
“She’s Not a Low-Class Dirty Girl!”: Sex Work in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

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Abstract

Turning to Vietnam’s contemporary sex industry, this article complicates existing frameworks of global sex work by analyzing a sex industry in a developing economy where not all women are poor or exploited and where white men do not always command the highest paying sector of sex work. Drawing on seven months of field research between 2006 and 2007, I provide a systematic *classed* analysis of *both* sides of client–worker relationships in three racially and economically diverse sectors of Ho Chi Minh City’s (HCMC’s) global sex industry: a *low-end* sector that caters to poor local Vietnamese men, a *mid-tier* sector that caters to white backpackers, and a *high-end* sector that caters to overseas Vietnamese (*Viet Kieu*) men. I illustrate how sex workers and clients draw on different economic, cultural, and bodily resources to enter into different sectors of HCMC’s stratified sex industry. Moreover, I argue that sex work is an *intimate relationship* best illustrated by the complex intermingling of money and intimacy. Interactions in the low-end sector involved a direct sex for money exchange, while sex workers and clients in the mid-tier and high-end sectors engaged in relational and intimate exchanges with each other.

Introduction

Studies on sex work pay particular attention to the growth of global sex tourism, marked by the production and consumption of sexual services across borders. A recent body of literature uncovers the complexities of stratified

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sex industries around the world (Bernstein 2007; Zheng 2009). This article extends the literature on the stratification of sex work by comparing three racially and economically diverse sectors of Ho Chi Minh City's (HCMC's) global sex industry: a *low-end sector* that caters to poor local Vietnamese men, a *mid-tier sector* that caters to white backpackers, and a *high-end sector* that caters to overseas Vietnamese (*Viet Kieu*) men.

First, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) theories of capital, I explain how sex workers' various economic, cultural, and bodily resources position them in different sectors of HCMC's stratified sex industry. Global processes, namely, the movement of people and capital around the world, expand the sex industry creating different markets and opportunities for female sex workers. Contrary to the current literature, I argue that sex workers are not all poor exploited women; rather, they come with an array of economic, cultural, and bodily resources that provide them with access to various types of local and global men.

Second, I expand the literature on client-worker relations in sex work by highlighting the multiple ways through which clients and sex workers mingle economic activity and intimacy. The commonsense understanding of sex is dichotomous: participants engage in sex either relationally (in a romantic encounter) or as an economic transaction (in sex work). When there are material rewards to sex, this perspective contends, each party's calculus is fundamentally individualistic: the buyer wants sex, and the seller wants material gain. In her research on sex tourism in Cuba, Cabezas (2009) highlights the multivalent encounters of emotional affection that occur in sex work blurring the boundaries between client-worker interactions and romantic relationships.

Drawing on seven months of field research between 2006 and 2007, I expand Cabezas's (2009) framework with a systematic *classed* analysis of *both* sides of client-worker relationships. Sex work is not a mere economic transaction; it is an *intimate relationship* best illustrated by the complex intermingling of money and intimacy (Zelizer 2005). I find that interactions between poor local Vietnamese clients and sex workers in the low-end sector involve *economic exchanges* that are intimate but not personal, while sex workers and clients in the mid-tier and high-end sectors engage in *relational* and *intimate exchanges* developed through the continuous interactions that tie customers to sex workers. In this article, I break away from the current understanding that high-class sex work occurs in bounded spheres with clear economic transactions (Bernstein 2007). Instead, I argue that there are porous boundaries in the relations between sex workers and their clients that depend on the strata they occupy. These permeable boundaries complicate our understandings of sex work because they allow women to offer a variety of

services that go beyond sex, in return for various forms of payment beyond money.

Sex Work in Ho Chi Minh City's International Economy

Vietnam is an ideal case for the study of sex work because rapid economic restructuring has triggered new inflows of people and capital, creating a segmented sex market. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, Vietnam effectively closed its doors to foreign relations with most of the international community except the Soviet bloc. In 1986, after a decade of full state management of the economy, heavily subsidized production, and postwar infrastructural instability, the Vietnamese government introduced an extensive economic and administrative renovation policy called *Doi Moi* (literally “renovation” or “renewal”) that transitioned Vietnam from a socialist to a market economy.

HCMC has since become a city with heavy international flows of people and capital. As the “Southern Key Economic Zone,” HCMC accounts for 35 percent of Vietnam’s gross national product (Pham 2003). In 2006, Vietnam joined the World Trade Organization, joining a globalizing economy and launching new foreign trade and investment projects, following similar moves by other socialist or formerly socialist countries (Hoogvelt 1997; WTO 2006). The transition to a market economy dramatically increased economic inequality, intensifying and laying bare the stratification of sex work (Nguyen-Vo 2008).

In her research on globalization, Sassen (2001) encourages us to examine how the world economy shapes the life of particular cities. By foregrounding cities as a strategic site of globalization, we can identify some of the mediating institutions that connect cities to the global forces that shape sex tourism (Wonders and Michalowski 2001). There is some evidence that HCMC is beginning to emerge as a new *global city* (Sassen 2001). However, HCMC still lacks an advanced transportation system, a major international stock exchange, and an active influence in international affairs. Thus, I argue that HCMC is an *emergent international city* rather than a global city—an emergent international city as part of the peripheral zone in the global capitalist market, where processes of transnationalism from above and practices of transnationalism from below shape the socioeconomic structure of the city (Hoang 2010).

HCMC has a distinctive sex industry with an estimated 200,000 Vietnamese women involved in prostitution (CATW 2005). While some scholars address the sex industry in Southeast Asia, few focus on the contemporary global sex

industry in Vietnam (Nguyen-Vo 2008; Truong 1990). Among scant research on Vietnamese sex work, Nguyen-Vo's (2008) theoretical approach focuses on how larger macro structures like the state regulate women's bodies. She tracks the governance of women's bodies in the contemporary sex industry, focusing mainly on establishments that cater to local Vietnamese entrepreneurs. My research expands Nguyen-Vo's work by providing an ethnographic analysis from the ground up that examines the significant differences among sex workers who cater to both local and overseas clients.

The movement of people and capital makes HCMC a critical site where globalization generates new types of inequality, which in turn create new segments of sex work. Unlike studies on sex trafficking that tend to view all women as poor victims in need of rescue, I argue that it is important to examine the social and economic distinctions between sex workers in a stratified economy. Globalization does not create a single market for poor exploited women who cater to wealthy foreigners; rather, I contend that globalization creates diverse markets and new segments that expand already existing inequalities. Structural factors such as women's access to economic, cultural, and bodily resources position them in higher and lower paying sectors of sex work with different relations of intimacy.

