

The sex market conducted in the squares: a study of two cities into São Paulo state, Brazil

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In Brazil, prostitution has an ambiguous status: while it is recognized as an occupation it is also seen as an immoral activity against the dominant value system. At the same time that the state guarantees the occupation of prostitutes, it criminalizes other surrounding activities (whose main implication is to earn any advantage to anyone who exercises any activity related to sex) and makes the prostitute a victim or incapable of making independent decisions. This liminal status of prostitution causes people dealing with sex work to establish conduct and internal codes of action to maintain practices and markets, moving between the spheres of legal and illegal, moral and immoral.

The objective of this paper is to understand the operation of the sex market in squares in two cities located in the state of São Paulo, Brazil, based on codes and conduct. The terms codes and conduct are used separately to treat two different things: the codes are knowledge and normativities, while the conduct is the act itself. When the conduct does not correspond with the code conflict may result. Fieldwork was conducted in two squares in different cities. The first square is located in Iris, a small city (about 6,000 inhabitants), which has fishing as a tourist attraction. The second one is located in the commercial center of Girassol, medium-sized city (about 200,000 inhabitants). In this research, it was possible to see differences in ages, prices, clients etc. The sex market in Iris follows the fishing tourism industry, and the numbers of tourists increases during holidays and decreases in the period of spawning fish, therefore, the main clients of the sex market are the tourists. In Girassol there is a different logic. The increase of the sex trade varies over the course of the month, as many of the clients are retirees and traders and the circulation of money is more intense at the beginning of the month, the same logic occurs with the sex market.

In both squares, there were conflicts between the sex workers, but these had different causes. In Iris, the conflict was over the price. When some women decreased their prices clients refused to pay the most expensive rates. This resulted in a conflict between the women, who eventually got together and established a minimum price. In Girassol, by contrast, the cause of conflict was a territorial dispute. Younger women began to occupy the square and to compete for clients. In response to that, older women supported by traders requested police presence in the square to turn away all sex workers. Over time, the older women came again, and new entrants had to adapt to established modes of dress and conduct. In both cases shown in this paper, it was possible to see that prostitution is not the only activity performed in those spaces. In Girassol the prostitution is less perceived by the local residents, but with the fieldwork is evident that it is a space dominated by men. It is different in Iris, where women who do not work as prostitutes also occupy the square, but are in a separate food stall. The moral space ends up being delimited by the food stall. This does not mean that the customers would not approach these women, as for some tourists any woman who is in the square may be considered a prostitute.

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