



A Qualitative Phenomenological Study of Male Night Traders

Fiasorgbor A. Doris

Department of Rural and Community Development, Presbyterian University College, Ghana.

Akropong

Email address: dfiasorgbor@presbyuniversity.edu.gh

Abstract

The sex marketplace comprises children and adults who sell sex as a means of earning a livelihood, as well as individuals whose decisions to enter a sexual relationship and whose choice of partner are predicated on the receipt of material resources. Men who sell their bodies are perceived as immoral; they endure a social stigma and the burden of being judged as socially inferior and dishonourable, generating claims of protection and redemption. Homosexuality is a growing sexual behaviour which is trending among different societies; meanwhile there is a general prejudice towards them in most African countries including Ghana. This study adopted a qualitative, phenomenological research design to understand and describe male sex work. The study found that young men go into homosexual activities and commercial sex work for a wide-range of reasons which could be classified as pull and push factors. Participants revealed that their clients include politicians, tourists, businessmen, popular figures in the society and anyone who can pay good money. Social media has been identified as one of the platforms used to get connected to clients and service providers. Determined efforts should be made to control the malaise of unemployment, sexual abuse and poverty which stand as push factors to socially condemned behaviours.

Keywords: Male sex work, gay, sex work, homosexuals, male night traders.

1. INTRODUCTION

The social organisation of sexual exchange takes a variety of forms in different historical and cultural settings and political economies; there is really no universal form. The sex marketplace of clients, vendors, and "goods" involves girls, boys, women and men between the ages of 7 and 60, or even 70 and older. It comprises adults who make a conscious choice to sell sex as a means of earning a livelihood, as well as individuals whose decisions to enter a sexual relationship and whose choice of partner are predicated on the receipt of material resources. It also involves children who are forced into sex work through becoming refugees in wars, those sold to dealers or brothel owners by poor guardians, as well as those who are absolutely stolen (Pitcher, 2015).

Men who sell their bodies are perceived as immoral and endure a social stigma and the burden of being judged as socially inferior and dishonourable, generating claims of protection and redemption. Research on sex work has focused on female workers to a far larger degree than their male counterparts, despite the fact that male sex work comprises a substantial proportion of the market and is key to explaining the impact of gender in shaping sex workers' experiences and other outcomes (McCabe, 2011).

Homosexuality is the same sex behaviour within animal species. Nature has created clear distinction in higher animals in terms of male and female partners. The ultimate goal of life is to re-produce by means of which it is possible to give the continuity of race in nature. Homosexuality is a growing sexual behaviour which is trending among different societies; meanwhile there is a general homophobic attitude towards them in most African countries including Ghana. Also, because of the general belief systems across a country like Ghana, homosexuality is generally not tolerated (Norman et al., 2016).

Some parts of the capital city of Accra have in recent times become favourable for the practice of gay prostitution, a new well-paid but illegal business venture emerging in the country. According to MyjoyOnline (2008), homosexuals have earmarked areas in the capital city notably, Adabraka, Tesano, Paloma and its environs, parts of Osu, East Legon areas among others as 'business centres' where gay partners pick and pay huge sums of money after sexual services.

Men sex workers (MSW) tend to be less visible as compared to female sex workers, as their numbers are smaller than those of their female counterparts, and because they constitute a group less commonly studied—an outcome of the multi layered stigma affecting these men; given their hidden nature, and the restrictive legal frameworks concerning male sex work in countries around the globe, also acceptable sexual health services are often not available to this group at all (Bayer et al., 2013).

2. THE PROBLEM

All the major religions in Ghana condemn the practice of homosexuality and commercial sex trade, however, the phenomenon still persists. The 2010 population and housing census in Ghana put the religious population at over 90% of the total population. By inference, most of the people who engage in male prostitution (prostitutes and their clients) might belong to one faith or the other. Therefore, male prostitution in Ghana poses grave religious and moral problems that need to be explored.

