



Sex trafficking and the Vancouver Winter Olympic Games: Perceptions and preventative measures

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H I G H L I G H T S

- ▶ Perceptions of the link between sex trafficking and the event were contested and contradictory.
- ▶ Stakeholder perceptions were informed by their respective area of expertise.
- ▶ Stakeholder tensions and strategic challenges impacted upon preventative measures.

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Considerable attention has been paid to sex tourism and this paper focuses upon an under-researched area: sex trafficking and sporting mega-events. Drawing upon qualitative research undertaken prior to the Vancouver Games, this paper aims both to examine stakeholder perceptions of the potential linkages between sex trafficking and the event, and to evaluate the preventative trafficking measures as they relate to the event. There is a continuum of perceptions regarding sex trafficking and the event: the Games can be a catalyst for trafficking; it is an uncertain risk; and, the Games are not a potential catalyst for trafficking. In terms of specific preventative measures, it is suggested that strategic planning lacked a centralised approach and there was a gap in the provision of awareness campaigns. Third sector groups led awareness campaigns which were criticised for being sensationalist and unrepresentative and, in addition, tensions in stakeholder relationships impinged upon a constructive partnership.

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1. Introduction

Cities hosting sporting mega-events are ephemerally catapulted onto a global media stage amid promises of munificent bounties. Recently, concerns have been raised about an under-explored avenue of social impacts, namely the potential linkages between sporting mega-events and sex trafficking, as witnessed at the following events: Athens (2004) and Beijing (2008) Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games; the World Cup in Germany (2006) and South Africa (2010); and the Vancouver Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games (2010) (Bird & Donaldson, 2009; Bowen & Shannon Frontline Consulting, 2009; Future Group, 2007; Gould, 2010; Hayes, 2010; Hennig, Craggs, Laczko, & Larsson, 2007; Milivojević, 2008; Milivojević & Pickering, 2008). The central argument is that the temporarily increased population may

contribute to heightened demand for sexual services which could be met, in part, by trafficked women. The population 'spike' associated with the event and potential increase in sexual services demand could lead to traffickers targeting the events destination.

Inevitably, the question arises as to whether the linkages between sporting mega-events and sex trafficking patterns can be measured. Although this is a logical question, it is fundamentally flawed as multi-faceted barriers impede robust empirical research. First, identifying changes in sex trafficking patterns requires reliable baseline data to provide the foundation to ascertaining whether sex trafficking increases or not during event hosting. Sex trafficking is a global operation with fluid and rapid patterns of movement which thereby creates critical challenges in the development of baseline data. The UN.GIFT (2008: p.3) argued that statistical data does not often meet statistical accounting standards as "at the global and regional levels, detailed data are simply not available and even when data are presented, they are frequently partial, incomplete and unreliable". Nationally, there can be limited centralised reporting and evidence gathering (UN.GIFT, 2008).

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Hence, it has been suggested “...the full scale of trafficking remains relatively unknown and only partly reflected in official statistics” (Hennig et al., 2007: p.29), and current national statistics are no more than ‘guesstimates’ (Kelly, 2002; Laczko, 2005). Second, there are substantive methodological issues. Empirical work may lack methodological transparency, which is compounded by conflation, on the part of stakeholders, of the terminology of migration, asylum, refugees, trafficking and smuggling (Kelly, 2005). Data collection on a ‘hidden’ population raises methodological and ethical issues (Tyldum & Brunovskis, 2005), especially as victims of human trafficking (VHT) can be unwilling or fearful to report their situation to the authorities (Hennig et al., 2007). Issues of bias and representativeness arise in the analysis of data from law enforcement and rehabilitation organisations (Tyldum & Brunovskis, 2005), and there is a lack of sound criminal justice data emanating from countries which have commenced human trafficking criminal legislation (Jahic & Finckenauer, 2005). A third barrier is traffickers can operate a carousel system whereby VHT are regularly moved (Monzini, 2005; O’Neill Richard, 1999), which makes it even more difficult to identify them. In relation to events, the fluidity of trafficking operations means that it could take a considerable period of time to identify VHT. Given these obstacles, it is hardly surprising that Hayes (2010: p.1126) argued that “...gathering accurate empirical data on sex trafficking is impossible”.

