

GLOBALIZATION, THE ECONOMY OF DESIRE, AND CYBERSEXUAL ACTIVITY AMONG GHANAIAN YOUTH

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Introduction Irrespective of where one stands with regard to the benefits or otherwise of the processes of globalization, there is no denying that they have had a tremendous transformative impact on socioeconomic, cultural, and political dynamics around the world. These transformations have produced qualitative shifts in the way transnational interactions are organized because they reconfigure the spatiotemporal environment within which those interactions occur. Part of the reason for the developments noted above are the technological innovations which allow capital and information to cross physical boundaries with alacrity and to be integrated at an unprecedented level. As we witness what Giddens describes as the emptying of time and space, there have emerged new challenges that are raising widespread concern.¹ O’Grady, for example, contends that:

Two of the key contributors to **globalization** — tourism and the Internet — have provided an unexpected bonus to child abusers, making the opportunity for child abuse more accessible. One could draw a partial causal relationship between the rapid expansion of **globalization** and the growth of child sex trade. Tourism has become the world’s largest industry and its long arms reach out into ever more obscure parts of the planet.²

Hughes argues that, as part of the process of globalization, women and children have become commoditized on the global market for various interests, including organized crime, tourists, and military personnel seeking to satisfy concupiscent desires of one form or another. She opines further that “through financial and technological independence, the sex industry and

the Internet industry have become partners in the global sexual exploitation of women and children.”³ While sexual exploitation is not new, the emergence of new technologies has expanded the coterie of actors involved (both victims and beneficiaries) and the sophistication and geographical scope of such activities. Bernstein also explains the connection between globalization and the commodification of the body, arguing that the capitalist restructuring of the international political economy over the last three decades has manifested itself at the most intimate levels.⁴

Studies from various parts of the world have contributed to these fears, as the Janus-faced nature of the Internet has led many to the conclusion that it is not only a useful resource, but also “a ‘Pandora’s Box’ of criminal opportunity.”⁵ O’Grady argues that:

For all the benefits the Internet provides, it also has its drawbacks, especially providing a vehicle to spread child **pornography** quickly. ... Increasing ties among nations provides the pedophile with the opportunity to hide from the immediate community, to operate within residence, to encounter a global network of like-minded individuals and worst of all, to discover an endless supply of victims.⁶

Some researchers reveal the potential for “cybersexual compulsivity” among Internet users, and the erosion of other areas of youth activity and responsibility that result from social pathologies referred to as technological addictions.⁷ A study by the Pew Internet Research Center shows that 57 percent of parents worry that strangers will contact their children online; close to 60 percent of teens have received a message from a stranger and 50 percent report communicating with someone they have never met.⁸ A national survey of youth, aged 10-17, in the United Kingdom suggests that about a quarter of respondents have had unwanted exposure to sexual material on the Internet.⁹ What makes the situation even more worrisome is the fact that most teens acknowledge that they do not tell their parents when a stranger contacts them online. One said, “I wouldn’t tell about it to my parents, they’d flip out and probably restrict my access to the Internet.”¹⁰

There is growing concern that Internet use in Ghana may reflect Cooper et al.’s study that sexual pursuits, ranging from visiting websites with sexual

themes to intense online sexual interactions, may be the most common use of the Internet.¹¹ In 2002, the Ghana Health Survey revealed the “disturbing ... rate at which kids are watching porno via the Internet. Some of these kids are so smart that they have obtained addresses of websites of porno all over the world and after classes they dash to the nearest Internet café to watch nude pictures on the Internet.”¹² Several respondents (surveyed or interviewed during field research for a larger study on cybersexual activity in Ghana that I am working on) intimated that they use and/or know others who use the Internet for these purposes. One interviewee disclosed thus: “The Internet allows me to entertain myself in ways that will not lead to trouble ... such as STDs or pregnancy.” There is concern among the public that too much engagement with the Internet may lead to addiction to the lascivious world of cybersex, which could significantly distract the youth from more “productive endeavors,” such as school, community service etc. As the World Youth Report 2003 notes:

The impact of the global media on young people is perhaps a metaphor for the broader impact of globalization, in so far as the apparently liberating technologies such as mobile phones and Internet computer games actually alienate young people by creating a world of individualistic hyperstimulation in which more mundane activities such as school simply cannot compete.¹³