Sex Work through the Lens of Capital and Intimate Relations

Bernstein (2007) and Zheng (2009) pioneered new research investigating the stratification of sex work. These scholars highlight how the different types of bodily, intimate, and sexual labors that workers perform correspond with their positions in higher-class and lower-class sectors of the sex industry. Bernstein (2007) illustrates how relations between lower-class street workers and their clients involved direct exchanges of physical sex acts for money, while higher-class sex workers provide their clients with experiences of *bounded authenticity*. Zheng (2009) extends the research on the stratification of sex workers beyond the United States in her study of hostesses in low-end, mid-tier, and high-end karaoke bars in Dalian, China. However, Zheng's (2009) research is limited to local Chinese men; she does not discuss how relations between clients and sex workers differ in the three types of bars. Elsewhere, I analyze the range of repressive and expressive *emotional labors* that sex workers provide their clients (Hoang 2010). In this article, I focus on how structural factors such as the exchange of different bodily, cultural, and economic capitals lead to a range of short-term and long-term *relationships* that emerge through client-worker interactions.

First, I turn to Bourdieu's theories of capital to explain how clients and sex workers draw on different economic, cultural, and bodily resources to enter various sectors of HCMC's sex industry. To develop Bourdieu's theories in the context of sex work, I also draw on Zelizer's (2005) concept of *intimate relations* to illustrate how clients and sex workers mingle sex, money, and intimacy in different ways that correspond to their position in a particular stratum.

Bourdieu defines *economic capital* as the monetary income, assets, or other financial resources that an actor can access (Bourdieu 1986). *Cultural capital* refers to actors' dispositions and embodiment in specific social fields. It is the ability to acquire and manipulate a system of embodied, linguistic, or economic markers that carry cultural meaning, especially within a hierarchical social system of status (Bourdieu 1977). Broadly, the relevant demarcations of cultural capital in the world of HCMC's sex industry are the resources, dispositions, and modes of embodiment that allow individuals to position themselves within the particular social field of sex work in HCMC. More specifically, on the client side, I use the term "cultural capital" to draw attention to *Viet Kieu* clients' understanding of the local culture and their ability to speak Vietnamese when navigating the sex industry in HCMC. For sex workers, I use the term "cultural capital" to refer to the linguistic and discursive abilities needed for communication with clients, and also to the sex workers' level of comfort within particular bars and restaurants. In addition, sex workers' cultural capital encompasses the ability to embody and project to clients an imagined nation: Vietnam as nostalgic "home" for *Viet Kieu* men and, alternatively, Vietnam as foreign and exotic other for Western men (Nguyen-Vo 2008).

I also incorporate Bernstein's (2007) term *body capital*, which she defines as an attractive appearance used to sell sexual services. In this article, I highlight dimensions of body capital such as apparent age, designer clothing, hairstyle, and make-up, as well as strategies to acquire body capital, such as cosmetic surgery. Sex workers' bodies serve as assets that allow them to work as entrepreneurs in bodily capital (Wacquant 1995) to market themselves as attractive and thus more valuable in relation to global men.

Bourdieu (1986) argues that different forms of capital have varied meanings within social fields. A *field*, in Bourdieu's oeuvre, is a terrain of struggle in which agents strategize to preserve or improve their positions (Bourdieu 1984). While men and women use different forms of capital to enter and maneuver within specific sectors of sex work in HCMC, these various forms of capital are only valued through the *relations* between men and women in this particular field. In this paper I highlight the forms of capital that are

relevant and valued in relations between clients and sex workers in HCMC's sex industry. Based on these relations, agents within a field stand in relationships of domination, subordination, or homology to one another by virtue of the varying levels of access that they have to the different forms of capital at stake in the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). I analyze relations of domination and subordination to show that they are not static but take on different meanings in different sectors.

While Bourdieu's (1984) theories of social fields and capital help us to understand the structure of the HCMC's stratified sex industry and the relations within a particular field, his theories inhibit our examination of the *product of interactions* between clients and sex workers. Zelizer's (2005) concept of *intimate relations* is more useful because it provides a critical tool for understanding how the *exchange* of different resources leads to a range of short-term and long-lasting relationships between clients and sex workers. Scholars of "separate spheres and hostile worlds" argue that intimacy and economic markets are mutually exclusive (MacKinnon 1982; Pateman 1988). In response, Zelizer (2005) argues that the "hostile worlds" view overlooks how people who blend economic activity and intimacy actively construct and negotiate interdependent and *connected* lives. I extend these ideas by exploring how sex workers and their clients engage in economic and intimate exchanges that vary according to these sectors of sex work.

How does Zelizer (2005) define intimacy and economic activity? Intimacy refers to "the transfer of personal information and wide-ranging, long-term relations which connect and overlap" between people (Zelizer 2005, p. 16). Intimate relations vary over time along a continuum and as people exchange different degrees of physical, informational, and emotional closeness with each other. Economic transactions, in contrast, go beyond the mere use of money. People may use gifts, different forms of compensation, or entitlements as payment, corresponding to the way they define their relationships with one another. They use varied symbols, rituals, practices, and distinguishable forms of money to mark distinct social relations (Zelizer 2004).

Integrating Bourdieu's theories of capital and Zelizer's concept of intimate relations, I argue that sex workers and their clients engage in three types of relationships with varying degrees of intimacy, capital, and duration (see Table 1 below).

Sexual exchanges are swift encounters between clients and sex workers that involve direct sex-for-money exchanges and happen almost entirely in the low-end sector. Although interactions between sex workers and clients are sexually intimate, they are not personal. That is, men and women do not build emotional ties with one another. *Relational exchanges*, which take

Table 1. Economic, Relational, and Intimate Exchanges

	Relations	Capital at Stake	Duration
Low-end	Sexual exchange (only sex and money are exchanged)	Economic capital: poor rural and urban women Body capital: lack of access to plastic surgery Cultural capital: lack of cultural and language skills	Short one-time interaction
Mid-tier	Relational Exchange (sex, gifts, and money are exchanged)	Economic capital: poor urban women Body capital: plastic surgery, hair, clothing, etc. Cultural capital: ability to speak English and navigate in foreign spaces	Short-term and long-term remittance relationships that often develop into boyfriend–girlfriend or husband–wife relations
High-end	Intimate exchange (sex, gifts, money, and intimacy are exchanged)	Economic capital: college- or trade-school-educated urban women from wealthy families Body capital: higher-end plastic surgeries, spas, designer clothing Cultural capital: Ability to display comfort in navigating high-end hotels, bars, and restaurants	Short-term intimate relationships where marriage and migration are not the end goal

Note: These typologies are ideal types specific to Ho Chi Minh City’s sex industry.

place primarily in the mid-tier sector, involve a complex set of intimate and economic arrangements, the exchange of bodily and cultural capitals, as well as short-term client–worker interactions that sometimes develop into long-term boyfriend–girlfriend relationships. *Intimate exchanges*, which occur mostly in the high-end sector, also involve a complex set of economic and intimate arrangements and the deployment of economic, cultural, and bodily capitals. However, relations between sex workers and clients in the high-end sector are short-term relationships that last only for the duration of the client’s visit and rarely develop into long-term remittance relationships.

