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Critical Perspectives: New Directions and Challenges

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Women buying sex: plenty of social discourses, little empirical data...

Ms Hilary Caldwell, PhD Candidate, Centre for Social Research in Health, Z3404047

Supervisors: Professor John de Wit, Dr Philippe Adam, Dr Kath Albury

Commercial sex is highly gendered. When people think about buying sex, they typically consider men buying sex from mainly female providers reflecting contemporary, political, religious and moral discourse. Conversely, fictional television drama, documentaries and advertisements depict empowered and sexually liberated women buying sex. Online and print media including citizen journalism present competing discourses about women buying sex as engaging in romantic 'fair trade', behaving in predatory and exploitative ways, or as victims of male sex workers. Some of these discourses have arisen from empirical research regarding females buying sex overseas, or sex tourism, and is often framed as something women would not engage with, in their home countries. There is a lack of empirical research about women buying sex in their home countries. This may be due to a belief that women do not buy sex or that some studies have anecdotally found that too few women buy sex for further analysis. However, researchers may not be asking the right questions in the right way, as women may not consider their activities to be engaging in commercial sex. Scholarly discourses relying on scant empirical evidence are insufficiently capable of informing on-going public debates on women buying sex, and there is a critical need for empirical data. I present a synthesis of media depictions and female sex tourism literature, and propose a research plan to explore the phenomenon of women buying sex in Australia.

Key Words: discourse, representation, commercial sex, gender.