

LOCAL COMMUNITY ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE IMPACT OF TOURISM ON PROSTITUTION

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Abstract

Tourism has been commonly related to prostitution. However, very few studies have evidenced this relationship in different contexts. Several studies on local community attitudes towards tourism impacts have briefly assessed the increase of prostitution as one of several indicators of social change. Due to the importance that such relationship has both for tourism impact management and social development, the impact of tourism on prostitution should be studied in detail. This study explores the 'responsibility' of tourism on the increase of prostitution in an urban destination as perceived by local residents. It was found that while local community residents do not perceive tourism as the only causing factor, the tourist involvement in commercial sex does exist, but it is commonly an incidental rather than a purposive experience.

Key words: *Community attitudes, Prostitution, Tourism impacts.*

JEL Classification: L83

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism has been regarded as an economic and social development tool. Its economic and social benefits have supported its adoption by governments. However, the social and cultural nature of tourism leads to sociocultural change in local communities. Sometimes, the effects of tourism may be favourable but they may also represent a disadvantage for local people.

While several studies have examined the social impacts of tourism, little is still known about the effects that tourism has on other phenomena and on the attitudes that local people hold towards such effects. Very often researchers have adopted or developed instruments containing several indicators of community attitudes towards social change, but rarely have they concentrated on specific issues of social transformations associated to tourism.

One of such issues is prostitution. Prostitution as a social phenomenon deserves special attention not only because it has been regarded as a "social evil or disease" (Kempadoo, 2001, p.41) but because of its economic, social, cultural and health relevance in contemporary societies. Its relation to other phenomena such as tourism, which may have a direct or indirect effect on its conditions, deserves scientific attention.

Frequently, it has been argued that tourism may have a direct impact on the increase of prostitution, but few studies have provided empirical evidence to prove this assertion. In this framework, the study herein described aims to contribute to fill in this gap. In so doing, it presents the findings of a research project looking at the effect that tourism has on prostitution, from the perspective of urban residents in a Mexican destination.

In order to set a theoretical and conceptual framework, the outcome of the literature review is first provided, in particular, issues related to tourism and social change, attitudes towards tourism and the alleged impact of tourism on prostitution are discussed. Then, a brief description of the setting is given. The rationale for the selection of methods and the methodological procedure adopted for the study are described. Findings are then presented, and conclusions are ultimately drawn.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Tourism and social change

Tourism has become an important economic, social and cultural activity in many societies, both in developed and developing countries (Telfer and Sharpley, 2008). Its economic relevance has justified its adoption as an alternative strategy for encouraging national, regional and local development. In addition to improving the economic conditions of certain destinations, tourism has created advantages within the social arena of local communities. Tourism has the potential to generate employment opportunities (Sebastian and Rajagopalan, 2009), create regional and local investment, provide local people with trade opportunities and support other economic sector within a destination zone (Ryan, 2003). Additionally, tourism may improve local infrastructure (Monterrubio, Gullette et al, in press), leisure opportunities (Getz, 1993), and support the revitalisation of local traditions (Deitch, 1989).

However, tourism may also have unfavourable impacts on the social structures of destination communities. Several works have revealed that

tourism may increase crime (Belisle and Hoy, 1980) noise, litter and traffic congestion as well as drug use and alcohol consumption in receiving societies (Pizam, 1978). Furthermore, negative cultural impacts of tourism, such as acculturation processes caused by the intrusion of tourists, consumerism, and the commodification of the local culture (Stronza, 2001) have been regarded as an inconvenient consequence of tourism.

While these and other effects may be assigned to tourism, it needs to be noted that many – if not all – of these effects do not derive only from tourism. Social aspects of communities may change not only because of tourism, but also as a consequence of globalisation, the media, intrinsic and extrinsic factors (the wider environment), and the ‘natural’ changing processes inherent to each society. However, it is necessary to know how tourism is partially or entirely responsible for social change in destination communities. Learning how tourism contributes to social change may help improve the conditions of the quality of life in destination communities. This has often been achieved through the analysis of local residents’ attitudes towards tourism impacts.

