individual. Power, in this particular context, however, is rather individual than collective, although it certainly reflects the masculine power over the ‘Other’ gender. Power indeed has a crucial role in the context of prostitution and sex business as a whole, where hegemony, relationships of power between the genders are constantly being produced and reproduced, challenged and renegotiated in social practices.

“Yes, I feel as using power, which feels good...” (Matti, 46)

“I became addicted to the feeling of power... The more phlegmatic the woman was during the act, the better.” (Janne, 32. No longer buys sex)

Zygmunt Bauman, discussing on the postmodern “redeployment” of sex, suggests that sexuality – “as omnipresent, shared by all human beings, as natural yet bristling with unnatural temptations, inescapable yet full of dangers” – has been suitable for the purposes of the total and all-penetrating power (Bauman 1997, 144-145). Bauman indeed is not alone in considering sexuality and sex as sites of discursive power: there has also been discussion on the use of sexuality, especially the gendered, sexualized body, as a site of gendered power in feminist theory as well as in Foucault’s theorization¹¹.

From the viewpoint of paying for sex, sexuality is used in order to manifest the masculine hegemony (and hegemonic, heterosexual masculinity) over the ‘Other Sex’. On Finnish internetforums, some of the discussers would appear to be trying to forge a “new” kind of masculinity, one that is independent on the requirements of gender equality and the threats it, from the viewpoint of these men, has set to the male hegemony.

It has been suggested that the strengthening of women’s and feminist movement and the steps taken towards the equality of genders have resulted in opposition for the part of some men in fear of losing the power hegemony held by men. According to Mikko Lehtonen, it is even justified to talk about *masculinist ideology*, which stems from the circumstance that unstability of the gender difference is not easy to live with. Thus complexity is transformed into simplicity by consolidating masculinity and femininity, by making them distinct and stable (Lehtonen 1995, 26-30,32).

As a part of my collecting research material, I interviewed one of the buyers of sex in an erotic bar in Helsinki. As a first time visitor, I felt confused by the fact that during the performances, a clear majority of the clients didn’t show the slightest interest to the dancing women. Instead, they kept themselves turned to their male company. Between the performances, the dancers moved from table to table, sat beside the male clients, even in their lap, but still most of the men kept talking to their male friends and mostly ignored the women. I asked the interviewee whether this was a common practice. He said that “*it is not just the girls and their performances*”, “*but **the atmosphere***” (Jorma, 40+).

¹¹ E.g. Grosz 1994 & 95; Butler 1990 & 93; Foucault 1998.

In modern society the boundaries between the gender roles have become exceedingly blurred. Therefore, an arena like an erotic bar, where the traditional male order and power still exists, may offer some men a social space of “male emancipation” where expectations and views on gender roles are quite different from the world outside. Sex business can therefore be comprehended as a space free from women’s demands, where men are able to join together *homosocially* (see Sedgwick 1985).

“Ethnosexual stereotypes”

In Finnish public opinion, there is to be found an element of threat in the prevailing images of prostitution from Russia and the Baltic States through the phenomena connected to it – infectious diseases (tuberculosis and HIV) and Russian mafia – and the prostitutes from the aforementioned countries are often considered as embodiments of that threat.¹² The threatening images of Russian and Baltic prostitution and the view of Finland and Russia as historical enemies, seem, however, not particularly prevalent among the Finnish buyers of sex. Some of them mention preferring Finnish prostitutes because they are perceived as “cleaner”.

Joane Nagel underlines the interconnection between the concepts of sexuality and nationality in discussing the construction of an *ethnosexual stereotype*. An illustrative example of this is the (racist) alleged sexual prowess of black men. The ethnosexual stereotypes are formed on “ethnosexual frontiers” where the interaction between different collective identities takes place (Nagel 2001, 128-129)¹³. I would see the labeling of the prostitutes from the ‘East’ (and generalising them as representing all Russian women¹⁴) as “less clean” and “more passionate” than Finnish (‘Our’) women as an example of *ethnosexual stereotyping* as put forward by Nagel. The body of a prostitute thus works as a symbolic frontier (space) where the boundaries are drawn – as well as crossed – in the (sexual) intercourse with women of ‘Other’ ethnicity.

