
Contesting the ‘trafficking and modern slavery’ frame: business and sex work in Jamaica’s tourism industry¹

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What is the issue?

The US Trafficking in Persons Reports and some international NGOs claim that Jamaica has a problem with ‘sex trafficking’ in general and ‘child sex tourism’ in particular. This induces calls for tougher law and law enforcement, and recommendations that tourism businesses should initiate corporate social responsibility actions to support crime prevention and prosecution. Such approaches assume that the problem is one of criminality and, as such, external to the mainstream tourism industry. They disregard the social, economic, legal and political conditions that give rise to vulnerable, precarious labour in tourism employment as well as the informal economy (including teenagers’ participation in commercial sex). They also overlook the rights violations experienced by female and LGBT sex workers at the hands of law enforcers. Moreover, the emphasis on criminality is deflecting the Jamaican government’s attention and resources away from activities that could better secure human and child rights for currently vulnerable populations.

The research evidence

This research project called attention to the role of the state in creating avenues for exploitative labour conditions by criminalising certain activities (e.g. prostitution) and groups of people (such as LGBT), as well as by allowing institutionalised violence towards sex workers by the police and members of the public. It also highlights the importance of considering the underlying socio-economic conditions that act as drivers into sex work.

¹ This note is based on a British Academy-funded project ‘*Revisiting child sex tourism, rethinking business responses*’. The project is part of the British Academy/DFID programme on [Tackling Slavery, Human Trafficking and Child Labour in Modern Business](https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/talking-trafficking-jamaican-sex-workers/). For further information: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/talking-trafficking-jamaican-sex-workers/>.

² Professor Brad Blitz led the British Academy/DFID programme on *Tackling Slavery, Human Trafficking and Child Labour in Modern Business* between 2017 and 2019.

The sex workers, both underage and adults, interviewed as part of this project, attributed economic hardships and the lack of jobs that pay a living wage as more significant factors to entry into sex work than trafficking. As prostitution is criminalised in Jamaica, sex workers of all ages fear reporting rape, robbery and assault to the police. Those who work on the street are at higher risk of violence mainly from customers and from members of the public, and less so from traffickers or 'pimps'. Indeed, most work independently of any 'pimp' or trafficker. The case of male sex workers is also alarming; they are exponentially targeted, as homosexuality is also criminalised in Jamaica. Furthermore, a whole sector may be involved in exploitation, such as in the case of the tourism industry. There seems to be no clear dividing lines between safe 'respectable' tourism jobs and unsafe earning, from sex work in particular. Hotel workers report experiencing coerced sex and sexual harassment from managers, supervisors and tourists alike.

The collected narratives testified to the need of tackling issues discussed under the rubric of modern slavery in a more concerted way by the various actors, governments and businesses, and taking contextualised approaches to combat extreme forms of worker exploitation. While doing so, the underlying social, economic, legal and political conditions that give rise to vulnerable, precarious labour should also be taken into account.

Policy and practice implications

- It is essential to shift the focus of international organisations from trafficking into sex work towards rights violations experienced by female and LGBT sex workers. As this project revealed, entry into sex work is not necessarily coercive.
- The UK should work with other governments to de-criminalise certain types of work and press for a non-criminalised approach to certain sectors (such as sex work) to lessen the vulnerability of specific populations.
- Global companies working in the tourism sector should ensure that adequate information and training on human rights, including in relation to the specific circumstances of sex workers and LGBT persons, are provided to managers and other employees.
- More research is needed to explore the ways in which global supply chains in tourism influence employment practices within locally and internationally owned hotels. Also, more information is needed on how these in turn impact on informal economic activity and the vulnerabilities experienced by informal, as well as formal, sector workers.