2.2. Attitudes towards tourism

Although there is not a universal definition of attitude (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1977; 1980), Getz (1994) argues that attitudes may be defined as enduring predispositions towards a specific aspect of the individual’s environment. He establishes that attitudes are reinforced by perceptions and beliefs and are closely related to the values and even personality of an individual. Such enduring predispositions may reflect in the way of thinking, feeling and behaving towards a specific entity of reality, for attitudes are structured by three components: cognitive, affective and behavioural (McDougall and Munro, 1994). In this framework, and within a tourism context, local attitudes may be described as the group of beliefs, predispositions, and the behaviour (or the intention of) towards specific aspects of tourism such as its impacts, planning and development, the tourists and their behaviour and any other tangible or intangible manifestation of tourism activity within the environment of local residents.

The attitudes of local communities towards tourism have gained special scientific attention within the international tourism academy. Examining the attitudes of destination communities is helpful in identifying specific segments of support for or rejection of tourism within the same community; this becomes relevant for destination planning and management purposes (Harrill, 2004, p.256). More specifically, the consideration of local attitudes has been relevant in identifying the social impacts of tourism (Allen, Hafer et al, 1993; Getz, 1994; Jurowski and Gursoy, 2004; Lankford, 1994; Lepp, 2007; Long, Perdue et al, 1990; McCool and Martin,

1994; Teye, Sönmez et al, 2002; Zhang, Inbakaran et al, 2006).

Although the study of local attitudes towards the impacts of tourism emerged almost four decades ago, mainly through the works of Smith (1977) and Doxey (1975), very little has been done with regard to the attitudes of local residents towards the impacts of tourism on specific aspects of their social environment. A great deal of investigations has incorporated specific indicators of unfavourable aspects of social reality in their instruments. Issues such as litter, crime, crowding, noise, traffic congestion, drugs, alcohol, immigration and prostitution have been included as individual items in tourism impact instruments, but such aspects have rarely become the only research object of tourism attitude studies. Particularly, although prostitution has been listed as one of the social indicators of tourism and leisure and social change (see for example Belisle and Hoy, 1980; Haralambopoulos and Pizam, 1996; Liu and Var, 1986; Pizam and Pokela, 1985; Teye et al, 2002), very few studies – if any at all – have focused exclusively on the effect that tourism has upon the increase or decrease of prostitution.

2.3. The impact of tourism on prostitution

Although the number of works on the impacts of tourism on prostitution is scarce, scholars have argued that there is indeed a link between both phenomena. *"The processes of tourism have created locations and environments which attract prostitutes and their clients"* (Wall and Mathieson, 2006, p.242). However, as Ryan (2003, p.321) acknowledges, *"There is nothing inherent to tourism per se to cause the problem [prostitution], but rather [...] tourism might simply confirm patterns that already exist"*. Both assertions – contradictory to some extent – have been frequently echoed in empirical studies. These studies have proved that the impact of tourism on (the increase of) prostitution is ambivalent. For example, in their study on the perceived impacts of casino gambling, Pizam and Pokela (1985) found that the majority of respondents thought that prostitution would increase if a hotel-casino was built; this was however only a hypothetical situation. Similarly, Liu and Var (1986) found that 64% of the sample in their study on resident attitudes toward tourism impacts in Hawaii agreed that tourism causes more prostitution. Conversely, others have found less negative attitudes towards the impact of tourism on prostitution. For instance, in their study on the perceived impacts of tourism in Samos (Greece), Haralambopoulos and Pizam (1996) found that tourism had no impact on issues like morality, organised crime and prostitution. In a similar vein, Monterrubio, Gullette et al (in press) revealed that tourism was not perceived by 60% of their informants as being the cause of increasing prostitution in a coastal destination in Mexico.

As noted above, while some studies may presume that there is a direct link between tourism and prostitution, others may not. These often contradictory findings may not have to do with the validity of the study, nor with the validity of the instruments adopted, but with the recognition that each destination is characterised by specific conditions that make them different from others. These conditions may precisely rely on the social circumstances that widely define the impacts that tourism may have on certain social aspects. Bearing this in mind, tourism may increase prostitution in certain destinations -perhaps where commercial sex has historically existed-, but in other spaces may not have any effect on it, neither for better nor for worse. Identifying the attitudes of local people towards the impact of tourism on prostitution, nonetheless, may be useful in the design and implementation of tourism marketing, planning, management and monitoring purposes.

3. MEXICO CITY

Mexico City is the capital of Mexico, and as such it holds particular economic, social and cultural relevance for the whole country. It has become one of the largest and most densely populated cities in the world. According to official statistics, the population of the city is heterogeneous in terms of sociodemographics, for almost 40% of its residents come from other parts of the country often in search of job opportunities.

