

## Selling Sex for Visas

### Sex Tourism as a Stepping-stone to International Migration

DENISE BRENNAN

On the eve of her departure for Germany to marry her German client-turned-boyfriend, Andrea, a Dominican sex worker, spent the night with her Dominican boyfriend. When I dropped by the next morning to wish her well, her Dominican boyfriend was still asleep. She stepped outside, onto her porch. She could not lie about her feelings for her soon-to-be husband. "No," she said, "it's not love." But images of an easier life for herself and her two daughters compelled her to migrate off the island and out of poverty. She put love aside—at least temporarily.

Andrea, like many Dominican sex workers in Sosúa, a small town on the north coast of the Dominican Republic, makes a distinction between marriage *por amor* (for love) and marriage *por residencia* (for visas). After all, why waste a marriage certificate on romantic love when it can be transformed into a visa to a new land and economic security?

Since the early 1990s, Sosúa has been a popular vacation spot for male European sex tourists, especially Germans. Poor women migrate from throughout the Dominican Republic to work in Sosúa's sex trade; there, they hope to meet and marry foreign men who will sponsor their migration to Europe. By migrating to Sosúa, these women are engaged in an economic strategy that is both familiar and altogether new: they are attempting to capitalize on the very global linkages that exploit them. These poor single mothers are not simply using sex work in a tourist town with European clients as a survival strategy; they are using it as an *advancement* strategy.

The key aims of this strategy are marriage and migration off the island. But even short of these goals, Sosúa holds out special promise to its sex workers, who can establish ongoing transnational relationships with the aid of technologies such as fax machines at the phone company in town (the foreign clients and the women communicate about the men's return visits in this manner) and international money wires from clients overseas. Sosúa's sex trade also stands apart from that of many other sex-tourist destinations in the developing world in

SOURCE: From *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, by Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild, eds., 2003, pp. 154–161, 168. Reprinted by permission of the author.

that it d  
women  
control  
Cer  
dangero  
not coe  
female :  
sex wo  
They c:  
of hour  
of mon  
The  
anythin  
demon  
some o  
the me  
such as  
These c  
are cap  
Sosúa f

Sex wo  
exploit  
To the  
Sosúa t  
might :  
color; t  
as com  
see the  
by whi  
Ev  
men at  
move  
there,  
to deli  
the di  
citizen  
seem  
throug  
disapp  
financ  
achiev

that it does not operate through pimps, nor is it tied to the drug trade; young women are not trafficked to Sosúa, and as a result they maintain a good deal of control over their working conditions.

Certainly, these women still risk rape, beatings, and arrest; the sex trade is dangerous, and Sosúa's is no exception. Nonetheless, Dominican women are not coerced into Sosúa's trade but rather end up there through networks of female family members and friends who have worked there. Without pimps, sex workers keep all their earnings; they are essentially working freelance. They can choose the bars and nightclubs in which to hang out, the number of hours they work, the clients with whom they will work, and the amount of money to charge.

There has been considerable debate over whether sex work can be anything but exploitative. The stories of Dominican women in Sosúa help demonstrate that there is a wide range of experiences within the sex trade, some of them beneficial, others tragic.... I have been particularly alarmed at the media's monolithic portrayal of sex workers in sex-tourist destinations, such as Cuba, as passive victims easily lured by the glitter of consumer goods. These overly simplistic and implicitly moralizing stories deny that poor women are capable of making their own labor choices. The women I encountered in Sosúa had something else to say.

### SEX WORKERS AND SEX TOURISTS

Sex workers in Sosúa are at once independent and dependent, resourceful and exploited. They are local agents caught in a web of global economic relations. To the extent that they can, they try to take advantage of the men who are in Sosúa to take advantage of them. The European men who frequent Sosúa's bars might see Dominican sex workers as exotic and erotic because of their dark skin color; they might pick one woman over another in the crowd, viewing them all as commodities for their pleasure and control. But Dominican sex workers often see the men, too, as readily exploitable—potential dupes, walking visas, means by which the women might leave the island, and poverty, behind.

Even though only a handful of women have actually married European men and migrated off the island, the possibility of doing so inspires women to move to Sosúa from throughout the island and to take up sex work. Once there, however, Dominican sex workers are beholden to their European clients to deliver visa sponsorships, marriage proposals, and airplane tickets. Because of the differential between sex workers and their clients in terms of mobility, citizenship, and socioeconomic status, these Dominican sex workers might seem to occupy situations parallel to those that prevail among sex workers throughout the developing world. Indeed, I will recount stories here of disappointment, lies, and unfulfilled dreams. Yet some women make modest financial gains through Sosúa's sex trade—gains that exceed what they could achieve working in export-processing zones or domestic service, two common

occupations among poor Dominican women. These jobs, on average, yield fewer than 1,000 pesos (\$100) a month, whereas sex workers in Sosúa charge approximately 500 pesos for each encounter with a foreign client.

