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# The Gambia's Tourism Sexual Economy

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# Introduction

- As a predominantly Islamic country with 1.8 million people and multiple ethnic groups, The Gambia is one of the smallest countries in continental Africa. However, it has developed a global reputation as a sex tourism destination.
- The Gambia's population includes a subpopulation of immigrants, political refugees and non-refugees from Senegal (including Cassamance) , Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, and Guinea (UNHCR 2015). Islam is the main religion (90%), polygyny is widely practiced bringing the average household size to 8.9. The average annual household income is \$320.00.








o Tourism is the largest industry after agriculture. It employs about 125, 500 people, and contributes 16% to The Gambia's GDP (World Travel & Tourism Council 2014 Gambia). In 2013, there were 157, 000 tourist arrivals mostly from the UK, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, Germany and Spain (World Bank 2014). This figure rose to 171, 2001 in 2014 (The Gambia Tourism Board). Tourists usually visit during the months of November to April. Most of them stay in and around Kololi beach area hotels, resorts, and guesthouses.





o Tourists can engage in many excursions to visit Katchikaily Crocodile pool, the old colonial village of Janjangbureh (Georgetown), the former slave trade post in Albreda and Juffureh along with James Island, which was renamed Kunta Kinteh Island after the Alex Haley's Roots Saga book and TV miniseries. Tourists can also do bush and beach safaris, take river and fishing trips along the river Gambia, visit the prehistoric Wassu Stones circle, and lastly hang out with young trained official Gambian tour guides whose goal is to “enhance guest-host encounters” ([visitthegambia.gm](http://visitthegambia.gm)).




# Gambian Men and Women involvement in Tourism Sexual Economies.


- However, what the Gambian tourism board doesn't mention is the many ways Gambian men and women have engaged in affective sexual economies with European tourists visiting the country.
- One component of tourists' experiences above the usual excursions is the consumption of Gambian bodies. Both tourists and their Gambian mates fashion their sexual encounters as "relationships."
- These "relationships" provide Gambian men and women with opportunities to make a living, while tourists get the chance to satisfy their (neo-colonial) fantasies about young black bodies.








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- In the past three decades feminist scholarship reconfigured prostitution as a form of labor or “income generating activity.” This has served to take away moralizing discourses by removing the stigma of selling sexual services (O’Connell 1998; Kempadoo 1998).

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- Transnational feminist scholars focus on how gender relations are enmeshed on “scattered hegemonies such as global economic structures, patriarchal nationalism, and local structures of domination” that are still influenced by colonialism (Grewal and Kaplan 1994:17).



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- When trying to make sense of the sexual exchanges that take place in tourism, we must keep in mind that both tourists and locals find creative ways to exchange sex for money. Kempadoo's concept of "transactional sex" and Cabezas' concept of "tactical sex" promise to be useful for my analyses of the different ways Gambian locals use sex strategically to advance their economic opportunities.





















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- Gambian men and women use “tactical sex” in their affective sexual economic exchanges with Global North tourists in order to obtain gifts, money, remittances, and perhaps marriage and a visa to migrate to Europe.
  - They view their engagement in sexual economies as a form of labor that provides them income. Very often they are proud to say that they are self-employed individuals working to make a living for themselves and their family.



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- Very often the Gambian men who engage in tourism's affective sexual economies are seen combing the beach looking for engagement with a potential tourist or other. Some also serve as taxi drivers and often wait by the beach side looking for potential tourist-clients in need of transportation.
  - Both Gambian men and women frequent many restaurants, bars, and night clubs located in the Kololi beach area, a site designed for tourism activities, looking to engage in a potential relationship with tourists.






# Gender and Stigmatization

- In Gambian patriarchal society, the ways in which Gambian men's and women's involvement in the sexual economies are treated and viewed differently by the larger society.
- While men are able to obtain legal access to the beach from the State because they serve as tour guides, taxi drivers, and the like, women on the other hand are only given limited access: they must be employed by local restaurants in the beach area to obtain legal access to the beach.