The Historic Centre of Mexico City represents the oldest part of the city and concentrates some of the most important cultural attractions – monuments mainly- in the whole country. Due to the number and cultural value of its ruins, temples, and 19th and 20th – century buildings, the Historic Centre of the city has been included in the list of the World Heritage Sites [www.unesco.org], a condition that to some extent determines tourism activity in the city.

Regarding tourism, Mexico City became the main tourism destination in the country as it received over five million visitors in that year (81% domestic and 19% international tourism) (Arellano, 2010). For domestic tourism, the main reasons to visit the destination are business (35%), VFR (29%), fun (16%), health, culture, religion and shopping. Out of the total number of visitors, over 60% travel alone and are between 35 and 55 years old. As for international tourism, travellers visit the city mainly for business (40%), VFR (20%), shopping, health, conferences and culture purposes.

With regard to prostitution, there are a great number of women involved in the sex work sector in Mexico City, either on public streets or in organised groups. In 2008, over 250 thousand people were involved in prostitution. Within the city, there are specific zones – quite close to the Historic Centre – in which prostitution is highly concentrated. Due to the

reputation that such spaces hold in terms of prostitution and tourism dynamics; these have been called the "sex tourism paradises" (Balboa, 2006).

4. THE STUDY

The original idea of this study emerged from one of the questions that Clift and Carter (2000) posed with regard to the critical issues and new directions of research on sex and tourism. Besides other questions, the authors stated that to what extent tourism is directly or indirectly 'responsible' for the growth of prostitution in particular destinations (Clift and Carter, 2000, p.281) are still unknown. In this vein, this study aimed to contribute to fill in this gap by exploring the impact of tourism on the increase of prostitution through the attitudes of local residents in Mexico City. Of course, the results of this study are by no means representative of the whole population, and it never intended to do so; instead, it attempts to provide empirical evidence on the connection between tourism 'responsibility' on the increase of prostitution.

For the research design, first a detailed literature review on the attitudes of local communities towards tourism was undertaken. This revealed that the large majority of investigations have adopted quantitative methods (Aguiló and Roselló, 2005; Allen, Hafer et al, 1993; Andereck, Valentine et al, 2005; Andriotis and Vaughan, 2003; Gu and Wong, 2006; Haralambopoulos and Pizam, 1996; Johnson, Snepenger et al, 1994; Madrigal, 1995; Mason and Cheyne, 2000; Perdue, Long et al, 1990; Weaver and Lawton, 2001). Quantitative approaches have become well established not only in the area of tourism attitudes but in tourism studies in general. According to Jennings (2001), quantitative research proves to be useful due to its deductive approach, objective epistemology, etc perspective, and its structured, systematic and replicable procedures. This has been echoed in several studies on the attitudes to tourism demonstrating that representativeness of the population may be possible. On the other hand, qualitative methods have also been used for exploring such attitudes. Qualitative approaches offer a valuable potential for understanding the phenomena in terms of the meaning that people bring to them (Phillimore and Goodson, 2004). Although researchers have often been hesitant in the adoption of qualitative methods, scholars such as Cooke (1982), Ap and Crompton (1993), Brunt and Courtney (1999), Spanou (2007), Lepp (2007), Sebastian and Rajagopalan (2009), Hughest, Monterrubio et al (2010), to mention some, have demonstrated the effectiveness of emic approaches in the study of attitudes towards tourism. Qualitative studies have recognised that emic approaches are needed for the inclusions of a more "personal voice" of community residents (Petrzalka, Krannich et al, 2005).

Bearing this in mind, this study adopted both qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative stage consisted of informal conversations during a week with local residents of central neighbourhoods in Mexico City. Such informal conversations were based on a number of questions regarding the perceptions that local people have, for example, on the benefits and costs of tourism and their attitudes towards prostitution. The qualitative stage was also informed by observational work during the whole period of field work. This stage permitted to obtain preliminary and contextual indicators for the quantitative exploration of locals' attitudes. Then, a second stage took place. This was a quantitative stage whose instrument (a questionnaire) was informed, on the one hand, by the literature review and, on the other, by the informal conversations and on site observations; these latter turned to be useful for the analysis of findings.