Research Methods

With the approval of Stanford University's board of human subjects in 2006 and the University of California, Berkeley's board of human subjects in 2007, I carried out seven months of ethnographic field research in three intervals between June 2006 and August 2007 in HCMC. The board of human subjects at Stanford and UC Berkeley required verbal consent from the participants in my study in order to protect both workers' and clients' identities. I conducted participant observation in local bars, cafés, sex workers' homes, malls, restaurants, and on the streets. All of the sex workers I studied were women over the age of eighteen who *chose* to enter sex work as independent agents. None of my participants were trafficked or forced into prostitution. Although all of the sex workers in my project disguised their labor in barbershops or bars, or by framing their relations with clients as boyfriend–girlfriend relationships, all of the women in this study referred themselves as “*gai di khach*” (girls who accompany customers) at some point in their conversations with me. The women never explicitly refer to themselves as “*gai ma dam*” (prostitutes or sex workers). They referred to themselves as “*gai di khach*” (girls who accompany customers) because sex work is illegal in Vietnam.

I focused on three sectors of HCMC's sex industry: those catering to poor local Vietnamese men, to white backpackers, and to overseas Vietnamese (*Viet Kieu*) men. I chose these sectors because together they represent a large portion of the sex work industry in HCMC and because the relations between clients and sex workers in these sectors are largely public and therefore easier to observe. I later returned to Vietnam for fifteen months between 2009 and 2010 to examine sex work relationships within private spaces and enclosed karaoke bars that cater to wealthy Vietnamese entrepreneurs and Asian businessmen. Here I focus on the sectors that are more publicly visible because I did not have access to enclosed spaces during 2006–2007.

Initially, I conducted a total of thirteen formal interviews, with seven clients and six sex workers. However, interviewing methods were ultimately ineffective for several reasons. Sex workers generally, and understandably, refused to sit down for a formal interview but they were receptive to me following them in their daily lives more informally. Moreover, many of the men and women in my study were not always completely truthful about their motivations for entering sex work or the nature of their relationships. Women in the high-end sector, for example, often claimed that they entered into sex work because of poverty, but as I followed them to their homes and into shopping centers, I quickly learned that they came from fairly well-to-do families

by local and global standards. Lastly, and most importantly, participant observation allowed me to take careful notes on *interactions* that took place between clients and sex workers, enabling me to examine the complexities of their *relationships*.

My research began with time spent in local bars and on the streets to meet and develop rapport with various sex workers, clients, and bar owners before asking the women to participate in my project. The second phase of the research process involved intensive participant observation and informal interviews with individual sex workers who agreed to participate in the project. Being an overseas Vietnamese woman helped me gain access to female sex workers because many of them suspected local Vietnamese men who asked them questions of being undercover police. Although all of the women knew that I was a researcher from the United States who would eventually write about their lives, this was not important to them. They cared more about my family history and my life overseas, wanting to situate me in their mental universe.

In my attempt to expand the literature on sex work empirically, I also incorporated male clients into my analysis. All of the clients knew that I was a researcher from the United States. Overseas white backpackers and *Viet Kieu* clients in my study were much more open with me than local Vietnamese men. White backpackers and *Viet Kieu* could converse with me in English and relate to me about the context of their lives overseas and the dynamics of their relations in HCMC. I befriended two local motorbike-taxi drivers who introduced me to the low-end sector that catered to local Vietnamese men. Cuong and Loc taught me how to approach men and women in this sector. They also helped ease me into conversations with local male clients. Their assistance was crucial in my understanding of the spatial and structural differences between the local sector and the sectors that cater to overseas male clients.

During my seven months of fieldwork, I spent three days conducting field research and three days writing field notes per week. On a typical research day, I spent the mornings in the barbershops that double as brothels where women in the low-end sector work, afternoons having lunch or coffee and shopping with clients and sex workers, and evenings in bars with mid-tier and high-end sex workers. I spoke mostly in Vietnamese with clients and sex workers in the low-end sector and a mixture of English and Vietnamese with men and women in the mid-tier and high-end sectors. However, I wrote all of my field notes in English, while highlighting key phrases in Vietnamese. I used pseudonyms in my field notes to ensure confidentiality in the event that local authorities asked to look through my computer. This paper is based on my extensive observations and informal interviews with fifty-four sex

workers and twenty-six clients. I studied twelve workers and four clients in low-end sector, thirty-one workers and fifteen clients in the mid-tier sector, and eleven workers and seven clients in the high-end sector. For analytical depth, I present three different case studies that broadly exemplify the sexual, relational, and intimate relationships between clients and sex workers in these three sectors of HCMC's sex industry.

The Low-End Sector: "Touching Them Makes Me Want To Throw Up!"

Sex workers who catered to local Vietnamese men generally engaged in *sexual exchanges* that involved direct sex-for-money transactions. These women worked in brothels disguised as barbershops in HCMC's Districts Ten and Four, the Binh Thanh district, and the area surrounding the Tan Son Nhat Airport. These districts were roughly forty-five minutes from District One, which is the main business district where tourists tend to concentrate. All sex workers worked during the day, from ten in the morning until about six in the evening.

This schedule disguised their work from local officials, extended family members, and friends. All twelve women in this sector were single mothers between the ages of twenty-nine and sixty who had no more than a grade school education. They were poor, urban women or rural migrants who once worked in the service or manufacturing sectors before entering sex work. Sex workers in this sector provided men with a variety of *sexual labors* (Boris, Gilmore, and Parrenas 2010), offering a quick orgasm within a twenty-minute interaction. Men typically paid three U.S. dollars for this service, and clients and sex workers rarely negotiated these prices. On average, women earned hundred dollars per month, which was forty to fifty dollars more than they would earn working in local restaurants, legitimate barbershops, or as house cleaners.

The older sex workers, aged between forty-five and sixty, said that they resorted to sex work because their former employers preferred to hire younger women. Phuong, a sixty-year-old woman, had worked in the shrimp industry for a wage of roughly fifty dollars per month. She entered the sex industry after her employer fired her for being too old. The women in this sector worked on the margins of HCMC's city center and did not have the economic resources to enter higher-paying sectors. They could not afford the clothing, make-up, or plastic surgery required of women who worked as disguised bartenders in the mid-tier and high-end sectors, nor could they pay for their own drinks in the bars where high-end women spent time. I asked Dung, a

thirty-four-year-old single mother of two, why she worked for such low pay and why she did not try to find work in District One, the business district, where she could capitalize on the flow of men with overseas money. She said very bluntly:

I am old. I have a kid. I don't look pretty. I don't speak English or even know how to get to those places [that cater to foreign men]. I don't have the clothes or money to walk around in those kinds of bars so I could never work there. I could never compete with those women. Money is never easy to get from white men.¹

In addition to the lack of money to move in and out of foreign spaces, these women did not have the cultural or linguistic skills that would allow them to interact with foreign men. As Dung states above, her inability to speak English and communicate with white men prevented her from entering higher-paying sectors. Moreover, although District One was only a thirty- to forty-minute motorbike ride from the neighborhoods where they worked, many of the women in the low-end sector had never been there. They did not know how to get there and could not afford the fare into the city center (two dollars). Even if they could afford to spend a day in HCMC's District One, many women did not know where to go or what to do there.