It is in the context of the preceding developments that this paper examines cybersexual activity among youth in Ghana. In this study, I adopt the United Nations’ definition of “youth” to mean those between 15 and 24 years of age.¹⁴ With the increase in the number of Internet cafes and subsequent access that youth have to the technology, there is anxiety about the negative moral, social, and psychological effects that it can have. These concerns are predicated on the relatively free access that the youth have to adult websites, the potential risks that they face vis-à-vis solicitations in chatrooms and relationships with cyber penpals, and their vulnerability to sexual marketing on the world wide web. These developments have resulted in a moral panic among the public at large, leading to calls for action by legislators, religious leaders, and various civic groups. One senior Christian cleric intimated that “something grave is going to happen to this country if steps are not taken

to fight this abomination [which is] undermining efforts to control the HIV/AIDS scourge.” The government has responded by cautioning “Ghanaian women against participation in such obscenities and pornographies which go against the very grain of the culture and training of the Ghanaian.”¹⁵

Having provided an insight into the moral panic generated by the intersection of the Internet and sexual activity, the next section of this paper provides an analysis of the theoretical framework within which the study is situated, followed by a discussion of the methodology that guided the research. The paper then analyzes the socioeconomic situation confronting Ghanaians, and youth in particular, after which it focuses on how Ghanaian youth are negotiating their participation and survival in the context of the economy of desire that has resulted from processes of globalization and the information technology revolution that facilitates them. It specifically explores the involvement of youth in the transnational space of Internet-related sex and sexuality. It examines how economies of desire intertwine with desperate economic circumstances in Ghana to turn Ghanaian youth into objects and seekers of desire in the spaces created by the Internet. It examines how these spaces facilitate ethnosexual consumption through “racial, ethnic, and national self-imaginings and constructions,” and reproduce patterns of domination and inequality in the global system.¹⁶

Economy of Desire, the Internet, and Transnationalization of Sexual Commerce I use a political-economy-of-desire framework to engage with the issues that are the object of this project. “Lack and scarcity are the main characteristics of the economy of desire ... This scarcity is not restricted to economic resources. It also applies to the gratification, bodily well-being, sexual desire and body commitment.”¹⁷ The framework draws from political economy,¹⁸ critical race theory,¹⁹ and gender and class analyses²⁰ to examine the relationships among global forces, technological advances, and the transnational manifestations of cybersexual activities and their offline effects.

Over the last few decades, neoliberal economic policies have defined the socioeconomic trajectories of many countries in the world. Among those significantly affected by these policies are developing societies which have

been compelled by circumstances to adopt policy prescriptions with harsh repercussions for their populations.²¹ The neoliberal policies have significantly eroded access to public goods, exacerbated unemployment, and resulted in the creation of despondent populations. These circumstances, combined with Internet-facilitated sexual commerce, have produced conditions that reveal:

[T]he relationship among capitalism's disruptive, restructuring activities: powerful images, fantasies, and desires (produced both locally and globally) that are inextricably tied up with race and gender; the emergence of young, poor black single mothers, married women and single young women, who are willing to engage in the sex trade; and a strong demand for these women's services on the part of white, foreign male tourists.²²

Related to this is Nagel's observation that "the Internet is a symbolically rich domain for cruising sites of ethno-sexual desire."²³ The expression of this desire is shaped by structural inequalities in the global political economy which, in turn, influence access to exotic bodies or compel a search for "opportunities" presented by the privileged. An interesting dimension of Internet-facilitated sexuality, therefore, is the extent to which it has expanded possibilities for sex to be racialized and for race to be sexualized. The Internet not only combines with a competitive global market of sexual desire to make access to the cheapest bodies very easy, it also reflects how racialization of those bodies feeds the desires of privileged groups.²⁴ One area of global sexual exchanges (i.e., sex-tourism) involves mostly economically better-to-do white men as the seekers of desire and poor women, mostly of colour, as the objects of desire.²⁵ For the women involved in this market, the feminization of poverty makes the transnational sex trade more enticing. Entering a relationship with men from the developed world presumably provides an opportunity to escape the economic hardships of their homeland — what Brennan calls the "opportunity myth."²⁶ Thus, interactions among actors in this transnational sexual space are premised on culturally and racially based imaginings, which stem from essentialized representations of "the other."²⁷

