

The Women of Durban's Dockside Sex Industry¹

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As the busiest port in Africa, Durban hosts tens of thousands of foreign sailors every year. For well over a century, local women have been at the forefront of catering to the social, recreational, and sexual needs of these transients. But since the containerisation of cargo in the late 1970s, the turnaround time for most ships has been cut to less than 20-hours, leaving sailors with precious little time for liberty excursions.

Those who do go ashore must remain cognisant of stringent port security regulations (radically enhanced since 9/11), their long distance from town, and their impending work duties. These constraints have led to the creation of a specialized prostitution sector which caters to the sailors' unique needs. The dockside sex scene—which used to thrive in brothels at the Point—has been narrowed down to a single club in the downtown area: The Riviera, Durban's last remaining 'Seamen's Entertainment Centre.'² Here, mariners can slake their thirst, bond with their mates, flirt with women, and find a companion for sex, all before returning for duties on their ships. Between fifty and a hundred do so every night.

It is in this world that I spent a month conducting research on

the contemporary dockside sex industry.³ And while it introduced me to a veritable United Nations of international seafarers—whose peregrinations are both fascinating and mundane—it also allowed for meaningful interaction with the women who deal with them. Let us take a brief look into the lives of Durban’s ‘sugar girls’ and how they navigate the turbulent waters of prostitution in the time of AIDS.

The Women

Most of the eighty women who solicit regularly from The Riviera hail from KwaZulu-Natal, places like Richard’s Bay, Eshowe, Newcastle, and Ladysmith. Very few actually come from Durban itself. Many also trickled down from Mozambique, Zambia, Angola, and even Nigeria and Ghana. These sixty African women work alongside about twenty whites and a handful of coloureds and Indians who come from scattered parts of the interior. Most are between eighteen and twenty-nine years old, though there are still a strong contingency in the thirty to forty age bracket.

Similar to prostitutes across the globe, many are survivors of rape or abuse by people they know, often coming from unhappy domestic circumstances. Some hint at the role that past incestuous events have played in shaping their attitudes toward sex, but they’re hesitant to say that it led them to prostitution. They prefer to give themselves credit for their agency in the ‘choice’ rather than characterize themselves as the hapless victims of a morality tale. Yet, despite their young ages in getting involved in the game, usually in their teens, they agree that they were already fairly hardened before they came in. They often speak of sex with a pronounced detachment.

For some, outsiders were crucial to childhood sexual experiences. Thandiwe, from Ladysmith, was twelve years old when she was approached by a European man who ran a brothel in another town. He drove alongside her while she was walking home in her school uniform, enticing her with promises of money and gifts for sex. She initially declined, but after a few more encounters decided to go with him.

She soon fell pregnant and gave birth to a light-skinned baby. Coming from humble circumstances, she found it difficult—and quite restrictive for an adolescent—raising the child within her broken

family environment. She ended up giving formal custody of the child to the man's family that resides in Europe. Though she still speaks of him as her 'ex-husband,' adding a layer of formality and legitimacy to the relationship, she wonders what his family will tell their daughter about her as she grows up. Ironically enough, she went to work at her 'ex-husband's' brothel when she was seventeen. She only abandoned it when her older sister, also a 'sugar girl,' told her about The Riviera in Durban. She is twenty years old now, a player in the game for three years. Like the majority of the women, she dropped out of school before matriculating, achieving only functional conversation skills in English. Unlike most, however, she is also illiterate.

Double Lives

Since most of the women in the dockside sex scene hail from outside of the city, they are able to maintain boundaries between their home and work lives. This is attractive for a number of reasons: morally, many are ashamed about the work they do and would not like to be publicly associated with it; temporally, many see themselves as mere sojourners in the business, and thus are uncomfortable claiming a more permanent identity as a 'prostitute'; physically, they may face serious consequences from the family or community if they are known to sell sex; and socially, many hope to eventually live 'straight' lives within their communities and do not want the stigma of their history to compromise their future.