At the beginning of my research, I naively invited some of these women to have lunch or dinner in District One. I quickly realized that they felt extremely uncomfortable, if not illegitimate, in these spaces. Truc, for example, said:

I do not go into those restaurants that mostly foreigners go into because I am so afraid that I will sit down, look at the prices on the menu, and panic because I couldn't even afford the cheapest thing there. If I turned around and walked out everyone would laugh at me.

In sum, sex workers' lack of economic and cultural resources placed them in a sector of sex work where they engaged in relations of subordination with poor local men.

In addition to the lack of economic resources and cultural capital that limited them, the women in the low-end sector did not have the *body capital* to participate in mid-tier or high-end sectors. As Mai, a woman from the Mekong Delta who worked in one of these barbershops, stated, "I am in my mid-thirties, I have a child, and I am not good looking. . . . So I don't have a choice but to do this." While women who catered to foreign men reinvested

a significant portion of their earnings into their appearance by purchasing cosmetic surgery, clothing, accessories, and make-up, the women in the low-end sector spent all of their earnings on necessities like housing, food, and schooling for their children. As such, the women in the low-end sector typically wore the same plain house-like clothing in both their homes and workplaces. They did not dress up for work or wear any clothing that marked them in an explicitly sexual way. In fact, these women's bodies resembled the bodies of poor homemakers, sisters, or mothers. They were women who shared similar class dispositions with poor local men.

Although they were not forced into sex work, many entered and continued to do this work as a means to escape poverty. The women in the low-end sector were among the most vulnerable and the most exploited. These women did not have much choice in terms of which clients they would service. In most cases, they served any client, because they needed the money. Mai said:

What we do is dirty. Old dirty men come in here and they are rough with my body. They don't care about me because to them I am just a worker. When I first started working, I would throw up after each client, but now I am used to it.

Many of these women serviced poor local men whose bodies sometimes made the women vomit. If hand jobs and oral sex did not make the client reach orgasm, the women would proceed to intercourse as a last resort. Nine of the twelve women told me that they vomited when they first started working after feeling the men's semen in their mouths or their hands because they were disgusted by the men's bodies. As Tram explained to me, "[when] they are old you have to work harder to get them to 'go' . . . [or] they [truck drivers] have been driving for a long time without taking a shower so they smell." Vomiting was a physical reaction to being disgusted with men's bodies in general, and especially to older men's bodies who were not clean. All of them told me that they occasionally cried to each other because they were engaged in the kind of work that, as Tram stated, "only women at the bottom of society do."

Condoms cost roughly forty cents each, a price that low-end sector sex workers considered very expensive. Therefore, they first tried to make the men ejaculate through means other than intercourse. Men sometimes provided the women with condoms. However, if condoms were not available, women engaged in intercourse with the men without using protection. Sex workers in this sector rarely carried condoms, as Nguyet explained to me:

I do not carry condoms because if the police come in here and inspect my shop and they find condoms they can arrest me for being a prostitute. I try to make a man “go” with my hands or my mouth first. If I cannot get them to “go” after that then I will have sex with him. . . . Then I will go to the pharmacy to buy a pill to take right after to make sure I do not get pregnant.

When I asked male clients about condom use, some men said that they always provided the woman with a condom, because they feared getting sick.

Male clients in the local sector were the hardest for me to engage in conversation. I often relied on the motorbike taxi drivers to help initiate these conversations, often over coffee or cigarettes as clients waited for service. Conversations with these men, and with the sex workers they visited, often focused on what led them to these sexual service locations.

The following vignette illustrates the logic of “responsibility” that guided interactions between sex workers and their clients in the low-end sector. One afternoon, while I was sitting with women in the Binh Thanh District at a local café that doubled as a sex shop, I met a client named Khoa, a man in his midforties. Over the course of about an hour, I learned that Khoa worked for a local construction company where he earned roughly hundred dollars per month. He was married and had a one-year-old son who lived with his wife in Ca Mau village, where relatives helped her raise their child. When I asked Khoa what brought him to these establishments, he replied:

Look, you probably think all men are doing dirty things, but you brought yourself here, so if you want to know, I’ll just tell you straight, and if it makes you uncomfortable, then it’s your fault for wasting your time in these places. My wife is in the village with my kid, and I am here in the city alone. I need to take care of certain things, and either I could leave her for another woman, or come here while I wait for her to come back.

I asked him, “Does your wife know you come here?” He said, “She’s too innocent. She doesn’t know about these places.” We sat in silence for a while, and then I asked Loc if men like Khoa ever go to women working in District One. Loc turned to me and said, “He can’t afford them.” Khoa then turned and said, “I do not have a lot of money. Those women would never waste their time with a man like me. Why would they when the white men can give them more?”

Poor local sex workers provided sexual services to poor local men. Women like Dung and Mai and men like Khoa were located so far from the city center that they could not afford the cost of transportation into District One, where the mid-tier and high-end sectors dominated. Moreover, for local men and women, sex often occurred within the confines of these barbershops or cafés. Very rarely did clients and sex workers conduct sex work in other spaces.

Low-end sex workers' inability to afford motorbike rides into the city center or the cost of food and drinks in District One, where mid-tier and high-end workers operate, positioned them in relations of subordination with men like Khoa, wherein women like Ha provided sexual services that oftentimes made them vomit. These women had the least control over their work. Because there were so few clients who came in on any given day, women in the low-end sector could rarely refuse service to clients. Instead, they strategized to finish their clients off as quickly as possible to avoid vaginal sex. Similarly, clients in this sector minimized interactions with the women, as I often witnessed men come and go relatively quickly. On the occasions that men did stay to drink coffee or smoke, they rarely conversed with the women. Although some women had a set of regular clients, these clients were purchasing a product—an orgasm—and nothing more. Sex workers and clients engaged in direct sex-for-money exchanges where economic and intimate relationships were not closely intertwined.

Mid-Tier Sector: “She’s a Smart Woman Who Is Just Trapped in a Poor Country”

The “backpacker” area in HCMC is well known as the central location for people traveling on a budget. Lining the streets are souvenir shops, mini-hotels, tourist agencies, restaurants, cafés, and bars catering to foreigners. The majority of shopkeepers in this area speak some English. I conducted participant observation in seven of the roughly twenty-five bars located in this area. The clients I met in this sector ranged in age from twenty-two to sixty-five, and all were white Americans, Europeans, or Australians. White men in the mid-tier sector viewed themselves as savvy travelers who were able to take advantage of a Third-World *sexscape* (Brennan 2004). They tended to stay in a host of mini-hotels, searching for the “authentic” Vietnamese experience. For example, Adam, a thirty-five year old man from Houston, Texas, remarked:

I want to see the real Vietnam, not the part of Vietnam that caters to tourists. I want to eat local food, talk with local people, and see how

people here really live. Most families here live off of one or two hundred dollars a month. I did not come here to hang out in places that serve only Western food and see white people.