The active way in which some Third World women seek Western men, or "play along" in pursuit of the "opportunity myth," poses a challenge to

feminist theory. There is a tendency, by some feminist scholars and other women's rights activists seeking to address "Third World" women's engagement in the commercial sex industry, to frame such involvement exclusively in terms of patriarchal systems of oppression and subordination.²⁸ However, as the narratives by some Ghanaian women in the ensuing discussion and those of some "Third World" prostitutes reveal, the concept of the "sex worker," which suggests entrepreneurship within a capitalist economy, aptly describes their motivations.²⁹ These motivations and the actions pursued to actualize them reflect active agency on the part of the women. There is the need, therefore, to move beyond the discourse of victimology that exclusively characterizes many feminist analyses of "Third World" women's engagement in sex-related activities — both in the public and domestic spheres. A more apposite approach should recognize women's agency as an intrinsic part of the commodification of sex in the era of globalization: actors making various choices even as they are constrained by systemic structures of one kind or another. The preceding argument is not to diminish the reality of power inequalities in the relationships described above. Indeed, the location of the interactants and their societies in the global capitalist structure shapes the power that they exert or exude, and hence their bargaining power. There are clearly different degrees of power between Third World women and their clients from the industrialized world whose privileged location in the global capitalist structure gives them an upper hand in fulfilling their objectives within the economy of desire.

The theoretical framework adopted for this study allows us to approach the sexual uses of the Internet from a perspective that is not encumbered by an exclusively patriarchal and dichotomized problematization of women's position in the global sex trade, but rather recognizes the multiple spaces occupied by various actors in these contexts as they negotiate a plurality of sometimes contradictory locations. It facilitates analyses not only of the class-based exploitation of the economically vulnerable, but also of the racialization that characterizes the myth of the sexualized "other" and the agency that African actors exhibit even as they are constrained by systemic structures of one kind or another. It is worth noting that, while much of the literature tends to focus on the eroticization of the female body and the

satisfaction of male desire, the objects of desire, in Ghana as in other places, are sometimes males and the exploiters/ beneficiaries female.³⁰ The relationships are both homo- and heterosexual in nature. Nevertheless, this paper will focus on the latter type of relationship because it is the most dominant. Moreover, the former type tends to be more difficult to assess because it is culturally unacceptable and could attract stringent social and legal sanctions when it is detected.

Methodology This study is mainly qualitative and, as mentioned above, is part of a larger study on cybersexual activity in Ghana. Our interest was not to focus on statistical data about number of respondents, frequency distributions etc. that can be generalized across all Ghanaian youth or sex-tourists, but to gain insights into the lived experiences of our subjects, their mindsets, and the motivations that drive them as they engage with the Internet. This knowledge provides a basis for more extensive research on the issues addressed in the study and for rethinking theoretical, conceptual, and analytical approaches to understanding them.

I employ the “global ethnography” methodology put forward by Burawoy et al. It transcends the local focus of traditional ethnography and embraces analyses that incorporate broader geographical and historical processes that influence, and elicit responses from, the local.³¹ In the context of the time-space compression defining the information and communication technology (ICT) globalization nexus, it is important that the ethnographic scope of the study be global, even as it focuses on the study of specific locales. This requires engaging not only with those in Ghana who are agents and victims of the economy of desire, but also with those who are implicated in those processes in places beyond the country. For this latter purpose, the research draws on Ghana-focused sexually oriented websites and sexual activities by tourists who are drawn to Ghana by narratives that they have accessed on the Internet.

Narratives of reality are socially constructed. I, therefore, adopted methodologies and forms of evidence and interpretation that allowed for “storytelling, counterstory telling, and the analysis of narrative ... [because they enable one to contest] myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms

that make up the common culture” in one locale or another.³² In a global context where the dominant narratives reflect the positions of the powerful, this method also gives subalterns the opportunity to voice their interpretation of realities, their location within them, how they negotiate them, and why they relate to them the way they do.

To get at the various narratives and gain perspectives on the global ethnography of cybersexual activities, I purposively sampled sex-related websites/forums/chatrooms that contained information on Ghana. This was done between January 2003 and August 2004, and involved content-analyzing discussions on the sites. I also conducted field research in Ghana between May 2003 and August 2003, and during the same period in 2004. During the field work, I analyzed secondary data on cybersexual activity, such as police, court, and news reports. Interviews were conducted with representatives of various organizations interested in cybersexuality (e.g., law enforcement, religious, educational, community-based, and human rights/advocacy) to gain an understanding of their knowledge of the issues, as well as the nature and extent of the problem and responses to it. Two clubs identified on the websites referred to above as locations where sex-tourists can meet potential clients were visited. The research team had conversations with tourists, female patrons, and key informants at the clubs, and through a process of snowball sampling, identified those who had used the Internet to facilitate or inform their trip to Ghana. I interviewed ten of them and nine of their clients. The interviews helped us to understand why they engage in these activities and to give voice to their personal experiences.