To queries from families and friends about their lives in Durban, they offer a host of well-crafted stories to account for their earnings and activities. One says that she is a model, another that she has an office job, another that she works for a cleaning company, and almost all the rest say they are students. Some, like Nomazulu, suspect that their relatives have guessed their true employment, but are too ashamed to air it publicly and are too afraid to lose the precious remittances that keep the homestead going.

If a Zulu woman bears a mixed-race child from a client—a possible sign of prostitution—she explains it away with references to meeting a guy at college, hooking up with a tourist, or dating a local businessman who, to her surprise, was actually married, and thus cannot come to see his child. In any case, families are often complicit

in keeping their daughters' secret as survival depends on her labour.

Such a double life comes with a price. Virtually all of the women have at least one child, usually of 'mixed-race.' The white women tend to have children from Asian men—Filipinos, Indonesians, Koreans, Chinese, Japanese, or Kiribatians. While some black women also have children from local men, most of their children derive their paternity from Europeans (Russians, Greeks, Italians, Spaniards, Germans, Croatians, etc.) or the ubiquitous Filipinos. And, like the sailors who spend months away from their families every year, rarely able to raise their children in person, most of the club women also leave their children in someone else's care. Parents, sisters or aunts often take on the responsibility, while in other cases, ex-prostitutes act as nannies to a number of different women's children. Others give their babies up for adoption or hand them over to the state.

Nicky, a white woman in her early twenties, has already borne four children from Filipino, Korean, Indonesian, and Japanese men, giving them all up for adoption. Coming from a broken home in which she was abused by her uncle, she says that she has never been in a position to take care of her offspring, emotionally or financially. Enele, on the other hand, who only works at the club on weekends (studying weekdays), takes care of her child with her mother's help. She wants nothing to do with the local father of the baby, a man who used to beat her. But she talks about her child incessantly, quite thrilled to be raising him. She says that the money she makes through sex work is ultimately for his benefit because it pays her college fees which will land her a decent job someday.

Most of the women reside in the downtown area near the club in quasi-brothels, boarding houses, and flats. (A quasi-brothel is a warren of rooms above a tavern where visitors must pay a fee to enter, no matter the purpose of the visit.) Small groups of women sometimes rent apartments from the owner of the Riviera who charges reduced rates so that they can get to work easily. They are then expected to operate regularly and exclusively from the club. Though their rooms are located near to the Riviera, making it a convenient place to consummate their business contracts, most women prefer to take their clients to a hotel for sex. This ties in with their desire to maintain a certain distance between their home life and their work life. By keeping clients outside of their city abodes, they further reinforce the

idea that this work is containable, that it does not represent the fullness of who they are.

But why do they work at the seamen's club versus somewhere else? Unlike other forms of sex work which entail high levels of public exposure to local men—streetwalkers under streetlamps, truck-stop girls at service stations, brothel girls in massage parlours—the seamen's club caters specifically to foreign transnationals who, as thirty-six year old Dora says, are 'here today and gone tomorrow.' These clients are wayfarers, unable to expose their secret lives to others. Moreover, the club bans local men, rendering it largely opaque to South African society.

Moreover, these women act as independent operators. Unlike streetwalkers, they are not controlled by a pimp, do not advertise their services publicly (outdoors), and are not distributors in the drug trade. And unlike massage parlour (brothel) women, they do not work mandatory shifts, do not have to accept any john who walks through the door, and do not have to split their earnings with a boss.⁴ They choose to conduct business from the seamen's club because it offers a degree of safety from criminal, client and constabulary abuse, decent money, a flexible work schedule, freedom to control the price and location of the sexual rendezvous, and relative anonymity.

The Game

Every night, these women spend between four and eight hours at the club: drinking, smoking, talking with colleagues, chatting up sailors, dancing with them, touching them in suggestive ways, trying to negotiate a lucrative agreement for sex. Most of the women's time is taken up with these in-club activities, while sexual trysts are far from guaranteed. On balance, most of their work is unremunerated, because their hours at the club are regarded as flirtation and marketing rather than labour. Perhaps the most valuable service that the women provide for many of the seamen—temporary companionship and a soft thigh to rest their weary hands on—remains largely unpaid. Both parties to conspire in commodifying the sex act rather than the sexually charged interactions at the club. This skews the work/pay ratio since sex itself occurs rather infrequently and its duration is often strikingly short.

