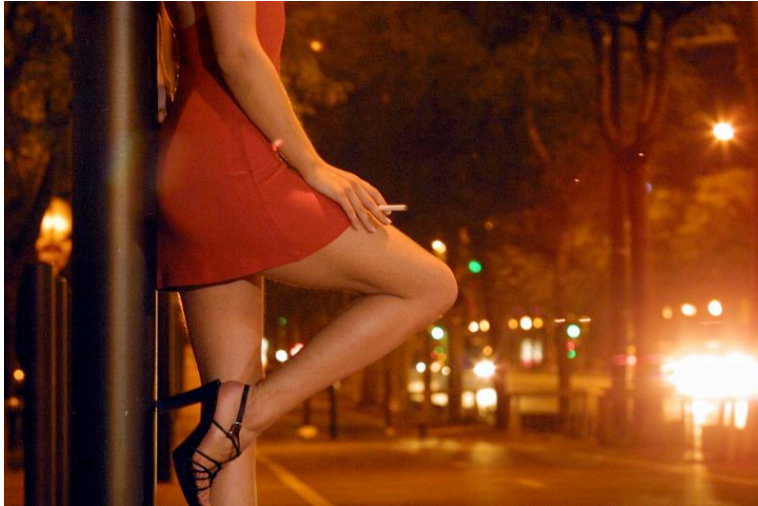


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Sex Work in Vietnam

November 30, 2012 By [Jerry Park](#)

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Much of the material I teach on racial, gender, and class inequalities is US based, but given the increasing relationship between the US and the rest of the world, I'm learning to add more to my repertoire on the push factors that bring new immigrants to the US and the conditions of the people there. Sometimes documentaries help me figure out the big frameworks for a particular issue, and that helps me to dig my way into the literature on a particular topic. One such documentary I viewed recently is called [Half the Sky](#), based on the book with the same title by journalists (and husband-wife team) [Nicholas Kristof](#) and [Sheryl WuDunn](#) (the first Asian American Pulitzer Prize winner btw).

In the two part series, Kristof invites noted celebrities who have an interest in meeting the needs of women in the developing world or the Global South. In each of their cases, viewers are exposed to the after effects of female genital mutilation, systemic rape, and child sex trafficking. As Patheos critic Azra [noted](#) the documentary suffers from a kind of Western tourism where American celebrities are filmed in conversation with women who have at various times been recipients of truly brutal behavior. It creates this picture that suggests that women in the West are superior since they are embodied by beautiful celebrities who never remark on the inequalities they or other women face in the west. Nonetheless, the documentary illuminated to me some of the ways that women find agency after trauma. Protective spaces and organizations are formed where young girls find new ground in which to recover, and grow through unconditional affection and education.

The sections that focused on Asia intrigued me of course because of my interest in Asia and America. And it helped me to engage some new research on the sociology of sex work that is appearing in some of the best sociology academic journals. One of these is by [Dr. Kimbly Kay Hoang](#), a post-doctoral fellow at Rice University and soon-to-be Assistant Professor.

Boston University.

Dr. Hoang's study (which was part of her dissertation and won the American Sociological Association's best dissertation award for 2012) was an examination of voluntary sex workers in Ho Chi Minh City, the largest city in Vietnam which accounts for 30% of the nation's GDP. She selected this site because it's one of those destination cities that casual tourists and business travelers visit with increasing frequency.



Vietnam like many developing countries builds its economy from tourism. Less well discussed is that part of that tourism entails sexual tourism via prostitution. As Hoang states there are an estimated 200,000 prostitutes in HCMC alone; this amounts to about 2.7% of the city's population. This is astounding to me, but I do not know how it compares to other contexts.