As a result, mid-tier sex workers who cater to men like Adam provided their clients with more than just sex. They served as tour guides and cultural brokers, providing men with an “authentic” Third-World experience.

Sex workers in this sector exploited the transnational sex market by developing relations with overseas men and engaging in what Smith and Guarnizo (1998) refer to as practices of “transnationalism from below.” While the women in this sector were certainly involved in direct sex-for-money exchanges, they also made use of their cultural capital to feign love and provide their clients with a variety of other services. The following account illustrates how transnationally savvy sex workers create and sustain intimate relations through their English-language skills and their bodies.

I met Linh in June 2006 and continued to maintain ties with her through August 2007. Linh was working in Pink Star, a bar located in the backpacker area of District One. At 5 foot 6 inches, Linh was taller than most Vietnamese women and had a slender body and long legs. She always wore tight pink and black dresses that accentuated her thin legs. Like many of the women working in this sector, Linh invested more than a thousand dollars in a variety of body modifications: breast implants, eyebrow tattoos, Botox injections in her forehead, and liposuction to flatten her stomach. While nearly all of the women in the low-end sector were rural migrants, women like Linh tended to come from urban families that were poor by city standards, but possessed more economic resources than the families of women in the lower-end sector. They were aware of places that catered to overseas white men looking for an authentic Vietnamese experience, and all of them could speak some English. All of these women worked in local bars disguised as bartenders. However, they did not receive a wage for bartending, instead earning money from tips and from their sexual liaisons with their clients. Many of these women learned English by talking to overseas men in the bars, and the more ambitious ones spent their earnings on formal English-language classes. Investing in her body and in English-language skills enabled Linh to initiate and establish ties with white men with economic resources from developed nations.

On one evening, a client named Jeff, a man in his midfifties from New York, walked in and sat down in Pink Star. Jeff was dressed in khaki shorts, a short-sleeve button-up shirt, and flip-flop sandals. He was sweating, so Linh walked over with a wet towel and wiped down his face, something she frequently did for men to demonstrate her care for them. The two sat and made

small talk, despite Linh's limited English skills. They exchanged typical questions including, "Where are you from?" "How long are you here for?" "What do you do?" "How old are you?" "Where does your family live?" After five drinks, Linh moved in, nudged him, and said, "You take me home with you." He smiled and said, "Okay." After which she said, "You pay me hundred dollars?" He laughed and said, "Too much . . . I pay you fifty." They smiled silently at each other for several minutes before she said, "Okay, sixty." They got up and left.

The next morning, Linh called and asked me to go with her and her daughter to a local amusement park. After several hours of walking through the park, we sat down to eat while her daughter took a short nap. During this time, Linh told me that she used her employment at the bar to meet clients from overseas. With clients she knew were in Vietnam for a short period, she was direct and asked if they wanted to go with her for fifty to seventy dollars a night. However, with clients who visited Vietnam for an extended time, she engaged in *relational exchanges* in an attempt to develop long-term relationships that sometimes turned into complicated boyfriend-girlfriend relations. Nearly all of the women in this sector had multiple "boyfriends." When I asked her if she loved any of the men she dated, she said:

When I first started working, I was young and not so smart. I would fall in love easily and then get hurt when things did not work out. Now, I don't let myself fall in love. I think I can grow to love the man who takes the best care of me in Vietnam or some other country. I want to change my life first and fall in love second.

In both long-term and short-term relations, Linh always attempted to develop remittance relationships after the men left Vietnam. She also dated multiple men as a strategy to migrate abroad: as she reasoned, if one man was unwilling to help her migrate, then she had other men who might take her.

After leaving the amusement park, Linh asked me to translate the first of what turned into more than hundred e-mails between her and James, a sixty-seven-year-old Australian man who owned a small business before retiring. She met James in December 2005 at Pink Star while he was on a holiday in Vietnam. Their relationship began with long-distance cellular phone text messages that became too costly, so she switched to e-mail. In the e-mails I translated for her between June 2006 and March 2007, she developed multiple crisis scenarios. For example, she told stories about her allegedly dying father, the debts she needed to pay to avoid death threats from the mafia, the possible loss of her house, and her desire to open a café so that she could

eventually become economically self-sufficient. She wanted to build an emotional relationship with James so that he would sympathize with her “struggles” and send her money. James deposited several chunks of money ranging from five hundred to five thousand dollars in her bank account to help her through these crises, in addition to monthly remittances of three hundred dollars a month to pay for English lessons and beauty school. Through these transactions, by August 2006, she received a monthly remittance of about seven hundred dollars from three overseas men, two from Australia and one from the United States. Linh convinced all three men that each was the only man in her life. While Linh did take English lessons, she had several men paying for the same set of classes, which provided her with extra money to pay for plastic surgery or purchase nicer clothing and fancier phones. Women like Linh capitalized on global linkages by creating and maintaining a series of fictitious stories about their lives in HCMC.

I first met James that day through Yahoo Messenger, an Internet chat system. Linh introduced me to him as someone studying transnational relationships. To my surprise, James took an interest in my project, and he and I went on to communicate via e-mail, Internet chat, and postal mail more than sixty times between July 2006 and August 2007. In August 2007, I met James in person at a local café in District One. The sixty-seven-year-old Australian decided that he was going to spend the rest of his life traveling as a backpacker on a budget.

In several conversations that I had with James, he repeatedly described Linh in these terms:

Linh is an honest person; she is a strong woman with a lot of integrity. You know she only went to school through sixth grade, but she can speak English fairly well. We talk about many things. I love Linh a lot and I want what is best for her. She is a smart and intelligent woman who is just living in a poor country where there aren't very many opportunities. I want to help her start her own small business in Vietnam, you know, so that she can be self-sufficient and not have to work in a bar.

In his e-mails to me, James did not speak of a sex-for-money exchange. Instead, he framed his relationship with Linh as one based on true love. James stated that he was in love with Linh, and that he believed she was truly in love with him. He expressed strong convictions that he was going to be the man who would “save” her from her life as a bar girl. The moral characteristics (Lamont 1992) of honesty, hard work, and personal integrity that James

attributed to Linh motivated him to send her large sums of money without questioning her stories of need. He sympathized with her because, as he said, “as a first-world man with so much privilege, I felt that it was important to help.”

Client–sex worker relationships in the mid-tier sector occurred in multiple sites, including bars, cafés, restaurants, homes, hotel rooms, and over the Internet. These relations ranged from short-term sex-for-money exchanges to long-term relationships. As such, clients and sex workers engage in a form of “relational work” (Zelizer 2005) as both parties share personal stories (whether true or false) with each other. At the beginning of most encounters between these sex workers and clients, there is a clear “price” for the services of sex work. However, as their relationships develop, intimate caring and sexual labors become complexly intertwined with economic relations. As relations between men and women transformed from client–worker relationships to boyfriend–girlfriend relationships, one way that sex workers expressed care for their boyfriends was by discontinuing condom use. Moreover, it became less clear how men should compensate women or which services the men thought deserved economic compensation. I watched James, for example, purchase clothing and jewelry for Linh in local shops. However, the vast majority of the material support that he gave her was in the form of cash transfers, ostensibly to alleviate her life of poverty.