The infrequency has to do with the fact that many of the

sailors are not seeking sex at all, just a chance to drink with their mates and enjoy casual companionship with a female. They're happy to have these women around, but they often only buy them drinks, maybe offering a couple hundred rands for the nice times.

The short duration of sex itself—what the women insist is 'fucking'—has to do with the economics of time. Simply: the longer it takes, the more it costs. The sailors are financially motivated to keep it short. Also, the nature of their work inhibits them from long sessions, as they must return to the ship by a certain time for duties. And, because many of the women hate this part of the job and want to get back to the club in hopes of a second client, they strive to finish up as quickly as possible. Thus, typical contracts are for a half-hour, an hour, and sometimes two, though extensions are always possible for the right price.

However, this does not mean that anything goes. Many women claim to enforce a host of taboos. This usually means denying their clients tenderness, or acts which are considered extremely intimate—anal sex, swallowing fluids, bondage, etc. Thandiwe says that she never lets a seaman kiss her on the mouth, touch her breasts or caress her. She seeks the quickest way to bring the man to satisfaction so she can get paid. This discomfort with giving away 'love' or 'intimacy' to a client runs through many women's commentaries. This, they claim, is reserved only for special men for whom they feel affection.

Morality

Most women believe that they are living 'way over the line,' as Dora puts it, that they have crossed a moral Rubicon beyond which they do not deserve social redemption. They neither justify prostitution nor try to rescue themselves from moral judgment. Most believe in the moral order of the straight world, the very world that they were raised in and, in many ways, still identify with.

But they still seek dignity, pride, and validation, usually by distinguishing themselves from their colleagues. For instance, many of the African women are disgusted by the idea of stripping their clothes off in public. Every evening at the club, when the midnight stripshow begins—in which an older white stripper prances around from table to table—the black women laugh and make faces at the spectacle. As the

twenty-two year old Thembisa says, shaking her head, ‘Yah, I may let a seaman go fuck-fuck in my pussy, but I never going to show my body to every stranger. *Hayi-bo!*’

Other women, like Maria from central Africa, insist that they ‘always act like a lady,’ that they don’t get mixed up in petty disputes over men that can lead to fights. They prefer to eschew the violent and confrontational tactics that other women resort to for settling matters. This decorum, they believe, distinguishes them from the others who have relinquished their manners through their work.

And lastly, while most say that they would rather be doing something else, that they would leave the game if they could, they say they are trapped because of financial commitments to their family, especially the upkeep of their children. This is not stated to justify their behaviour, but merely to explain how they got into ‘this immoral business.’ For most, it was a practical decision based on calculations of what a female school drop-out could make in the straight world—‘R1800 per month as a packer at Checkers’—versus in the club.

After The Game

When asked about their future, white women seem confused, if only because few can imagine a life outside the club. This lack of imagination is most strikingly portrayed by the three mom-n-daughter teams that work together. The mothers sit and watch their mixed white/Filipina daughters work the same dance floor and clientele that they used to. Other white women often end up as waitresses in the club ‘earning peanuts.’ Tessa, from the UK, used to prostitute at The Riviera but says she was a ‘lousy whore,’ unable to make much money. She now fetches drinks and chips for the customers, occasionally ‘going with’ a seafarer who has taken a fancy to her. Outside the club, prospects remain limited. The drug addicts often become streetwalkers to support the habit; the worn-out sometimes become nannies to the club women’s children; and others, like sixty-four year-old Rena, end up making sandwiches at white working-class neighbourhood dives, raving on about how ‘the Japanese sailors put a radio chip inside my head which they use to control my thoughts.’⁵

Most African women, in contrast, see this work as a temporary answer to the temporary problem of poverty. They reason that while

they're young and attractive, they can make a few rands to help their families, feed their kids, and save up for a proper business someday, like a hair salon. Many imagine that they'll exit the game in their mid- to late-twenties, marrying either a decent black man (who will know nothing of her past) or a rich foreign white man (who will have met her in the club, but will not judge her). They exhibit greater optimism than the white women about what prostitution can secure them in terms of future opportunities. Thembisa, who started in her teens, sees herself in the game for three more years, max. 'I will find a nice German man at the club and marry him. Maybe we will live here or overseas.' Enele, the college student secretly funding her studies through weekend night-work, is certain that she will drop the game in a year or two, when 'my last subjects are completed and I can get a good office job. Maybe in marketing.'