In addition to the above methods, an in-depth ethnographic case study of cybersexual activity was conducted between May and August 2003 in Swedru, a commercial town in the Central Region of Ghana, with a follow-up visit in June 2004. The region is one of the most deprived in the country and Swedru gained notoriety as a transnational meeting ground where virtual actors arrange in-person rendezvous to fulfill their desires. The case study thus provides insights into why the town is a destination of choice as well as the impact that cybersexual activity has had on the community and individuals. I organized two focus group discussions with a representative sample of community members (including the youth, parents, and commu-

nity leaders) to elicit their views on these matters. I also interviewed some women who were advertently or inadvertently involved with cybersexual activities, family members of the women who were involved, key informants, and some young men who served as mediators for the transnational spaces facilitated by the Internet.

Political Economy of Deprivation and the Socioeconomic Context for Cybersexual Activity Ghana went through an intense economic crisis during the 1970s and early 1980s. The crisis was precipitated by both internal and external factors. Among the internal triggers were economic mismanagement, political corruption, severe drought, and the deportation of about a million Ghanaians from Nigeria. Externally, the country had to contend with deteriorating terms of trade, falling export prices for its primary commodities, and consequent balance of payment problems. These developments had far-reaching implications. By the early 1980s, inflation was hovering at more than 100 percent, per capita GDP had plummeted to \$739 US from its 1960 level of \$1,009 US, real export earnings stood at only half of 1970 values, and import volumes had shrunk by more than 33 percent.³³

In response to this economic morass, the country underwent International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank-dictated Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), which involved reductions in government expenditure, devaluation of the currency, retrenchment of workers, privatization of state enterprises, and removal of price controls. Consequently, 300,000 workers in the public service were laid off and deep cuts were made to government funding for social services, such as health care and education.

While these policies have helped to address some of the macroeconomic problems the country was facing, they have not extricated the country from its economic doldrums. Inflation continues to be high “with wild fluctuations that over the course of [the 1990s] saw prices increase more than ten times,” eventually settling at 50 percent in 2000.³⁴ Total debt has continued to rise from \$1.39 billion US in 1980 to \$5.87 billion US in 1995 to its current level of more than \$6 billion US. The country spends more than 60 percent of its export earnings on debt-servicing, thereby redirecting resources

away from sectors and groups in desperate need.³⁵ The results of the economic crisis, and the policies implemented to deal with it, were extreme deprivation for large segments of the population. By 1999, about 40 percent of Ghanaians were living below the poverty line and 27 percent faced extreme poverty.³⁶ The situation in Ghana reflects the trend in much of Africa, where “around 55% of all people employed are not earning enough to lift themselves and their families above the US\$1 a day poverty line.”³⁷

The failure of the SAP to alleviate Ghanaians’ economic privation is borne out by the fact that the country is now implementing the Highly Indebted Poor Countries’ (HIPC) Initiative under the guidance of the IMF and World Bank. Konadu-Agyemang notes the increased regional, class, and gender disparities that have resulted from the deplorable economic conditions under which many Ghanaians live.³⁸ Citizens have responded in a variety of ways, including the exodus of both skilled and unskilled workers to other countries, mainly in the industrialized world.³⁹ The country’s agricultural sector, which constitutes the mainstay of the economy, has seen the greatest reduction in productivity registered by any African country between 1980 and 2001.⁴⁰ Total expenditure on education between 1992 and 1998 dropped significantly by about 10 percent.⁴¹ The overall prognosis for Ghana does not seem different from the following bleak assessment for the continent as a whole: “The high share of working poor and total poverty is likely to persist given the region’s high unemployment rates, insufficient capacity for job creation, rapidly expanding labor force and huge overall decent work deficit.”⁴²

This portentous picture has severe implications for the country’s youth, who constitute 21.4 percent of the population.⁴³ Generally, the youth tend to be poorer than the older generation, thereby compounding their susceptibility to other socioeconomic problems, which can lead to disillusionment and/or risky behaviour aimed at extricating themselves from poverty.⁴⁴ The World Bank notes that:

African youngsters are growing up in a time of both heightened peril and unprecedented opportunity. More than ever before, adolescents — particularly those in cities — are connected to the world at large through communication, information, and transportation technologies. Yet, the cycle of poverty, inadequate education and work opportunities, and civil unrest stunts the development of too many millions of young people.⁴⁵

The gendered nature of poverty means that the situation is even worse for young women, thereby increasing their vulnerability to exploitation.⁴⁶ It is clear that, at the same time as globalization is bringing the world together in a variety of ways, we are also witnessing significant disparities in the circumstances of people in different regions of the world. It is in this respect that the UN observes that:

The global culture has become a fundamental building block in many young people's lives. However, their relationship with it is very fragile because youth, more than any other, are exposed to and have come to rely on the global consumer culture but probably have the fewest resources and the most to lose should global culture not provide the satisfaction they demand of it.⁴⁷

In the midst of the deprivation discussed above and the disparities that define the global political economy, globalization and information technology are teasing Ghanaian youth with images of the consumer lifestyle that characterizes the industrialized world. Unfortunately, however, most of them cannot replicate that lifestyle. Consequently, many young people are compelled to be ingenious, through processes of "globalization from below," in order to survive in the new reality.⁴⁸ For female youth, some unpleasant yet compelling options include prostitution, both at home and abroad.⁴⁹ As Chapkis observes, in the context of sex workers:

Practices of prostitution, like other forms of commodification and consumption, can be read [in] more complex ways than simply as a confirmation of male domination. They may also be sites of ingenious resistance and cultural subversion ... the prostitute cannot be reduced to ... a passive object used in male sexual practice, but instead it can be understood as a place of agency where the sex worker makes active use of the existing sexual order.⁵⁰

Consumption of the Virtual Human Corpus: Sex-Tourism and Sexual Commerce The Internet has become one of the mechanisms by which African youth are exploring opportunities for personal advancement. In the new transnational social space made possible by ICTs, one does not have to cross physical boundaries in order to engage directly with the centre or

periphery of the world capitalist system. Developments in Internet-enabled sexual commerce, and the concerns that they have engendered, are complicated by processes of globalization with which they are intricately intertwined. The consumerism that is characteristic of globalization and the capitalist economic system that undergirds it is not limited to material goods, but has been extended to the consumption of people as well.⁵¹ This latter consumption pattern involves deriving satisfaction from the human body itself as opposed to concrete products of human endeavour. The Internet facilitates this in a number of ways by enabling people to view sexually explicit material and by fostering online and, subsequently, offline amorous or sexual relationships.

Beyond merely accessing lewd material referred to earlier, some Ghanaian youth, principally female, have become recruiting targets for advertising on sexually explicit websites. Interviews with some young women at night clubs noted for sex-tourism in Accra revealed that they make contact with their clients via the Internet. These women, some of whom are secondary school and university students, are registered with online services located abroad.⁵² The following verbatim profiles from the relevant sites capture their general tone:

- 1) Am a nice lady, with good chocolate slim body. Seriously seeking a man for meaningful relationship/more. Will like meeting up. If you are interested, write soon and lets meet up. no time wasters please.
- 2) i am black attractive lady very beautiful caring understanding lovely sexy romantic and very adveturouse and good in bed. i like outing and always happy whe i see that my patner is happy with me. i am open person and dont lie i like making fun with my patner and satify all his feelings for him i want a man who love anmd care as soulmate and love each other for the rest of our life.

Prospective clients obtain contact numbers from online dating services and make contact with the women upon arriving in the country. In other cases, the men contact the women prior to leaving their home countries, and arrangements are made for different kinds of romantic or sexual activity when the men arrive in Ghana. One man claimed that he bought a list from

“africonnections,” a dating service, for \$17.50 that had 25 phone numbers with photographs of the girls.

While some young women, especially urban and secondary school/university-educated women, engage with the technology directly, this is not the case with all women who appear on the Internet by way of texts or images. Most of the women outside the major cities who are involved in cyberfacilitated sexual activity are not conversant with the Internet and hence do not engage directly with the technology. This became clear during the ethnographic research in Swedru when it was revealed that the encounter between young women from the area who appear on the Internet and their prospective clients is mediated not only by the technology, but by an organized group of local young men. The young men’s *modus operandi* are captured by one of them in the following statement:

We normally approach the beautiful girls in town and tell them that we can find them pen pals abroad who can help them leave the country. We ask them for their pictures to accompany their profile. Sometimes the girls are not interested, but after we give them money, they agree. About one month later, we tell them that some men abroad are interested in marrying them, but want to see them naked so that they can be sure ... that they meet their standards. ... Many of the girls are not comfortable with this, but we tell them that they will receive between \$100 and \$300 for doing that. After they take the pictures, we send them to our contact people who use them on their websites.