Sex tourism, it is commonly noted, is fueled by the fantasies of white, First World men who exoticize dark-skinned "native" bodies in the developing world, where they can buy sex for cut-rate prices. These two components—racial stereotypes and the economic disparity between the developed and the developing worlds—characterize sex-tourist destinations everywhere. But male sex tourists are not the only ones who travel to places like Sosúa to fulfill their fantasies. Many Dominican sex workers look to their clients as sources not only of money, marriage, and visas, but also of greater gender equity than they can hope for in the households they keep with Dominican men. Some might hope for romance and love, but most tend to fantasize about greater resources and easier lives.

Yet even for the women with the most pragmatic expectations, there are few happy endings. During the time I spent with sex workers in Sosúa, I, too, became invested in the fantasies that sustained them through their struggles. Although I learned to anticipate their return from Europe, disillusioned and divorced, I continued to hope that they would find financial security and loving relationships. Similarly, Sosúa's sex workers built their fantasies around the stories of their few peers who managed to migrate as the girlfriends or wives of European tourists—even though nearly all of these women returned, facing downward mobility when they did so. Though only a handful of women regularly receive money wires from clients in Europe, the stories of those who do circulate among sex workers like Dominicanized versions of Hollywood's *Pretty Woman*.

The women who pursue these fantasies in Sosúa tend to be pushed by poverty and single motherhood. Of the fifty women I interviewed and the scores of others I met, only two were not mothers. The practice of consensual unions (of not marrying but living together), common among the poor in the Dominican Republic, often leads to single motherhood, which then puts women under significant financial pressure. Typically, these women receive no financial assistance from their children's fathers. I met very few sex workers who had sold sex before migrating to Sosúa, and I believe that the most decisive factor propelling these women into the sex trade is their status as single mothers. Many women migrated to Sosúa within days of their partners' departure from the household and their abandonment of their financial obligations to their children.

Most women migrated from rural settings with meager job opportunities, among them sporadic agricultural work, low-wage hairstyling out of one's home, and waitressing. The women from Santo Domingo, the nation's capital, had also held low-paying jobs, working in domestic service or in *zonas francas* (export-processing zones). Women who sell sex in Sosúa earn more money, more quickly than they can in any other legal job available to poor women with limited educations (most have not finished school past their early teens) and skill bases. These women come from *los pobres*, the poorest class in the

Dominic  
would e  
mobility  
jobs, do

Sex  
savings a  
expenses  
female f  
month.  
return le  
homes l  
small bu

Wh  
workers  
In pract  
rent for  
pesos a  
(such as  
houses  
meals. C  
release  
month.  
larly du  
finds a c  
Sosúa w  
and mis  
less than

The  
membe  
them. N  
through  
gate far  
parts of  
since Se  
young  
time th  
a first-ti  
country  
airline t  
airline t

If s  
migratio  
gested  
known  
met in  
sex tou

Dominican Republic, and they simply do not have the social networks that would enable them to land work, such as office jobs, that offer security or mobility. Rather, their female-based social networks can help them find factory jobs, domestic work, restaurant jobs, or sex work.

Sex work offers women the possibility of making enough money to start a savings account while covering their own expenses in Sosúa and their children's expenses back home. These women tend to leave their children in the care of female family members, but they try to visit and to bring money at least once a month. If their home communities are far away and expensive to get to, they return less frequently. Those who manage to save money use it to buy or build homes back in their home communities. Alternatively, they might try to start small businesses, such as *colmados* (small grocery stores), out of their homes.

While saving money is not possible in factory or domestic work, sex workers, in theory at least, make enough money to build up modest savings. In practice, however, it is costly to live in Sosúa. Rooms in boardinghouses rent for 30 to 50 pesos a day, while apartments range from 1,500 to 3,000 pesos a month, and also incur start-up costs that most women cannot afford (such as money for a bed and cooking facilities). Since none of the boardinghouses have kitchens, women must spend more for take-out or restaurant meals. On top of these costs, they must budget for bribes to police officers (for release from jail), since sex workers usually are arrested two to five times a month. To make matters worse, the competition for clients is so fierce, particularly during the low-volume tourist seasons, that days can go by before a woman finds a client. Many sex workers earn just enough to cover their daily expenses in Sosúa while sending home modest remittances for their children. Realizing this, and missing their children, most women return to their home communities in less than a year, just as poor as when they first arrived....

The sex workers I interviewed, who generally have no immediate family members abroad, have never had reliable transnational resources available to them. Not only do they not receive remittances but they cannot migrate legally through family sponsorship. Sex workers' transnational romantic ties act as surrogate family-migration networks. Consequently, migration to Sosúa from other parts of the Dominican Republic can be seen as both internal and international, since Sosúa is a stepping-stone to migration to other countries. For some poor young women, hanging out in the tourist bars of Sosúa is a better use of their time than waiting in line at the United States embassy in Santo Domingo. Carla, a first-time sex worker, explained why Sosúa draws women from throughout the country: "We come here because we dream of a ticket," she said, referring to an airline ticket. But without a visa—which they can obtain through marriage—that airline ticket is of little use.