Although there is generous data to suggest that universally homosexuals and male prostitution are increasing; there has been increase in all types of prostitution including lower class prostitution which is more commonly practiced by the uneducated and unskilled sex workers. Nevertheless, male prostitution has not been given the desired attention by researchers. Male sex work has been exposed to many inaccuracies and common misconception. It appears that male sex work flourishes more in cities and unlike female prostitution, male prostitution is mostly practiced in better of neighbourhoods of the cities. It is ironical that our knowledge of male prostitution is either based on hearsay or still reflects our moral and value judgments. Though little is known of the male prostitutes' backgrounds and conditions that predispose them towards commercial sex work. Moralists and other groups have consistently judged and condemned both homosexuality and male prostitution for different reasons. It is against this backdrop that this study is conceived because this study rejects any such dispositions. The present study therefore sought to examine the various dynamics that male prostitution brings to the participating men.

3. METHODS

3.1 The Study Area

East Legon is a town in the Accra Metropolitan area. All over East Legon are business enterprises catering to most needs. New business ventures spring up very often in the East Legon neighbourhood and it is quite delightful to stroll around the place noticing the diversity of people and services both well-known and the obscure and unknown. Just think of the item or service, and you are very likely to find it or a business that serves it within East Legon (MeQasa, 2019).

A busy street at East Legon is notorious for prostitution, drugs and other illegal activities. In the day, the street is clean and fertile enough for any genuine and clean engagements. After 7:00 pm, a different breed of creatures dispenses onto the corners of the street from unidentifiable parts of Accra to sell their bodies. The females dress in short and skimpy clothes to reveal their flesh and other seductive parts of their bodies, while their male counterparts dress normal; which makes it difficult for them to be identified with the trade ((MeQasa, 2019). The figure 1 below shows the East Legon area.



Figure 1: Map of East Legon area

Source: Google Maps

3.2 The Narrative inquiry/biography

This study adopted a qualitative, phenomenological research design to understand and describe male sex work. The study is designed to focus on the male prostitute's descriptions and constructions of their experiences, challenges and survival strategies. Therefore, a phenomenological design was adopted to identify male prostitutes in Accra to describe their subjective and the social characteristics of male prostitutes and the real meanings they hold.

This descriptive phenomenology study used in-depth semi-structured interviews to examine male prostitutes' experiences. The study is a phenomenological research because it provides profound, detailed understanding of a single phenomenon; where it allows for a truly unique approach to understanding the phenomenon. The phenomenon under study is so rare and unique that only two (2) participants were available. The researcher happened to have conducted a study on female commercial work around the Spintex road area. During the interviews with the participants, the researcher found that there were also men involved in commercial sex work. Upon enquiries, one of the participants (Lulu) from the female commercial sex workers study agreed to help the researcher identify some of the male

commercial workers. Lulu called me after four (4) months and informed me that, three (3) young men in the night trade were willing to be part of my new study on the topic. Unfortunately, one of the three men decided to withdraw because he was no more interested in being part of the study, so I only worked with two (2) men as the participants of this study.

Ethical issues

Attention was paid to ethical issues in this distinctly sensitive area of study. The introductory stages of the fieldwork were aided by a female sex worker, who arranged meetings with the initial three (3) potential participants. A number of practical arrangements were made to ensure that contact between participants and the researcher would not risk compromising the safety of either. Meeting times, places, and spaces were arranged to be convenient to the participants. Before consenting to participate, participants were however assured they would be able to withdraw from the research, temporarily or permanently, at any time, for any reason or none, without any consequence. These measures to increase participants' confidence in the research procedure as being a shared effort, enabled the study to follow the pace and daily reliabilities of participants' lives; which was particularly important given their needs to engage with income generating opportunities that were neither regular nor totally expectable.

Study Limitations

The scope of this study was focused on two (2) men, the sample size was limited due to the sensitive nature of the study. A larger sample size of male sex workers in the East Legon area would have given a more accurate, generalised results. A male interviewer was used to encourage trust.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Characteristic of Participants

The two men that were covered in this study were engaged commercial sex work in various parts of Accra but mostly, they operated around the East Legon area. Ages of the male night traders that the study covered are 24 and 33years. Both (2) participants have had some form of formal education. One is a university graduate and the other a senior high school graduate. The table 4.1 below presents the participants' demographic characteristics.