Hoang's thesis states:

"Globalization does not create a single market for poor exploited women who cater to wealthy foreigners; rather I contend that globalization creates diverse markets and new segments that expand already existing inequalities." (370) "...women's access to economic, cultural and bodily resources position them in higher and lower paying sectors of sex work with different relations of intimacy." (370)

In order to support her argument, she frequented bars, cafes, sex workers' homes, mall restaurants and the street for seven months to meet with about 54 sex workers and 26 clients. She notes the difficulty in using the most formal method, the one-on-one interview since there is (understandably) a reluctance to divulge much of what they do. Keep in mind sex work is illegal in Vietnam, thus these women describe their work as "girls who accompany customers."

In Hoang's study she divides sex work in HCMC into three sectors: low, mid, and high tier. At the low end sector, sex is exchanged for money in a one-time encounter. Sex workers here resemble the ones seen in the Cambodian story in *Half the Sky*: poor rural and urban women. They work to escape severe poverty but they don't make enough to get plastic surgery nor do they have the language and cultural capital to gain more expensive clients. Since their bodies are the instrument of their work, "body capital" becomes important. Those with more resources can augment their bodies in ways that appeal to wealthier clientele. But for the low tier sex workers, they lack these advantages and their clients are usually local somewhat poor, Vietnamese men.

At the mid-tier level the exchange is what Hoang calls "relational." Women in this class are typically poor and urban similar to the low-end sex workers mentioned earlier. They can obtain plastic surgery and some designer clothing but not of the quality of the high-end workers, and they are fluent enough in English to frequent areas with English-speaking clientele, who are collectively described as "white backpackers," tourists of American, Australian and European background. These budget travelers seek "authentic" experiences desiring to meet "real people" as opposed to a sanitized version of HCMC. As such, mid

sex workers try to create a sense of authenticity through exchanging intimate details of lives. The client is then drawn into a relationship as opposed to a simple sex-for-money exchange. The clients are led to believe that they are “saving” good women from poverty by being more involved relationally with the sex worker. The most interesting aspect of the mid-tier sex workers is that while some of the client-worker relationships are short term, some relationships turn into boyfriend-girlfriend as well as husband-wife pairings. The white backpackers sometimes maintain remittance relationships with sex workers.

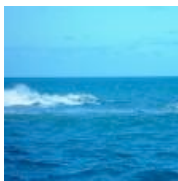
At the high end, the exchange is somewhat complex. These encounters with clients happen more than once and the exchange includes sex, but also intimacy (sharing of personal information), gifts and money. Women here are college or vocational-school educated; from wealthy families. Their language ability and knowledge of upper class culture allow them access to high-end hotels and bars where their clients frequent. As such they can afford expensive plastic surgery and clothing which also add to their desirability among high-end clients. These clients are Vietnamese men from overseas (Viet Kieu). The Viet Kieu clients are also particularly interesting in that the women “project to clients an imagination: Vietnam as nostalgic ‘home’ for Viet Kieu men” (371). It’s not simply sex, but the illusion of traditional Vietnamese male dominance and traditional Vietnamese female subordination. The relationship between high-end sex worker and Viet Kieu client is very public: these men want to be seen as wealthy, the kind that can afford to lavish their paramour with gifts and money. High end sex workers take great effort to blend in with other women so that these public exchanges cannot be identified as worker-client.

What I learn from this are the ways in which sex work is a means of subsistence, a means of migration, and a means of upward mobility. It’s true that trafficking occurs and with disturbing frequency. But sex work also includes thousands of women who voluntarily participate in sex-for-money exchange. To quickly judge this as exploitation misses the complex realities that women in these conditions face, and the kind of micro-control that they obtain. For the lucky few in the high end they can experience material wealth that cannot be imagined by the low end. For the mid-tier, such sex work might result in migration to a new start. Where their bodies are clearly commodities to their clients, sex workers do what they can to control it as a means to a better life. Ending sex work, as sex activists in the West might prefer, will not be necessarily viewed as beneficial from the perspective of some of the women in Hoang’s study, and her cutting edge research helps understand why.

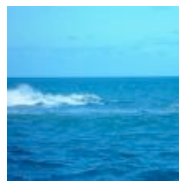
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