The quantitative instrument was made up of two sections mainly. The first included sociodemographic variables and the second contained items regarding the informants' attitudes towards tourism. Specifically, in the second section, three-point Likert Scale questions (ranging from Agree to Disagree) were included. Examples of such questions were worded as follows:

- Tourism generates employment and improves infrastructure;
- Tourism generates litter, traffic congestion and other social disadvantages;
- Many tourists come to Mexico City only for the purpose of commercial sex;
- Many tourists use commercial sexual services as an opportunistic experience;
- Tourism is the only cause for prostitution in Mexico City;
- Tourism is partially responsible for prostitution in Mexico City;
- The more tourism, the more prostitution in Mexico City.

The questionnaire was made up of 28 items in total. In order to test the instrument, a pilot study was first carried out among twenty local people that agreed to participate. This study revealed that the topic was of interest to most informants and that there were a few questions that were ambiguous to informants. These questions were therefore reworded. A total of 148 questionnaires were finally administered in August 2011. A special attempt was made to obtain a larger sample, but the conditions of the informants did not allow to. These conditions were, for example, the limited amount of time and the fact that over three quarters of the people who were approached for interviewing were either temporary workers or visitors in Mexico City; these of course were not included in the sample since the main condition for informants was residing in the City. It should be noted however that the design of the instrument led people to give further qualitative information regarding their responses in the questionnaire.

5. FINDINGS

By recognising the importance of obtaining a balanced sample, half of the informants were men and half women, and people aging from 18 to 89 were included in the survey. The intention was to give voice to a wide variety of local views. Forty-seven percent were native to Mexico City; others came from other parts of the Mexican Republic (51%) and the rest from another country. The average length of residency in the city was 28 years, and most of them (41%) did high school and 25% undergraduate studies.

The first question of the instrument was of a sentence-completion type. This question was worded "*The first word that comes to my mind when I hear the phrase 'tourism in the centre of Mexico City' is...*" It aimed to identify the possible social representations of tourism. In this vein, the commonest representations of tourism were:

- a. Tourist/visitor;
- b. Sightseeing/holidaying;
- c. Attractions/monuments; and
- d. Development/growth.

Other concepts related to tourism were places, people and tourism organisations, which in general portray the recreational and industrial aspect of tourism. It is important to note that "prostitution" was not reported by any informant in the survey.

As stated above, part of the instrument aimed to identify the impacts of tourism as perceived by local residents. In this regard, there is a common perception (72%) that tourism in the Historic Centre of Mexico City has increased during the last years. Tourism was reported by most people (76%) as being the responsible for the generation of employment and economic opportunities, as well as for the improvement of infrastructure. Additionally, tourism was frequently (62%) unrelated to the increase of litter, traffic congestion and other social disadvantages. This relation, however, was somehow ambivalent, for 48% agreed that tourism has such negative effects on the city.

With regard to the idea that many tourists visit the Historic Centre of Mexico City only for commercial sex, there was a clear view among residents. Seventy-five percent of informants disagreed with this statement. From informal conversations, it was learnt that residents are aware that tourists come to the city mainly to visit different attractions, particularly the huge amount of monuments and cultural sites. Only 9% – but again important – agreed that many tourists visit the city for commercial sex; repeatedly, these informants openly commented that those tourists who come only for sexual purposes are "insane people", since in their opinion there is no further reason for travelling for commercial sex.

In a related item, however, it was found that tourism was not totally separated from commercial sex. Almost 70% of informants believe that many

tourists engage in commercial sex in the City just because the opportunity is given; the consumption of sexual services is a matter of chance, rather than the main motivation of travel. This strongly supports Oppermann's (1998, p.11) assertion that "many tourists experience sexual encounters simply because the opportunity arises or because they meet like-minded individuals". Correspondingly, in accordance to local views, the usage of sexual services while travelling is closely related to the liminal role of tourism (McKercher and Bauer, 2003). Tourism offers an ideal opportunity to engage in commercial sex because the traveller is unknown in the locality, (s)he is away from home and therefore may adopt the behaviour that is often socially constrained at home. This also concurs with Oppermann's (1998, p.11) suggestion that "In other cases, they [tourists] just feel lonely or sexually deprived [...] and use the opportunity of being an 'unknown stranger' to buy sexual services". This assertion was supported by 80% of respondents. Therefore this suggests that the liminal role of tourism in particular may have a special effect on prostitution.