Based on interviews with key informants in the community, it looks like the money that the young women receive for taking the nude photographs is a very small percentage of what the gendered agents get from the website operators. This mirrors inequities in resource distribution evident in economic transactions between men and women within the larger society. Nevertheless, in a community characterized by high levels of poverty, unemployment, and few prospects, the offer of a couple of hundred dollars can be very enticing. The gendered agents for the transnational cybersex networks are also paid to serve as go-betweens when the men who respond to the ads arrive in Ghana. The revulsion towards these cyber- and real-life pimps is vividly illustrated by the following criticism from one key informant: “Some young

men in our own community are assisting these sex maniacs to destroy our daughters and our community.”

What the above discussion makes clear is how the potential for expanding sex-tourism networks has been significantly facilitated by the Internet. As Wonders and Michalowski point out, “‘sex tourism’ highlights the convergence between prostitution and tourism, links the global with the local, and draws attention to both the production and consumption of sexual services.”⁵³ There are networks on the Internet where people exchange experiences about sexual exploits in Ghana and offer advice about how to satisfy members’ concupiscence.⁵⁴ The following quotes illustrate the tenor of such discussions. A 61-year old from Australia wrote:

Ghanaian babes are uninhibited, eg., some [write in online ads] openly seeking ‘broad-minded, sexy men; [saying] I am interested in erotic pictures ... making love’ ... Well, after \$2500 for a round-trip 38-hour flight ... I arrived inn [sic] Accra the capital. I found my way to Swedru ... the workd [sic] soon got around that an eligible ‘obroni’ [white man] had arrived; ... I had to schedule them ... Each was gorgeous, like the best coffee: hot, strong, black and full of flavour.

Another contributor added:

I have found most African women love sex and make no bones about it. Some really, and I mean really get off on it. I don’t think I could every [sic] marry a white woman after experiencing the beauty and pleasures of the African woman.

Some sex-tourists target young teenage girls. Not only do they have sex with them, they also take nude photographs of them, presumably for child pornography websites, listservs, chatrooms, and other exchange networks. The case of Morgens Riber Nielsen, a Danish man based in Norway, helps to put the issue of Internet-facilitated pedophilia into perspective. The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of the Ghana Police Service worked in collaboration with the Norwegian Police to arrest Nielsen. At the time of his arrest in Norway, he had in his possession pictures of 12 teenage girls among 3,000 films that he had produced.

It is not inaccurate to say that the economic hardships faced by many Ghanaians turn these young women into vulnerable prey for marauding sexual predators whose egos are presumably fanned by the Ghanaian women they encounter. As one sex-tourist said: "Oh, how nice to be a big slob of an American and be fawned over by the wayward college females that would just do anything for a few dollars!" Another intimated that "every Ghanaian girl's dream is to catch a white man from the Western world."⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the sweeping generalizations presented by the sex-tourists in the foregoing narratives about Ghanaian women's ambitions reflect the condescending attitudes of these privileged Westerners toward the subaltern "other" that they exploit. It is also an insult to Ghanaian womanhood as a whole to have the ambitions of all the country's women reduced to the perceptions contained in these inflammatory and egotistical self-gratifying discourses of white men. The views expressed by these sex-tourists corroborate the observation that:

Most global sex tourism ... arises from the linkage between the political economic advantage enjoyed by affluent men from developed countries and the widespread cultural fantasy in those nations that dusky-skinned "others" from exotic southern lands are liberated from the sexual/emotional inhibitions characteristic of women (and/or men) in their own societies.⁵⁶