In August 2009, I met with Linh in Ho Chi Minh City to see how her life had changed. Linh and James got married in 2007, and after a year and a half, she was finally granted a visa to migrate to Australia. At her farewell party, I asked, “Do you love him?” She replied, mixing Vietnamese with the English that she often practiced with me to prepare for her move abroad:

We go through a lot together to get visa and he work so hard for it.
Now I love him, yes. *Trong doi nay hen sui thoi, em cam thay rat may man.* (In life it is all about luck, I feel really lucky.)

While most of the men and women in my study at least attempted to maintain long-distance ties with each other as boyfriends and girlfriends, only a handful were able to maintain these relations across distance, time, and the multiple state barriers inhibiting migration. As of June 2009, only five of the thirty-one women I studied secured visas to migrate via marriage. Sixteen others continued working in different bars or returned to their villages to marry local men. I lost touch with the other ten. However, the relationship between Linh and James illuminates how sex workers in HCMC’s middle tier self-consciously traverse the border between the (economic) transactional

and the intimate spheres. Indeed, it is global socioeconomic inequality itself—and moral discourses about it—that make this imagined border porous. Linh and James began their relationship as worker and client, and while Linh held on to multiple men until she was able to secure her visa to migrate, she eventually fell in love with James. Vietnam’s status as a poor country allowed Linh, and other women in the same position, to represent themselves as victims of global poverty, generating sympathy and regular, large remittances from several men like James. Linh’s ability to speak English, navigate foreign spaces, act as a personal tour guide, and induce feelings of love and sympathy in her clients made this relationship possible. Her simultaneous involvement with multiple men across transnational social fields also allowed her to choose whom she would serve, and determine the country to which she would eventually emigrate. Likewise, James drew on moral discourses about global inequality to explain why Linh entered sex work. James and other foreign men like him also made use of the expanded sexual and relational possibilities in a developing country like Vietnam, where they knew their money would both buy more sex and go further to support women they deemed deserving. The stories of men and women like Linh and James demonstrate how seemingly powerless women can exploit global and local systems of oppression by capitalizing on transnational linkages and engaging in relational sex with the hope of migrating to a country with better opportunities, and if they are “lucky,” maybe even falling in love.

High-End Sector: “She’s Not a Low-Class Dirty Girl”

Workers and clients in the high end of HCMC sex work engaged in *intimate exchanges*, blurring the boundaries between economic and intimate relations even further than those in the middle tier. The high-end sector was by far most difficult for me to access because women’s status as sex workers was not readily apparent. The women hung out in high-end bars and lounges as bar-goers rather than as bar employees. Moreover, the relations between clients and sex workers often resembled boyfriend–girlfriend relations, making it difficult for me to differentiate between women who were working and those who were “just hanging out.” I met many middle-class women in high-end bars who were not sex workers. However, because I repeatedly showed up at these bars alone, many of the women thought that I was a working girl and would invite me to come have a drink with them. Over time, however, I developed a rapport with various women in the bars and talked with them

about my research topic. Some eventually opened up to me about their experiences as high-end sex workers.

Clients in the high-end sector engaged in relationships with sex workers who possessed levels of economic and cultural capital similar to them. These men were not looking for poor women whom they could save. Instead, they sought young, desirable women with options. Unlike the women in the mid-tier sector, the women who catered to wealthy *Viet Kieu* (overseas Vietnamese) did not come from poverty. In fact, many of them came from relatively wealthy families who owned small businesses and had the social networks and resources to comfortably navigate some of HCMC's most expensive establishments. Although women in the high-end sector often received money from their clients, sex workers and clients both framed the transfer of money as a *gift*, never as a form of *payment*, and most definitely not as a way to help save women from poverty.

In the next account, I illustrate the various forms of economic, cultural, and bodily resources that women in this sector possess. I met Ngoc, a tall, slender twenty-four-year-old woman, in May 2007 inside Dragonfly, one of HCMC's most expensive bars. A single drink cost approximately seven dollars. A bottle of Rémy Martin, a French cognac favored by Vietnamese patrons, cost between a hundred and five hundred dollars. One evening, I arrived at the bar around 9:00 p.m., which was considered early. Ngoc and I were the only two women in the bar, both of us sitting alone at different tables. After about half an hour I walked over and introduced myself. We sat and chatted over drinks and cigarettes. Over the course of the summer, I spent several nights following her around the city. Ngoc's family owned a small electronics store in District One. She just started a job at Star Capital, an investment company whose global headquarters was based in the United States. She made roughly six hundred dollars per month working as an assistant to an account manager. Like Ngoc, most of the women that I studied in this sector had a college or university degree. Along with a well-respected job, and a salary that was relatively high by HCMC standards, Ngoc's parents supplemented her income.

Ngoc always dressed in trendy clothing, owned several different designer handbags, and owned multiple cell phones. While spending a day in a local spa together, Ngoc described to me the various surgeries that she underwent to enhance her body. She showed me her breast implants, saying [in Vietnamese]:

Don't these look good to you? I got them done in Thailand by a doctor who specializes in breast implants for transsexuals: you know, men

who want to be women. The doctor told me to stay with a C [size] cup because they would look more natural and my nipples would look better. You don't want to get those cheap implants like a lot of girls in Vietnam get [because] they look fake.

In addition to the breast implants, at the age of twenty-four Ngoc had nose surgery to create a nose bridge, double eye-lid surgery, liposuction from her thighs and stomach, and Botox injections in her forehead. With the exception of the Botox, she completed all of these procedures in Thailand—a mark of distinction that differentiated her from local women who could only afford surgery in Vietnam. These cosmetic alterations cost her more than twelve thousand dollars in total. Ngoc also had regular appointments at a local spa, where she got a massage and a facial once a week. She spent several hours in local beauty salons getting her hair and make-up done prior to going out at night. For Ngoc, having plastic surgery, wearing designer clothing, spending days in spas, and getting her hair and nails done at beauty salons distinguished her from poorer Vietnamese women who catered to white men.

Ngoc and I also spent several nights out in cafés, restaurants, and bars where she introduced me to many of her friends, who were local bar and restaurant owners. These men and women often referred clients to Ngoc. On our outings together, rich local men would often proposition Ngoc. She always declined because, as she said, “They would automatically know that I was working, and if something bad happened, everyone would know I was working.” I asked her, “What about Western guys?” She said, “Those are for the village girls who want to migrate. If I go with a white guy, everyone will know I'm a working girl.” In addition to the rich local Vietnamese clients and white businessmen, she also turned down several *Viet Kieu* men. When I asked why she turned down so many clients when she had not been with anyone for nearly two weeks, she explained:

You have to know how to pick out men. Many *Viet Kieu* men come to Vietnam and they show off, but they are actually poor men. You can tell the difference between rich and poor men by the kind of clothes they wear, their watches, and the kinds of places where they hang out. Poorer *Viet Kieu* men will eat at places that don't cost much, but men with money, know about good restaurants.