Another effect that tourism may have on prostitution has to do with the work notion of commercial sex. As Jenness (1990, p.405) states, "prostitution is work and the master concept of work should replace the master concept of crime as the fundamental stance of society toward prostitution". Since tourism may generate work opportunities in local communities, there is no reason not to believe that such opportunities can be given within the sex work arena. According to 71% of informants, tourism offers work opportunities to some people through prostitution in the city. Based on the informal conversations, it was further argued that in particular international tourists are more profitable to sex workers, for international tourists – particularly North Americans – tend to have higher incomes and spend more than domestic tourists in commercial sex.

As stated in the literature review above, it is hard to disentangle the effect of tourism from the effect of other social conditions that may lead to change in societies. With regard to the effects of tourism on prostitution, this difficulty seems to be acknowledged by local residents. The study revealed that tourism is not the only cause of prostitution in the destination. Seventy-four percent of the informants do not perceive tourism as being the only origin, instead they recognised that prostitution has existed since ancient times in Mexico City and that prostitution would exist there with or without tourism. Interestingly enough, however, over half of the informants regard tourism as being somewhat responsible for prostitution in the city, particularly in terms of the growth that prostitution may experience due to tourism demand. This finally concurs with the idea that the more tourism in the destination, the more prostitution. Such perception was reported by 53% of informants.

As can be seen, there seems to be an effect of tourism on prostitution, but it is clear that tourism is by no means regarded as the only responsible for prostitution. Tourism is a phenomenon that may contribute partially to prostitution, but residents recognise that prostitution would exist in the destination regardless of tourism. The existing relation though does not seem to shape peoples' attitude towards both tourism and prostitution. While 71% of informants hold a positive attitude towards tourism, over half of informants regard prostitution as an immoral activity. Based on this, when analysing the interaction between tourism and prostitution, one thing should be born in mind: there are two phenomena that are commonly viewed from opposed perspectives. On the one hand, tourism is often regarded positively due to the economic and social benefits; on the other, however, prostitution is seen as sin (Jenness, 1990). These contradictory views deserve special attention in future research. Particularly, more research should focus on how these opposing perspectives interact in the minds of individuals and which of these has more significance – if any at all – in their everyday life. Furthermore, additional attention should be paid to the way positive attitudes towards tourism may favourably act on shaping the negative views towards prostitution and other commonly condemned phenomena.

6. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore, through a specific case study, the impact of tourism on prostitution. Theoretically speaking, this study provides evidence to suggest that tourism – at least within the case studied – is not totally responsible for prostitution. Local residents may be aware that tourists' motivations may mostly rely on other issues of tourism (recreational mainly) and seldom travel for the purpose of commercial sex. The attitude of local residents towards tourists who may travel for such purposes is that of "insane" tourists.

However, this study suggests that in the mind of some local residents, tourism is a phenomenon partially responsible for prostitution. Although sex encounters may become the main reason for travelling, the usage of sexual services by tourists is also opportunistic. This behaviour may be explained by the liminal role of tourism which located tourists in a temporary respite from their ordinary life and offers a high degree of anonymity to tourists (McKercher and Bauer, 2003, p.11).

The involvement of tourists in prostitution is reinforced by the tourist's awareness that s(he) is unknown and away from social restraints. Furthermore, local people may be aware that tourism has "beneficial" effects on prostitution, since tourism provides employment to some people through the buy of sex services. The actual attitudes towards tourism

in this case may be that of support because of the employment opportunities, but not necessarily because of the effect on prostitution as an often socially disapproved phenomenon.

While this study may be regarded as one of the first in attempting to explore a particular social aspect (prostitution) of local communities on which tourism may have an effect, these findings should be taken with caution. Although both emic and etic approaches were adopted, strictly speaking there is not entire representativeness of these findings; they may represent the attitudes only of those interviewed at the time of the study. Additionally, there is no reason to believe that the results herein presented may have an application in other urban destinations neither in Mexico nor in other countries, since the conditions of the destination and the research design may have somehow shaped the outcome of the research.

Ultimately, this study suggests ideas for future research. Of particular relevance would be to explore how each of the three attitudinal components -namely cognitive, affective and behavioural- operates in the mind of local people. This would be of interest for the behaviour of individuals may have a direct impact on tourism flows and sex workers. Moreover, further research should look at identifying clusters within residents based on the attitudes towards the impact of tourism on prostitution and on other social phenomena. Finally, what other factors – either intrinsic or extrinsic – have an effect on tourism and how these also shape the attitudes of local people towards tourism should become part of the tourism research agenda.

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