Table 4.1: Participants' Demographic Characteristics

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Sex		
Male	2	100
Age		
24	1	50
33	1	50
Education		
University	1	50
Senior High school	1	50
Occupation		
Banker	1	50
Unemployed	1	50

4.2 Entry

As outlined in the social psychologic and prostitution analytical framework that a combination of social and psychological factors push people into prostitution; this study found that high rate of youth unemployment, limited job opportunities, greater rural migration promote homosexual relations and commercial sex among young men and sometimes young women. The study found that young men go into homosexual activities and commercial sex work for a wide-range of reasons which could be classified as pull and push factors where the push factors mostly centre around poverty, unemployment while the pull factors could be peer pressure, social media, pimps and environmental factors. The study revealed that one or more of the factors identified above contributed to the participants' involvement in sex work and the individual stories are told below. I will call my respondents Kappulle (24years) and Shawn (33years). Kappulle has been in the business for about five (5) years and Shawn on the other hand has been in the trade for almost a decade.

Kapulle revealed thus; I got into homosexual activities and commercial work when I was in the boarding house. I come from a very wealthy home and went to one of the prestigious boys' school in the country. I was given everything I needed in school and this was one of the things that pushed me into homosexuality and the eventual sex work. It so happened that some of the boys were very needy in school and therefore depended on the benevolence of some of the wealthy students. This gave power to some of these wealthy students to take advantage of the poor students. After being kind to them for some time; they begin to demand favours from the poor students to anal sex with them in return for continued enjoyment of goodies from the rich students. Some of the poor students succumbed to the pressures of having anal sex but most of them normally refused, even though this came with a stop to the favours they got from the rich kids.

As a rich kid myself, the other rich kids involved in anal sex started convincing me of the benefits I could enjoy from the poor students that I extended kindness to. Initially, I refused to engage in such an act and even found it disgusting but the pressure became unbearable from the peers and even some of the poor kids who had begun enjoying the act; eventually, I decided to try it and thought it was cool after all. This is how I became a homosexual.

About going into sex work, circumstances compelled me to do so. I became addicted to sleeping with men to the extent that I practised it at home with a friend in our neighbourhood; my mum caught us in the act and that was the genesis of a different kind of life for me. I was warned, scolded, counselled and even went on therapy but the addiction was so bad I could not stop the practice; various members of the family caught me in the act or suspected so several times. The last event that broke the camel's back was when my younger sibling (7years) saw me and a friend in a compromising position and reported to my parents innocently, that was when all hell broke loose and I had to leave home.

A senior high school graduate with some weak results to strengthen and without any profession; squatting with one of the poor kids I used to help in school and a sexual partner when we were in school. Things were difficult for us; we did not have any means of income. One day an old school mate called us to meet him at a plush hotel in Accra, we honoured the invitation and upon arrival we saw him in the company of four (4) foreigners. It was at this point that he told us why he invited us; his guests wanted the company of temporal homosexual partners for their two weeks' stay in Ghana. Hungry and already involved in the act, we accepted the offer and I tell you, the money we got from them was good. From thence, I decided to go commercial with the act after we visited a homosexual club inside East Legon

with these foreigners. We made friends and got their contacts so it was easy to return to the club for business all the time.

Furthermore, Shawn the second participant of this delicate study is a 33year old university graduate and a banker. Shawn said, *I come from a very poor background from one of the villages in the country. I grew up in the village, I actually came from the village to school in Accra. I taught in the Junior High School (JHS) as a national service person. After the national service, I occasionally came to Accra to drop my job application letters with various organisations and recruitment agencies. Fortunately for me, one of the agencies called me for an opening as a contract worker with one of the banks in the city. Honestly, the offer was not good but I accepted it with the hope that if I work hard, the bank will give me a permanent offer; this did happen though but before I got the permanent and better offer with the bank, I had become a gay guy because I needed to take care of myself and family back in the village.*

Some colleagues in the bank were already engaged in the practise and introduced me to it. I was initially hesitant but the pressure and the goodies they got from their partners attracted me. I decided to go out with them on a Friday; we went to a club in East Legon and this was how I was introduced to the trade. Honestly, I have acquired some properties from being a gay sex worker but I have plans of quitting the business one day because I wish to have a family of my own. My parents are always on my case to get married and give them grandchildren.