Among the Finnish male clients of prostitution the ‘Stranger’ from the “East” would seem to, to a certain extent, be considered as the origin of danger (stranger danger), but more as the origin of difference (as in multiculturalism) – and the prostitution encounter even as a celebration of difference. Crossing of the mental and social boundaries and, particularly, transgression of traditional imaginary boundaries between Finland and Russia would thus appear to be more common among these men. The sexual encounter thus produces “a hybridity that does not belong to the one or the other” (Ahmed 2000, 119-121). In the present prostitution (as well as trafficking) discourse, borders are rather social spaces than geographical, dividing lines between nations. On and over the borders identities are constructed and deconstructed and difference is met, used, consumed, subjugated, included, excluded, manifested, celebrated, challenged, problematised, sustained...

Many of the Finnish buyers of sex seem, however, to have an almost naïve belief in that “the girls” are working independently, without a pimp, and that a condom can protect a client from having any sexually transmitted diseases (even though there have been alarming statistics on the HIV-situation in Russia and the Baltic in Finnish media). Most of the men mention trying to avoid prostitutes who appear to be on drugs, to whom they refer to as “having brown or red spots in their arms”. Most of the men thus seem to have a strong confidence in being able to minimize the risks of getting an infection.

¹² According to Vilho Harle and Sami Moisio, Finnish national identity politics have traditionally built on the contrasting of Russianness and Finnishness. Harle & Moisio 2000, 56.

¹³ According to Fredrik Barth, it is indeed the interaction on the social boundaries where the ethnicity is formed. Barth 1969, 15-16.

¹⁴ Also, according to Reet Nurmi, Russian women are often equated with a prostitute among Finnish people (Helsingin Sanomat 27.10.02, D 1-2. For example in Turkey, Israel, England and the United States, a Russian name “Natasha” has come to mean a sex worker from the former Soviet Union (Gülçür & İlkkaracan 2002, 412). In Turkey, there is even a recently composed popular song (*Natasha Disco*) on ‘natashas’ who come from Russia to sell their bodies (Bellér-Hann 1995, 231-232). Racism is an inseparable part of prostitution and trafficking businesses. In Finland, Russian women are often generically called “Tatjanas” but I haven’t seen it used as referring to sex workers from Russia.

Also Faugier and Sargeant (1997, 130-133) as well as McKeganey and Barnard (1996, 54-56) have brought up the optimism of the clients of prostitutes in that they can avoid infection by carefully selecting a prostitute who “looks healthy”.

Local Interests – Global Linkages

Characteristic to the commercial sex business is the interconnection between the global and the local. In this paper I have drawn attention to the *virtual trafficking* in women and girls which doesn't require an actual physical, transnational moving of individuals but is based on using new information technology to transfer *images* of women across the borders. I believe, that in addition to the physical trafficking and prostitution of women and girls, this virtual sex trade further contributes to the maintaining and development of national and ethnic images and stereotypes: Russian and Baltic women are extremely visible in the prostitution advertisements and marriage agencies in the Internet, which portray them as “hot, passionate, blonde bombshells”. Against these dominating (and all-embracing) images it is easy to further construct various ethnized, sexualized images and stereotypes.

The clienthood of prostitution can be approached (as I also have done in this paper) from the viewpoint of plurality of masculinities, masculine “needs and desires” – as well as the power relations between them. I, however, believe that the sex business is first and foremost about gendered, economic, social and cultural – global and local – power structures. Structural inequalities, the new information and communication technologies and increase in movement and moving of people have a considerable importance in expansion of the sex industry as well.

Hedonistic need for constant change and new “products” grows demand for “exotic” prostitutes and thus sustains international sex trade. Political changes and poverty (and especially feminization of poverty) offer “new bodies” to the market and thus respond to the demand respectively. The demand thus has a major role in sustaining the international sex trade and trafficking in women and girls. This again highlights the importance of drawing attention to the client and to his position in the global sex trade. Keeping in mind that most of the clients are men, it is also important to study how the hegemony of men is structured and maintained in the context of globalising sex industry.

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