If sex workers build their fantasies around their communities' experiences of migration, the fantasies sex tourists hope to enact in Sosúa are often first suggested through informal networks of other sex tourists. Sosúa first became known among European tourists by word of mouth. Most of the sex tourists I met in Sosúa had been to other sex-tourist destinations as well. These seasoned sex tourists, many of whom told me that they were "bored" with other

destinations, decided to try Sosúa and Dominican women based on the recommendations of friends. This was the case for a group of German sex tourists who were drinking at a bar on the beach. They nodded when the German bar owner explained, "Dominican girls like to fuck." One customer chimed in, "With German women it's over quickly. But Dominican women have fiery blood.... When the sun is shining it gives you more hormones."

The Internet is likely to increase the traffic of both veteran and first-time sex tourists to previously little-known destinations like Sosúa. Online travel services provide names of "tour guides" and local bars in sex-tourism hot spots. On the World Sex Guide, a Web site on which sex tourists share information about their trips, one sex tourist wrote that he was impressed by the availability of "dirt cheap colored girls" in Sosúa, while another gloated, "When you enter the discos, you feel like you're in heaven! A tremendous number of cute girls and something for everyone's taste (if you like colored girls like me)!"

As discussions and pictures of Dominican women proliferate on the Internet sites—for "travel services" for sex tourists, pen-pal services, and even cyber classified advertisements in which foreign men "advertise" for Dominican girlfriends or brides—Dominican women are increasingly often associated with sexual availability. A number of articles in European magazines and newspapers portray Dominican women as sexually voracious. The German newspaper *Express* even published a seven-day series on the sex trade in Sosúa, called "Sex, Boozing, and Sunburn," which included this passage: "Just going from the street to the disco—there isn't any way men can take one step alone. Prostitutes bend over, stroke your back and stomach, and blow you kisses in your ear. If you are not quick enough, you get a hand right into the fly of your pants. Every customer is fought for, by using every trick in the book." A photo accompanying one of the articles in this series shows Dieter, a sex tourist who has returned to Sosúa nine times, sitting at a German-owned bar wearing a T-shirt he bought in Thailand; the shirt is emblazoned with the words SEX TOURIST.

With all the attention in the European press and on the Internet associating Dominican women with the sex industry, fear of a stigma has prompted many Dominican women who never have been sex workers to worry that the families and friends of their European boyfriends or spouses might wonder if they once were. And since Dominican women's participation in the overseas sex trade has received so much press coverage in the Dominican Republic, women who have lived or worked in Europe have become suspect at home. "I know when I tell people I was really with a folk-dance group in Europe, they don't believe me," a former dancer admitted. When Sosúans who were not sex workers spoke casually among themselves of a woman working overseas as a domestic, waitress, or dancer, they inevitably would raise the possibility of sex work, if only to rule it out explicitly. One Dominican café owner cynically explained why everyone assumes that Dominican women working overseas must be sex workers: "Dominican women have become known throughout the world as prostitutes. They are one of our biggest exports."...

strate  
trans  
in th  
roma  
tunic  
are r  
quen  
prom  
ment  
call  
pow

Marginalized women in a marginalized economy can and do fashion creative strategies to control their economic lives. Globalization and the accompanying transnational phenomena, including sex tourism, do not simply shape everything in their paths. Individuals react and resist. Dominican sex workers use sex, romance, and marriage as means of turning Sosúa's sex trade into a site of opportunity and possibility, not just exploitation and domination. But exits from poverty are rarely as permanent as the sex workers hope; relationships sour, and subsequently, an extended family's only lifeline from poverty disintegrates. For every promise of marriage a tourist keeps, there are many more stories of disappointment. Dominican women's attempts to take advantage of these "walking visas" call attention, however, to the savviness and resourcefulness of the so-called powerless.

sed on the recom-  
 en sex tourists who  
 German bar owner  
 chimed in, "With  
 ve fiery blood....

an and first-time  
 ia. Online travel  
 sex-tourism hot  
 rists share infor-  
 mpressed by the  
 another gloated,  
 A tremendous  
 you like colored

on the Internet  
 and even cyber  
 for Dominican  
 associated with  
 and newspapers  
 an newspaper  
 Sosúa, called  
 at going from  
 alone. Pros-  
 kisses in your  
 fly of your  
 k." A photo  
 tourist who  
 wearing a  
 words SEX

st associating  
 apted many  
 the families  
 if they once  
 ex-trade has  
 who have  
 when I tell  
 ve me," a  
 ers spoke  
 waitress,  
 ty to rule  
 everyone  
 workers:  
 prostitutes.