While overseas *Viet Kieu* men certainly leverage the power of the dollar to consume more in Vietnam than they could in the United States, Ngoc used the consumption patterns of male clients to distinguish richer *Viet Kieu* men

from working-class *Viet Kieu* men. Women like Ngoc avoided men whom they thought were “working-class *Viet Kieu*” because these women had no desire to develop relationships that would result in marriage and migration. As Ngoc said:

I love Vietnam and I am comfortable here. I don't want to live anywhere else. In Vietnam, when you have money, you can afford everything. I have aunts and uncles in America, and you know in America people have to clean their own houses, buy their own food, and cook it themselves. I speak English, but I know that I could never get a job overseas that will pay me enough to live like this. Life here is just so much easier if you have money. If my family was poor, I think I would want to marry someone who will take me to the U.S., so that I could live a better life. I am not poor. Why would I give up this life?

Ngoc's ability to live a high-end lifestyle year-round kept her in short-term, noncommittal relationships with several *Viet Kieu* men, who spent large sums of money on her while they were in Vietnam. She was aware that immigrants from Vietnam to first-world countries rarely find coveted jobs in the primary labor market, often ending up with low-status, low-paying jobs instead (Thai 2008). She had no desire to marry and migrate abroad, because the possibility of downward mobility was too great. On another occasion, I asked Ngoc, “If you have the money already, and you don't want to live in the U.S., why do you spend your time with these men?” She responded [in English]:

I am twenty-six years old and I don't want to settle down yet. Marriage here is not easy. I see so many husbands cheat on their wives with younger, more attractive women and I want to have fun for as long as I can. It's temporary: these men will eventually go back home, and it is nice to be spoiled with nice gifts and extra money. I have fun doing it. I'm young, so why not, right? I can't do this when I'm in my thirties, so that's when I'll get married.

Ngoc's social, cultural, economic, and physical advantages allowed her to move with ease in spaces where high-end *Viet Kieu* men spent their time and money. Her body capital, economic resources, and ability to convey a high-class image enabled her to exert power over her clients. In a conversation about her two boyfriends, she said to me:

I have to think fast on my feet sometimes. There are times when I have too many men to juggle. I do not want them to think that I go with everybody, so sometimes I lie and tell them that I am on a business trip in Hanoi, I am busy with the anniversary of the death of someone in my family, or I have too much work. I get more money when I can manage more relationships but it's like I have to *chay show* (run around from one client to the next in the same night).

Women like Ngoc carefully managed their relationships with their clients by conveying the image that they were busy, important, and highly sought after. The power that women were able to exert over their clients enabled them to command more attention and choose their clients carefully. Moreover, because Ngoc did not *need* the money she received from clients, she could be creative in her ways of asking men for more expensive gifts. This also allowed her to strategize how to procure money from her clients. The women in this sector never explicitly asked for money like the women in the low-end and mid-tier sectors did. Instead, they would gently say that they wanted money to shop or buy something new. If clients failed to acquiesce, sex workers would stop returning phone calls or responding to the clients' text messages. I watched several relationships between men and women dissolve as clients failed to compensate their women properly.

In June 2007, Ngoc introduced me to Tuan, a *Viet Kieu* from France who had worked as an orthodontist for fifteen years in France before returning to Vietnam to open a practice. During one of four informal interviews with Tuan over coffee, he remarked:

I am thirty-nine, almost forty years old, and I am not ready to settle down with anyone, but I don't want to spend my days alone either. This is a fun city to go out in at night. I don't want to be tied down, so I spend my time with girls who are sort of working. I mean, I know that I have to buy her things and spend money on her. Otherwise, she won't waste her time with me. I can't be with just any girl, either. I need to be with someone who is young and beautiful. When you go out in Vietnam, people see you. If you have money, you can't have a cheap girl.

Viet Kieu men looked for intimate relationships with local women that involved more than just sex. These men purchased the services of women whose skills and looks distinguished them from the lower-class sex workers who accompanied white men. Men like Tuan wanted to be around women

who helped them display their masculinity in very public places (Allison 1994). High-end sex workers were better than women in other tiers at disguising the nature of their relationships as boyfriend–girlfriend relations rather than client–worker relations, because they did not work as disguised bartenders. Instead, they could afford to pay for drinks and services in the high-end bars and cafés that cater to foreigners. High-end men like Tuan spent large sums of money on women like Ngoc because, as he said [in English]:

Saigon is a small city. In Paris, you know I could walk into a bar and drop over a thousand dollars and no one would notice. In France, rich people hide their money. Here in Saigon, it's different. When I walk into a bar, the ten men at the door to greet me will walk me to my table. When I spend five hundred dollars on a good bottle of Rémy [Martin], people notice it. The same happens with girls. When I am with a young pretty woman who other men want, I don't mind spending money on her for expensive things. She is not a low-class dirty girl who is going to waste her time. Besides, when other people see her with an expensive phone or handbag, it makes me look good.

Moreover, while relations of intimacy certainly involved sex in private spaces, the relationships took place in very public places like local bars, cafés, restaurants, hotels, and on the streets. The multiple sites of intimate labors went hand in hand with the multiple forms of compensation. These clients often spent large sums of money on expensive cellular phones, motorbikes, and designer handbags and clothing for the sex workers, all of which served as markers of distinction. The clients were often willing to spend liberally on gifts for their women because—as Thanh, a computer technician from Paris, explained—“I don't go to those low-class dirty girls, you know? These girls are young and pretty, and other men want them. You know they are smart, they speak English, and they come from good families.” In short, the purchase of intimacy from high-end sex workers involved the deployment of economic, cultural, and bodily capital. In return, high-end clients compensated women with expensive gifts and cash. However, the cash was always framed as a gift and not, as in the middle and lower sectors, a way of fulfilling a need.

Viet Kieu men also sought relations with local women who embodied their ideals of Vietnamese femininity. When I asked Tuan why he preferred local Vietnamese women to *Viet Kieu* women, he said:

The women whom I dated back in France all had careers. One was a lawyer. [She] loved me a lot, but she was too independent, and as a man, I just wanted to feel like I could protect her. I didn't feel that way. I didn't feel like a man who could take care of her, because she was just too independent.

As Tuan stated, Vietnamese women could make men like him feel good because, unlike women in the West, they knew how to foreground their dependence on men and shunt their autonomy into the background in a way that made men feel important.

