

A cultural double standard: Public responses to female sex tourism

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Background:

The idea of women buying sex challenges discourse about the sex industry based on notions of gendered power. Fictional television drama and documentaries typically portray women buying sex as empowered and sexually liberated. There is limited empirical research about women buying sex overseas, which mostly constructs conflicting discourses that position women as sex or romance tourists, or as victims of male sex workers. This paper examines contemporary Australian discourse about the idea of female sex tourism (FST).

Methods:

An Australian online news article about FST by Bowen (22 January 2013) generated 364 comments. Using each comment as a unit of analysis, a textual analysis was undertaken to examine how messages about women buying sex are interpreted in Australian society and to find dominant discourses.

Results:

The commentary compared male and female clients, finding FST as a phenomenon different from male sex tourism (MST), due to romantic motivations and subtle means of remuneration. Some participants denied that women buy sex, reflecting notions of gendered biology or behaviour. In general, a discourse of 'female sex workers are victims' maintained that only males perpetrate violence when they buy sex. In addition, a discourse of 'sex work is work' considered sex tourism as fair trade or economic aid, regardless of gender. The implications of FST were debated as an increasing phenomenon signalling healthy female sexuality or a problem in terms of unequal racial and economic power.

Conclusion:

Despite a polarisation of opinion regarding sex work being work or exploitation, female sex tourists were mainly encouraged and occasionally victimised, whilst male sex tourists were mainly condemned. FST was mainly assessed as empowering to women whilst, MST was most often appraised as violent due to perceived effects on female sex workers. The analysis demonstrates a double standard in gendered constructions of people who buy sex overseas.

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