By and large, white men are the targets of those women who engage in cybersexual activities, whether directly or mediated, as well as their offline manifestations. This preference is based on a general, and sometimes erroneous, impression that white men are wealthy and generous. For these women, a relationship with a white man provides an opportunity to overcome the vicissitudes of life in Ghana and an avenue to lift their families out of poverty and squalour. A relationship with a white man could also mean an opportunity to migrate to Europe or America, the dream destination of many Ghanaian youths. They are suffused with the "opportunity myth" and crave the glamorous images of these places painted in the media, or peddled by certain compatriots returning from there. Furthermore, the economic success of some Ghanaians resident abroad, reflected in buildings, cars, and conspicuous consumption, fuel these perceptions of the metropole. The social status that comes with conspicuous consumption of

foreign goods is another motivation for seeking links to foreigners who can provide such symbols of perceived upward mobility. This status then gives them the power to upset the existing dominant structures of power. Nyamnjoh and Page outline similar motivations in the Cameroonian context where “young ladies ... [who] comb the beaches in search of whiteness are interested in more than prostitution; they are interested in a gateway to fulfilling their fantasies, thus making sense of the promises of modernization in a context where the reality of its implementation has failed woefully.”⁵⁷

The narratives above also illustrate how interactions among actors in this transnational sexual space created by the Internet and its offline relative derive from culturally and racially based and essentialized imaginings of “the other.” Moreover, it is clear that the relative power of the interactants in these relationships depends upon their own, and their countries’, location in the global capitalist structure. The sex-tourists are driven by a desire for the cheap and the exotic, while the women are motivated by the need to escape economic despondency by becoming entrepreneurs in the global marketplace of sexual consumerism and/or by hopes of a fantasy marriage and relocation to the metropole.

Another dimension of cybersexual activity is the way in which its organizers exploit victims without their consent, whether latent or manifest. Some of the Ghanaian women on the Internet claim that they did not consciously choose to be there. One woman in Swedru whose semi-nude picture appeared on the Internet asserted that she was unaware that it would end there when a photographer offered to take a picture of her at a nearby beach. Some women the research team talked to at a popular beach in Accra expressed concern about people with cameras at the beach. They were concerned that these individuals may take pictures of them in compromising situations that may end up in one medium or another, thereby creating the impression that they are selling their bodies. What the Swedru woman’s assertion and the concerns of others in Accra show is the emergence of a group of savvy local entrepreneurs who are responding to the market for exotic images by exploiting unsuspecting women and their bodies for their own pecuniary gain.

There is no gainsaying the exploitation that characterizes the women's relationship with local Ghanaian male agents who manipulate them and are complicit in the exploitation and violation of their bodies. As processes of globalization and their intersection with advances in information technology facilitate the fulfillment of needs and desires for different actors, these young men in Ghana take advantage of the situation by acting as agents within the interstices of ethnosexual desire, sex-tourism, and economic deprivation. This is their own way of addressing the socioeconomic deprivation that they face, by taking advantage of the opportunities presented by the economy of desire and the Internet. There were suggestions in the Swedru area that the local agents had gained financially from their involvement in these activities, and some of them are said to have built houses and bought cars with the monies that they made from their activities.

Socioeconomic Impact of Cybersexual Activity The activities described above have affected individuals, families, and communities in a variety of ways. One of the biggest impacts on Swedru, as a result of the cybersex-related stories, is the stigma that has engulfed the town. It has assumed a reputation among many Ghanaians and Internet chatroom participants as a haven for immorality and promiscuity. The reputation goes back to 1998 when, out of the 77 women showcased in Ghanaian newspapers as unashamedly selling their naked bodies on the Internet, 54 came from the town. This stigmatization of a whole community angers many residents of the town and makes them uncomfortable. The reaction has created resentment and strong antagonism not only towards those women and men accused of bringing the name of the town into disrepute, but their relatives as well. Consequently, fissures have emerged within the town's social structure, thereby upsetting the hitherto existing social balance. According to the parents of some of the young women whose pictures were featured on the Internet site in 1998, their families have had to face untold hardships, including social isolation, as a result of the social stigmatization that comes with engagement in what most Ghanaians consider to be shameful, indecent, and immoral activities. One mother lamented that right after the story broke, others thought of them as "an *ashawo* family [i.e., family of prostitutes]."

People pointed at us wherever we went, scorned us, and called us all sorts of names.”

Among some of the microlevel effects are “virtual infidelity,” which is impairing or devastating real life relationships. Marriages have also fallen apart as a result of the revelations. One woman was reported to have had a miscarriage when pictures of her on the Internet were published by the local media.⁵⁸ Further investigations made in the course of this study revealed that her shock was due to the fact that she was unaware that the picture, ostensibly meant for a potential suitor abroad, had ended up on the Internet in the full glare of the world. One woman disclosed that her planned marriage to her fiancé was ruined because of the ridicule that the publication of the pictures in the newspapers brought him. He was pressured by friends and family not to go ahead with the marriage. According to her, “they said they did not want to bring into their family a girl who had exposed herself to the whole world.”