Viet Kieu men, unlike white men, had the linguistic and cultural resources to participate in the high-end sector. Whereas in the low-end and mid-tier sectors clients and sex workers talked more directly and explicitly about forms of payment, relations between men and women in the high-end sector often involved more indirect and discreet exchanges. In fact, because so many of the high-end sex workers disguised their labor so skillfully, many of the white men in my study could not figure out how to engage in relations with high-end women. In contrast, *Viet Kieu* men were comfortable participating in the oblique, elaborate *pas de deux* that high-end sex workers expected. This was most evident in moments of rupture, when relationships between clients and sex workers in the high-end sector grew precarious. Clients understood that they needed to compensate the women in some way; otherwise, their relationships would dissolve. As Trung, a thirty-two-year-old *Viet Kieu* from Orange County, California, observed:

I was with this girl. She was hot! When we got together she would ask me for small gifts and what not, so I bought her bebe [an American designer brand] dresses and perfumes. I gave her money to go shopping. You know, stuff like that. I knew I had to give her stuff or she would just go with a richer guy. But then one day, she asked me to buy her a motorbike. I told her that I would buy her an *Attila* [worth two thousand dollars], but she told me that a woman like her could not be seen driving a cheap bike around because people would look at her and judge her. She wanted me to buy her a *Dylan* or an *SH*. Those bikes cost nine thousand dollars. I said no, and that's it—we were over. She stopped answering my phone calls and text messages.

Trung's inability to buy an expensive motorbike for his girlfriend eventually led to the end of his relationship. Without his girlfriend explicitly telling

him that she did not want to waste her time with him, he understood that once the money and gifts fell away, so would the relationship.

In my conversations with high-end sex workers and clients, the physical act of sex served both as a way for sex workers to distinguish themselves as upscale women and to make clients feel more intimately involved. These women often withheld sex from their clients, projecting the image that they were not “easy” girls who would go with just anyone. When they did have sex, the women made the clients believe that they were monogamous partners and could therefore have sex without protection. Most of the clients in my project, however, said that they used protection because they did not want to get a woman pregnant accidentally. As Huy said, “If I accidentally get a woman pregnant, I will have to give her money for a long time, and I do not want any woman to hold that over my head.”

Economic and intimate relations in this sector were closely intertwined, as both clients and sex workers went to great lengths to distinguish themselves as high-end. The consumption practices of high-end women enabled men like Tuan to distinguish themselves from the white men who participated in the mid-tier market. While some white men spent just as much money in their relations with mid-tier sex workers, they justified their consumption practices in different ways. White men engaged in relations with women who “needed” help, while *Viet Kieu* men engaged in relations with women who helped them assert a particular class status in public. This cultural logic of desire (Constable 2003) is embedded not only in a client’s ability to engage in relations with high-end women but also in the sex worker’s ability to distinguish herself from mid-tier and low-end sex workers who do not have her bodily, cultural, social, and symbolic capital. Women like Ngoc are among the most sophisticated workers because they have the money, skill, and looks to mask their work. Clients in the high-end sector pay for intimate relationships characterized by a hidden set of intimate labors that are intertwined with a complex set of economic arrangements. While low-end women provide their clients mainly with sexual services, women in the high-end sector provide their clients with short-term physical, sexual, and emotionally intimate encounters.

Conclusion

In today’s global sex work circuit, men and women from around the world enter into relations with each other across national borders, profoundly changing the social structure of commercial sex. Studies on sex work in the new global economy point to the migratory *survival circuits* (Sassen 2002)

of poor women in Third World economies on the periphery of the global system struggling against debt and trying to escape poverty. By dividing the global economy into two parts, rich nations of the First World and poor nations of the Third World, scholars document how the bifurcated global economy is highly racialized and unequal. Research on global sex work focuses overwhelmingly on the movement of white men from Western nations to developing nations where they can purchase cheap sex from exotic women. In this article I complicate the existing framework of global sex work by analyzing a sex industry in a developing economy where not all women are poor or exploited and where white men do not always command the highest paying sector of sex work.

Turning to Vietnam's emergent international city, I argue that globalization does not create a bifurcated market between the global rich and the local poor. Instead, I argue that we need to look at differences *within* various types of sex work as global processes expand the sex industry creating multiple markets and reproducing class structures similar to those found in other types of occupations. Sex work in today's global economy looks more like an "industry" (Wonders and Michalowski 2001) that is organized and stratified according to workers' differential access to economic, cultural, and bodily resources.

Drawing on Bourdieu's theories of capital and Zelizer's concept of intimate relations, I extend the literature on sex work by paying particular attention to the structural positions of both sex workers and their clients. I demonstrate how some sex workers were able to enter higher-paying sectors of HCMC's sex industry, while others were limited to lower-paying sectors where they had little control over the types of clients they serviced. Contrary to the research of Rosen and Venkatesh (2008), not all of the women in this study sought work in the informal economy because they did not have access to paid employment in the formal economy. Women with money and desirable bodies entered into relations with expatriates like Tuan, while poor local women tended to service men like Khoa.

This article illustrates how men and women capitalized on HCMC's position in the global political economy in different ways. As an emergent international city, HCMC provides marginal men from strong nations with a place to expand their relational possibilities across transnational spaces and serve as economic providers to women from poor nations. At the same time, Western visions of Vietnamese women as struggling mightily to overcome Third World *poverty* allow the mid-tier sex workers to extract regular payments from white patrons in Australia, Europe, and the United States. Ironically, however, it is Vietnam's recent economic *growth* that defines the

dynamics of the high-end sex-work sector. As Vietnam emerges as a “rising-dragon” economy (Hayton 2010), *Viet Kieus* return to Vietnam in droves, chasing not only jobs and investment opportunities but also social status, nostalgia, and the company of sophisticated women. HCMC’s sex industry provides *Viet Kieu* men with public spaces where they can achieve a sense of dignity and actively contest global racial hierarchies through their distinctive patterns of consumption.

From a theoretical and methodological perspective, this is one of the first studies to examine both sides of client–worker relationships. The current literature focuses heavily on the sex worker’s side of the relationship and ignores the diverse motivations of men who purchase sex (Weitzer 2010). Moreover, while interview data allow us to understand individuals’ motivations and interpretations of their relationships, research on sex work benefits from in-depth ethnography that captures dynamic *relationships* between clients and sex workers that are class coded. By bringing the work of Bourdieu (1984) and Zelizer (2005) together, I highlight how structural factors lead to three types of exchanges: *economic*, *relational*, and *intimate*. This article challenges the assumption that sex work occurs only within bounded spheres of strict sex-for-money exchanges. Clients and sex workers in the low-end sector engaged in *economic exchanges* that involved direct sex-for-money exchanges, while men and women in the mid-tier and high-end sectors engaged in *relational* and *intimate exchanges* by creating and sustaining ties to one another. As clients and sex workers negotiate the transactional and intimate spheres of their relationships in Vietnam’s globalizing economy of sex, the purchase of intimacy involves the sale of more than just sex, for a wide range of payments that go beyond money.

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1. All of the conversations that I had with the women in the low-end sector took place in Vietnamese. The quotations are my English translations.

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Bio

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