



3-18-2013

My Night As A Sex Tourist

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Broe, Chelsea E., "My Night As A Sex Tourist" (2013). *SURGE*. 143.
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My Night As A Sex Tourist

Abstract

I've been studying in Copenhagen, Denmark for a few months now, and since I had a week off to travel (perks of studying abroad), I took the opportunity to spend a few nights in Amsterdam. I was traveling alone, so during my first night at the hostel in Amsterdam, when I met a woman my age who offered to show me around the city, I accepted, excited to find a traveling partner. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, sexuality, sexual exploitation, prostitution, Red Light District, objectifying women

Disciplines

Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Gender and Sexuality | Social Control, Law, Crime, and Deviance | Sociology | Tourism | Women's Studies

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Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at [surgegettysburg.wordpress.com](#) Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

MY NIGHT AS A SEX TOURIST

March 18, 2013

I've been studying in Copenhagen, Denmark for a few months now, and since I had a week off to travel (perks of studying abroad), I took the opportunity to spend a few nights in Amsterdam. I was traveling alone, so during my first night at the hostel in Amsterdam, when I met a woman my age who offered to show me around the city, I accepted, excited to find a traveling partner.



After walking through the major canals, we were nearing the heart of the city, the Red Light District. Since we were already so close, my travel companion asked if I wanted to walk through and see a bit of it. I thought it would be cool. The Red Light District is supposed to be a place where the law doesn't dictate how a woman is allowed to use her body, a place where the individual has the agency to make that decision for herself.

But when we got there, empowerment was the furthest thing from my mind.

I really don't know what I was expecting, but to actually see women standing half-naked in a window, some trying to seduce the people walking by, most just standing there, seemingly apathetic as to what would happen that night, I was incredibly uncomfortable. But more than just seeing women on display, what really got under my skin were the people, just like me, who were walking around the area just for some entertainment. I noticed a group of old white men walking around, clearly interested in more than just looking, as well as two young black men negotiating prices with one woman through a window. I couldn't help but think that I'm no better than them. Even if my intentions were different from theirs, wasn't I objectifying the women in the same way?

Denmark makes a big deal about how they have one of the highest ratings of gender equality in the world, and the Netherlands ranks even higher. After being in Amsterdam, I wonder how this is possible: How can a country that is known for putting women on display and selling them also be known for gender equality? I know these ratings are based on several factors, including education opportunities, career mobility, pay equity, maternity leave, etc., but does all of this mean anything when we still just think about women as objects for our own pleasure?

It's interesting to note that prostitution was legalized in the Netherlands in 2000 in order to regulate the industry and combat sex trafficking. It is currently illegal to hire an unlicensed prostitute, and new measures are being taken to regulate the escort industry, which grew significantly after 2000 as a way to circumvent the prostitution licensing system. So while they acknowledge that sex slavery is still a [problem](#), it seems like the Netherlands is not ignoring it, and is taking steps in the right direction. But on the issue of gender equality, something still seems wrong.

If women and men truly have the same opportunities in education and career mobility, why are there 25,000 women who see prostitution as their most viable option for supporting themselves? In a city that's already so open about sex, why is prostitution so lucrative?

To me, it seems that prostitution is so profitable because what is being sold is not sex, but power: men hire prostitutes because it gives them a sense of sexual control that they wouldn't get from a one-night stand with someone they met at a bar or club. And while women may justify the choice to use their own body as their livelihood by claiming that doing so puts them in the position of power, there is no power in the dehumanization that is inherent in sexual objectification.

This is a problem that extends beyond Amsterdam and it surely has to do with more than just prostitution, but how do we even begin to change that when countries with legalized prostitution (and all that comes with that: dehumanization, objectification, violence, slavery) are pointed to as the epitome of equality?

As I wrestle with the arguments for and against prostitution, I am very aware that there are others who have wrestled far longer than I have. In fact, [these two women](#) have worked as prostitutes in Amsterdam for 50 years. Maybe we should be listening to what they have to say.

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<http://surgegettyburg.wordpress.com/2013/03/18/my-night-as-a-sex-tourist/>