4.2 Clients

Both participants revealed that their clientele include politicians, tourists, businessmen, popular figures in the society and anyone who can pay good money. Asked about how and where they meet these rich and influential clients, the participants indicated that they have various means of getting connected. They said the social media is a useful platform for getting connected to clients and other forms of networking are also very useful. It was further revealed that gay clubs are also venues for networking. Both Kappulle and Shawn revealed that they are bisexuals and therefore render services to some wealthy women too.

The study found that most of the clients are married men and women with families and they are also very generous people. Indicated that their clients are people that need more tenderness, understanding, somebody to talk to, some sex, more sex, certain sexual acts, or simply diversity, novelty, something new that they cannot get from their normal relationships; but this they can get from them (MSWs). Kappulle has this to say;

“I believe we are the better solution to the problems of some of these clients, we are not intrusive. In most cases, our clients’ partners have no idea we exist, because we only require financial rewards. We demand no attention or time from them”

4.3 Challenges of a Male sex Workers

The participants revealed that there are really no serious implications being involved in the business because they are not noticed; it is not easy to identify us with the kind of work we do. Unlike our female counterparts that dress in certain ways to attract their clients, our means of connecting with our clients are different. Shawn said, I sometimes go to meet clients right after work in my three-piece suit. ‘Honestly, I just dress like I will on any other

day. You see, our clients are wealthy, respectable and sometimes popular people in the society so we also dress decently, responsibly and 'sharp' to march their statuses'.

However, Kalluppe and Shawn revealed that some of the customers do not like to use condoms, unfortunately these are the clients that pay them very well. The participants are compelled to give in to the pressure from these types of clients; especially regarding the rewards that come with taking the risk. They said they know the risk involved in taking the offer. We only hope that they do not have any sexually transmitted diseases; in any case we also try to refuse such offers as much as we can.

Future Plans

Participants indicated that they have plans of vacating the business in the future. Shawn said he has a fiancée he plans on marrying soon. He wants to have a family and he believes he has acquired enough resources from the trade to give his family a comfortable life. Kalluppe said he has just started a business and would like to see it develop. He also has plans of returning to school next year and settle down one day to make a home.

5. DISCUSSION

The study revealed that there are push and pull factors such as parental neglect, peer pressure, boarding school factors and poverty that influence the decision of people who engage in prostitution, be it female or male prostitution. This is in line with the findings of Gungul (2014) who reported that women go into prostitution because of negative elements in their backgrounds; a broken home, parental promiscuity or childhood traumas that are conducive to such deviant activities. The study further discovered that prostitution is an exhibition of an uncontrolled background which is in line with the work of Reid (2011) that described commercial sex work (CSW) as environmental factors that compel some men and women go into CSW because of discontent and unhappy home environments. CSW flourishes in an environment of misery and poverty. Some parents claim that poverty led them to sell their children into CSW and street children also resort to sex work because they see it as one of the means of existence.

Furthermore, this study found that CSWs encounter challenges clients and the public. The findings of this study are in consonance with the findings of Matovu and Ssebadduka (2012), which found that the damaging effects prostitution has on the prostitutes' emotional and physical health is undisputable, principally with regards to the sex workers succumbing to the demands of wealthy clients when it comes to safe sex practices.

Finally, the current study reveals that social media plays a very key role in the male sex work business as clients and providers get connected through the various social media platforms. This confirms the findings of Minichiello et al. (2015) which noted that the expansion and availability of online technologies have assisted in the normalisation of MSW. Not only does the internet provide unprecedented opportunity for the public to access information on MSW but it can also make access to the male sex industry easier (and safer) for both clients and workers. Through the internet, individuals can access the virtual world of MSW from the comfort of their living rooms and do so with a high degree of anonymity.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Poverty situations and parental neglect expose people to circumstances that force them to have no option than to 'commodify' their mouth, rectum and sexual organs. Sex work exposes the individual, his/her clients and the society to detrimental states. Information technology has assisted in developing a world-wide outlook on MSW sensitivity to cultural variations in the expression of masculine norms. Also, development in information technology has changed the way the male sex work industry is organised and structured.

Concerted efforts should be made to curb the malaise of unemployment, sexual abuse and poverty which stand as push factors to socially condemned behaviours. It is therefore overbearing to focus on addressing the socio-economic causes of sex work in the society.

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