It is interesting to note that despite the widespread condemnation among the Ghanaian public of cybersexual activities, their offline corollaries, and sexual commerce in general, many of the female youth interviewed intimated that they understood why their peers would engage in such activities. They contended that the socioeconomic challenges they face make their bodies the only asset they could use as a means of survival. A young woman operating at one of the clubs frequented by sex-tourists confided thus: “If I am hungry and a white man is willing to take me abroad for sex, what is wrong with that? After all, I will not be the first to do that. I know girls who have met foreign men through the Internet and are enjoying life abroad now, or getting money sent to them from there.” This disclosure corroborates Freeman-Longo’s observation that “it is easy for young people to recognize that many of these ‘models’ are close to their age, thus legitimizing in the minds of the youth online that people their age are also involved in real life and online sexual activities. It normalizes the experience.”⁵⁹ While various individuals and organizations have appealed to moral values as a means of curbing the youth’s involvement in cybersexual and other forms of sexual commerce, these appeals do not seem to be an easy sell. The clash between the “feel good” appeal of moral rectitude and the expedience of

engaging in the economy of desire, however risky, is a difficult dilemma for a lot of youth tethered on the brink of economic survival, but the likelihood that they will resolve it in favour of expedience is very high.

Unfortunately, however, while sex-tourists and those who feed on the exoticized bodies of these Ghanaian women and girls are, by and large, able to fulfill their desires, a vast majority of the latter tend to be disappointed in the long run. This is because they are hardly able to realize the dreams promised by the “opportunity myth.” There are reports of girls and young women who have been impregnated by sex-tourists and left to fend for themselves. This fate is illustrated vividly by the case of a young teenage single mother who was taken from Swedru and abandoned in Accra by a sex-tourist after she got pregnant. Narrating the story, her mother recalled that:

She was only 13 years old and in JSS-1 [Junior Secondary School – grade 1]. She was introduced to Morgens Riber [the Danish man referred to earlier] by boys in the town. After that she left Swedru with him and she did not come back again. After she got pregnant, he left the country and now she is struggling to look after the child in Accra.

Stories like this mirror Brennan’s accounts of women in the Dominican Republic who have fallen victim to the ephemeral world of sex-tourism.⁶⁰

Conclusion The neoliberal economic agenda that underpins economic globalization holds sway over the economies of developing countries, and the prescriptions of that agenda impose tremendous hardships on many young people in those locations. Neoliberal prescriptions also claw back, to a significant degree, the public goods that citizens enjoyed in the past. Consequently, the youth are compelled to be ingenious in order to survive within the new reality. That ingenuity takes a variety of forms, including forays into the Internet-enabled global sex market, which can be described as part of the process of “globalization from below.”

This paper argues that the interaction of Ghanaian youth with the global as an avenue for economic redress has been facilitated in unprecedented ways by new information technologies. In the new transnational social space made possible by these technologies’ capacity for time-space compression,

one does not have to cross physical boundaries to engage directly with the centre or periphery of the world capitalist system. Processes of globalization intertwine with developments in Internet-enabled sexual commerce to introduce a sophistication to transnational sexual engagement that has created a moral panic in Ghana.

The nexus of interactions enabled by the Internet helps to extend the reach and scope of processes that intensify consumerism as well as the commodification of women's bodies and male desire. The Internet combines with a competitive global market of sexual desire to target the cheapest bodies and to facilitate access to them. Moreover, it has provided a mechanism for ingenuity among Ghanaian youth who take advantage of innovations in the global capitalist market, a market that, ironically, simultaneously perpetuates their economic peripheralization and/or sexual exploitation. The Ghanaian case also points to the racialization that characterizes the myth of the sexualized "other" and the consciously class- and gender-based exploitation of the economically vulnerable.

For the Ghanaian women involved in this market, the feminization of poverty intensifies the allure of the transnational sex trade and increases their vulnerability to exploitation in the context of the exchange relations that characterize the market. Their engagement with the market, however, is not bereft of agency and calls for analytical frameworks that transcend the victimology of an exclusively patriarchal and dichotomized problematization of women's position in the global sex trade. More appropriate approaches must recognize the ingenuity and activism of women in these exchange relationships as they negotiate their locations within multiple, and sometimes contradictory, spaces.

Notes

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