

Prostitution in Nepal: Discourses around Gender, Self-Perception, and Sexuality

For decades social and medical sciences have treated women and men exchanging sexual activity for profit, as a “deviant risk group.” The opinion of those involved generally remains ignored. In Nepal cultural traditions, political tensions and international development programmes shaped a transcultural meaning of prostitution excluding the women and men (mostly transgender) concerned. Presenting a picture of the difference between the actor’s self-perception and the imaginary of prostitution may provide information on multilayered social, political and cultural interferences influencing the understanding of prostitution. The theoretical framework employed will draw upon Appadurai’s “scapes” (Appadurai 1996: Modernity at large), “deeply perspectival” constructs resulting from historical, political and linguistic environments, where individual actors embody and play important roles. Fieldwork will be conducted in Nepal, where prostitution has been traditionally addressed in relation to female trafficking. Recently Nepal’s internal movement has risen, fuelled by economic hardship, increased foreign presence and the Maoist conflict. The capital Kathmandu constitutes the epicentre on these trajectories, where new forms of prostitution flourished along with “transaction venues” (“dance bars”, “cabin restaurants” and “massage parlours”) as well a “call-girl” escort elite. My thesis is an attempt to draw an ethnography placing women and men’s narratives at the centre, evaluating their position within dominating discourses. How does their self-perception compare to what is said about them?