It is for these reasons this paper does not seek to ‘measure’ sex trafficking patterns according to the event. Instead, drawing upon qualitative research undertaken prior to the Vancouver Games, it aims both to examine stakeholder perceptions of the potential linkages between sex trafficking and the event, and to evaluate the preventative trafficking measures as they relate to the event. The rationale relates to practice and theory. Significant work has been undertaken on resident and stakeholder (Byrd, Bosley, & Dronberger, 2009; Kim & Petrick, 2005; Lorde, Greenidge, & Devonish, 2011) perceptions of tourism and events, which contributes to their representation in tourism development. This work continues in this vein, but focuses on stakeholder perceptions of sex trafficking and the Vancouver Games. The stakeholders are connected to the local sex trade, sex workers and trafficking victims and, in addition, represent law enforcement, border controls, policy development and trafficking prevention and investigation, and, as a result, are well situated to offer insights into the likelihood of sex trafficking related to the event. According attention to stakeholder voices provides an opportunity to understand the ways in which sex trafficking operates, and its types and forms. Furthermore, evaluating preventative measures can provide insights into critical policy challenges which can inform future host cities as sex trafficking is a risk requiring management. Theoretically, this paper seeks to open the dialogue on the topic as, while conceptualisations of sex tourism have evolved considerably, there is a research gap in this area. The rationale for focussing upon the Vancouver Games is because it had been argued that:

“traffickers could view the 2010 Olympics as a short and long-term business opportunity. First, there is a risk that an expected increased demand for prostitution during the Olympics could be filled by human trafficking victims. Second, traffickers may attempt to bring trafficked persons posing as “visitors” into Canada for the Olympics, only to exploit them in other cities or transit them into the U.S” (Future Group, 2007: p.4).

An alternative perspective countered “...that trafficking and mega-events are not linked” (Bowen & Shannon Frontline Consulting, 2009: p.iv). Certainly, a temporary spike in the Vancouver population was evident from projected figures: 5500 athletes, 2800 media members, 25,000 volunteers, and projections

of 1 million spectators (Heegie, 2009). This paper delves into these contested narratives. It is structured as follows: the literature review identifies sex tourism dimensions and the push–pull factors underpinning trafficking as well as elaborating upon the relationship between sporting mega-events and sex trafficking. The research context and methods provides a background to trafficking within Canada and outlines the method, data collection and analysis. The findings are organised around perceptions of sex trafficking and preventative measures. The paper concludes by identifying the contributions to the literature and the empirical and management implications.

2. Literature review

2.1. Defining sex tourism

Considerable attention has been devoted by feminist and tourism scholars to sex tourism, and, although the field is a contested space where the politics of gender and power are played out, theorisations have developed substantively. Graburn (1983: p.438) provided an early definition of ‘prostitution tourism’ which could be “...defined as tourism whose main or major motivation is to consummate commercial sexual liaisons”. Yet Oppermann (1999) argued that narrow constructions of sex tourism, in particular those which emphasised monetary exchange as the central criterion, were problematic. The sex tourism framework comprised a series of dimensions: intention and opportunity, monetary benefits, length of time, prostitute–tourist relationship, sexual encounter, and beneficiary (Oppermann, 1999). As Harrison (2000) notes, sex tourism can be defined either by motivation or the organisations involved within it. Current analyses have sought to move beyond narrow constructions and provide a more rounded picture. The composition of sex tourism may be charted around the geographies of sex tourism, the definition of the sex tourist, and the nature of the relationship.

Analyses of sex tourism have moved beyond geographically and economically bounded constructions whereby tourist flows are characterised by tourists from developed countries travelling to less developed countries to partake in sexual services. Thailand, as a reputed sex tourism destination, has been the laboratory for extensive research activity (Cohen, 1982, 1988; Garrick, 2005; Singh & Hart, 2007) though the geography of sex tourism has extended to, for example, Barbados (Phillips, 2008), Cuba (Wonders & Michalowski, 2001), the Caribbean (Sánchez Taylor, 2001), and the Dominican Republic (Brennan, 2002, 2004; Herold, Garcia, & DeMoya, 2001). Sex tourism is not confined to less developed countries as demonstrated by work conducted within New Zealand (Ryan & Kinder, 1996), the Netherlands (Wonders & Michalowski, 2001) and Australia (Ryan & Martin, 2001).

Defining the sex tourist brings into focus their typology and motivation. The majority of studies concentrate upon male heterosexual sex tourism (Brennan, 2002, 2004; Cohen, 1982; Garrick, 2005; Ryan & Martin, 2001) as it arguably comprises a larger proportion of the market. Nevertheless, this characterisation does not express the full gamut of sex tourism which includes child sex tourism and paedophilia (Montgomery, 2001; O’Connell Davidson, 2000, 2004), gay and bisexual male sex tourism (Padilla, 2007, 2008), and female sex tourism (Herold et al., 2001; Phillips, 2008; Sánchez Taylor, 2001). Sex tourism conceptualisations vary according to the motivation type. Female sex tourism has been constructed as romance tourism (Pruitt & LaFont, 1995) and ‘romance entrepreneurship’ (Dahles & Bras, 1999) and, furthermore, a theoretical difference has been drawn between the male and female sex tourist on the basis of economic exchange and emotional attachment. Conceptualising emotional exchange and

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