When I ask Mike, the manager, whether optimistic narratives ever play out for the black women, he shakes his head with regret:

It's one in a hundred. You see, the game changes these women. They may come into it with a plan, or they might dream of making a business someday with the money they're earning now, but the very nature of this industry ruins their chances for success in the straight world. They earn money day-to-day; and they blow it day-to-day. This income cycle makes them bad financial planners. They come to rely on this easy money structure, getting trapped in it much longer than they would have imagined. By the time they leave the game, the daily abuse of alcohol will have destroyed them. And so they'll end up in some township somewhere shackled up with a widower, washing his laundry, doing sweet fuck-all.

If their daytime habits are anything to go by, this may be true. As nocturnal labourers, they typically wake up around noon, filling their afternoons with laundry, cooking, eating, watching videos, listening to music, chatting with friends, taking trips to the hair salon, and drinking at nearby taverns. These are all normal activities, of course, but few take the necessary initiative to learn new skills for life beyond the game. For instance, last year, the manager made a deal with a number of the women who said that they wanted to get drivers' licenses so they could be more employable outside the club: he said that if they studied for and passed the written exam of the Learner's License—the information of which is all found in a simple

booklet—he would pay for the actual driver’s training course and test. To date, none of the dozen women has studied for the test, most failing to even retrieve the booklet.

Though these women are savvy business women in the club environment—bold, perspicacious, and puissant—the structure of their lifestyle appears to have an incapacitating effect when it comes to preparing for the constraints of the ‘straight world.’ The understanding that they can earn a quick buck in the evening lulls them into putting off strategic long-term plans until tomorrow. Always tomorrow.

Viruses and Violence

Lingering below the surface of any talk of the future is a hushed concern for AIDS. Many of the women have been tested for HIV at some point in their lives, and most claim that they always insist on using condoms. But they also admit fear at taking another test. Enele says ‘I’d rather not know. Not right now.’ Though it is impossible to divine whether the women are strict about condom use, certain signs hint at momentary lapses: the purchase of home pregnancy tests, the birth of children, trips to the clinic for a jab, abortions, cold sores, vaginal itching, etc. They understand, intellectually, that are at constant risk of getting HIV through their work, but do not obsess over it. Just as speeding taxi drivers rarely complain about the risk of accidents (failing to protect themselves anyway through wearing a seatbelt), these women merely add HIV to a long list of other concerns they must navigate through sex work.

In fact, most have a more traditional fear, that of pregnancy. This, rather than the stealthy work of a virus, concerns them because they already know what it means to be pregnant, to give birth, and to either maintain or give away a child. Most also know what it means to have an abortion, a decision that is convenient, but not without its emotional and physical costs. Thembisa says, ‘Sex without a condom, no good. Me, I wanna stay slim, but every time—I get pregnant and have an abortion, pregnant then an abortion—I put on weight. This is bad for business. No good.’

But other factors are crucial for the question of disease and protection. Recent literature on prostitution links male violence, and women’s fear of that violence, with high HIV transmission rates.⁶

These studies suggest that sex workers, when faced with the prospects of violence, feel disempowered to insist on condom-use if the client demands flesh-on-flesh. Those who resist often face harrowing consequences, both physically and virally. But there are structural factors in the dockside sex trade that enhance the women's power to insist on safe sexual practices.

First of all, their clients are strangers to Durban, foreigners to the city and the law. Though they may come from societies as patriarchal as South Africa, in which abuse against women is exercised with virtual impunity, they feel much less comfortable asserting such masculine prerogatives in places where they do not know the rules, nor have much social standing.⁷ In fact, when women complain of having been raped or abused, it is almost always at the hands of local men. Foreign sailors are seen as safer clients.