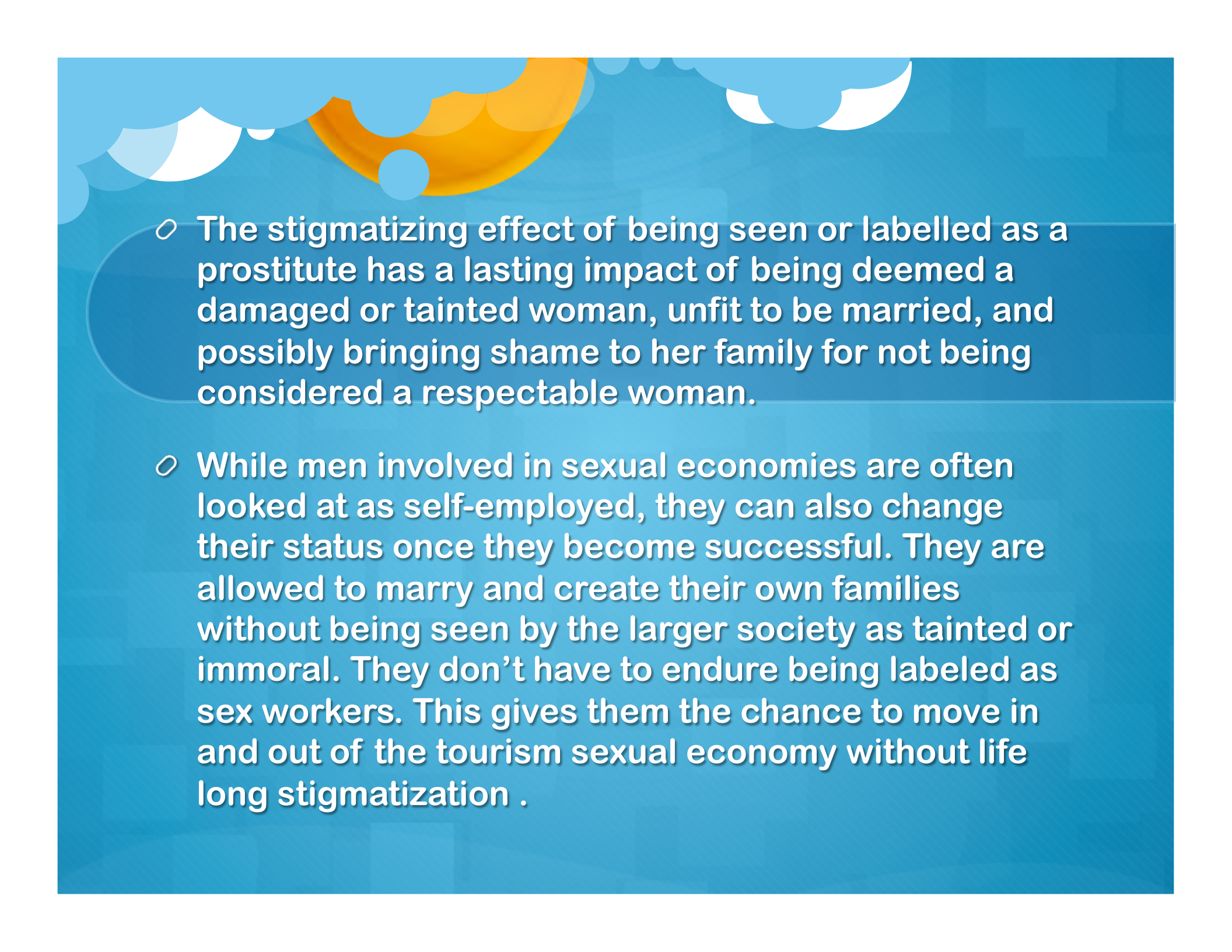


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- This pushes Gambian women to mainly frequent bars, night clubs, and restaurants within the Senegambian strip (adjacent to the Kololi area) in order to meet tourists.
  - The larger population often view these bars and night clubs as sites where prostitutes and loose women hangout.
  - This creates a stigmatizing effect on the women who attend these bars and night club. They are viewed as prostitutes who sell their bodies to tourists.







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- The stigmatizing effect of being seen or labelled as a prostitute has a lasting impact of being deemed a damaged or tainted woman, unfit to be married, and possibly bringing shame to her family for not being considered a respectable woman.
  - While men involved in sexual economies are often looked at as self-employed, they can also change their status once they become successful. They are allowed to marry and create their own families without being seen by the larger society as tainted or immoral. They don't have to endure being labeled as sex workers. This gives them the chance to move in and out of the tourism sexual economy without life long stigmatization .







# Concluding Remarks

- The Gambia's tourism sexual economy is mainly grounded on the cheap labor of young Gambian men and women who have very little economic opportunities. Their bodies are the main capital they possess. They are left to use their bodies to survive. These Gambian men and women offer their bodies (tactical sex) for consumption by usually older men and women Global North tourists.
- Above and beyond their immediate objective to get access to resources, the young Gambian men and women's long term goal is to get visa sponsorship so that they can migrate to Europe in search of a better future.



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- The Gambian State sees these men and women as a nuisance because they allegedly are doing nothing more than harassing tourists. This, says the State, brings a set of negative guest/host interactions. This leads the State to act very aggressively towards Gambians involved in the sexual economy by arbitrarily arresting them and taking them into labor camps, where those wearing dread locks are shaved off by the military. At times, women who hang out on the Senegambian strip with the hope of meeting tourists are presented on the Gambian National Television as prostitutes who have lost their moral compass and dignity.



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- The Gambian tourism sexual economy must be interpreted considering the different measures some Gambian men and women take to survive their poor economic status their bad luck to have been born in an impoverished country. The circumstances of their birth leaves them little or no choice but to use their bodies to survive.
  - Rather than being a tourist-harassing nuisance, they are actors and agents of The Gambia's tourism industry, for they provide services to tourists who visit the country with a specific demand in mind. They contribute a great deal to the tourism industry.