Second, the women control the location of negotiation and the location of sex. By conducting negotiations at the club, a safe public space, women can agree on a mutually acceptable contract with a man before going off with him. Within the club, she always maintains the right of refusal (a right not always available to prostitutes in other sectors of the industry). But the women also choose where they will have sex, either at her flat or a nearby pay-by-the-hour hotel (the ship is off-limits these days for security reasons). By going to a place of her choosing, she radically enhances her power in the engagement.

Third, many Durbanites have a vested interest in the safety and security of these women because they bring them business. The club management, cab drivers, and hotel owners all derive ancillary commerce from prostitution activities, so they form part of an informal surveillance network which keeps tabs on the women and their clients. The club owner even notes which women go with which men, a precaution as much for the safety of the sailor as it is for the woman. Unlike local men who cruise around for streetwalkers—assured of mobility and anonymity in their cars—sailors are much more exposed, confronted at every turn by local allies of the women. Thus, in this context, women are able to make sexual decisions without much threat of violence. In fact, the sailors are the ones placing their safety in the hands of the women.

Ironically, the pressure to give in to full-contact sex comes not from the threat of abuse, but from a completely different source:

emotional attachment. Since Durban is a container port with quick turn-around times and frequent first-time visitors, women often deal with new clients. With such first-timers, they are much more likely to insist on a condom than with repeat clients with whom they have built up a certain emotional bond. Indeed, women are more likely to play safe with men they do not know than with men that they do. In other words, HIV transmission within this population is most likely to occur between people with real emotional connections to each other than between strangers.

Conclusion

One of the striking aspects of Durban's dockside sex scene is that there are so few actual Durbanites involved in it. All of the sailors come from overseas and virtually all of the women hail from upcountry locales or foreign countries. As we have seen, there are logical reasons for this, but it is not the norm worldwide. KwaZulu-Natal's long history of labour migration continues to play out in surprising ways, even in this most intimate of industries. Socially, it may be that Durban's most cosmopolitan women are those who have bypassed Durban's racially segregated social scene for the multi-national dockside world. But virally, these women also participate in a global traffic of fluid exchange, interacting with seafarers from across the globe and local men from their home communities. How ironic that their most meaningful sexual exchanges—those that entail real emotional connection—are often the most lethal.

Footnotes

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² All names and identities of informants—including the name of the club—have been altered.

³ My Ph.D. dissertation is titled 'Port Culture: A Modern History of South African Sailors, Stevedores & Sugar Girls.' I am currently researching and writing it as a Yale University History Department graduate student.

⁴ On streetwalker and brothel prostitution in Durban, see Ted Leggett, *Rainbow Vice: The Drugs and Sex Industries in the New South Africa* (David Philip: Cape Town, 2001), especially pp. 96-121.

⁵ Rena worked at The Riviera when it first opened almost 30 years ago, though she also spent significant time at the Cape Town clubs. She now suffers paranoid-delusional fantasies of former clients influencing her 'brain waves' through 1970s-vintage technology.

⁶ See Suzanne Leclerc-Madlala, 'Transactional Sex and the Pursuit of Modernity' *Social Dynamics* 29:2 (2003): 213-233; Julia O'Connell Davidson and Jacqueline Sanchez Taylor, 'Child Prostitution and Sex Tourism: South Africa' (1995 research paper for ECPAT available online at:

http://www.ecpatinternational.org/eng/Ecpat_inter/

Publication/Other/English/Pdf_page/ecpat_child_prost_sex_tourism_south_africa.pdf); John M. Luiz and Leon Roets, 'On Prostitution, STDs and the Law in South Africa: The State as Pimp' *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 18:1 (2000) 21-38; and Melissa Farley and Vanessa Kelly, 'Prostitution: A Critical Review of the Medical and Social Sciences Literature' *Women & Criminal Justice* 11:4 (2000) 29-64.

⁷ On the prevalence of rape and its virtual impunity in South Africa, see Helen Moffett, "'These Women, They Force Us to Rape Them': Rape as Narrative of Social Control in Post-Apartheid South Africa' *Journal of Southern African Studies* 32:1 (2000) 129-144.