Elina Ihamäki
Homosociality in the sexscapes of Sortavala, Russia

Abstract

The (historical) countryside town of Sortavala, Russia is located within close proximity to the Finnish border. The town has become a tourist destination for a number of Finnish tourists since the relaxation of these international borders regulations in the 1990s. During the past years, Finnish male tourists have been the most visible partakers of Sortavala’s commercial sexscapes. This article explores how homosociality is constructed and maintained in the sexscapes of Sortavala among Finnish men as a way to legitimate sex tourism and the sexualisation of Russian-speaking women.

Keywords

prostitution, sex tourism, sexscapes, homosociality, masculinity, Sortavala, Russia
Homosociality in the sexscapes of Sortavala, Russia

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Introduction

Although circumstances conducive to male bonding have been diminishing due in part to changes in gender paradigms (Meuser 2005, 397), men still form (strong) homosocial relationships with each other in various settings, locations, groups and institutions. Michael Flood (2008, 342) mentions that ‘homosocial ordering of men’s heterosexual relationships in particular has received relatively little attention’. The homosocial bonds established between men can be based on networks of friendship, work, hobbies or, in this case, purely on a common interest in the commercial sex experience with women or/and experiencing commercial sexscapes without necessarily any actual sexual encounters with the women occupying this sexualized space. Men’s (gendered) discourses and embodied actions towards women working in sexscapes make these venues particularly conducive for homosocial bonding. For example, Rikke Knudesen (2012) in her study of young men’s purchase of sex in Buenos Aires has considered male bonding a highly relevant dimension of commercial sex experience in her research context. She views men’s brothel visits as ‘a kind of performance that goes between men’. According to her in such ‘peer group performances’ men are constructing their sexual selves and positioning themselves in the group. As Anna-Maria Marttila (2008, 53) has stated, the buying of sex is more often considered to be a practice of individual men than a collective activity. I argue that it can be both depending on place, situation and (masculine) culture.

In this article I discuss how the experiences of heterosexual prostitution in the sexscapes of Sortavala organizes relationships between men. This is a rarely discussed aspect of prostitution studies. Over the past few decades, generally speaking, research devoted to the purveyors of prostitution (most often men) has been growing internationally (e.g Knudsen 2012). However, in the case of Finland, only relatively few academic studies on this subject group have been carried out. Although prostitution and the buying of sex is legal in Finland, areas just beyond its border with Russia have become locales for transnational prostitution, largely characterized by Finnish men seeking to obtain relatively inexpensive sexual services from Russian-speaking women in an environ of relaxed cultural norms. In Russia, prostitution is an administrative offense according to the Code of...
Administrative law (§ 6.11 and § 6.12). Under the Russian Criminal Code, both the pimping/procuring (§ 240 and § 241) and trafficking of human beings (§ 127.1 and § 127.2) are defined as criminal offences.

**Conceptual groundings: Homosociality and sexscapes**

The concept of homosociality originates from the Jean Lipman-Blumen article ‘Toward the homosocial theory of sex roles’ (1976). According to Lipman-Blumen (1976), homosociality is ‘the seeking of enjoyment, and/or preference for the company of the same sex, which connects gender based ties and solidarity’. Therefore, homosociality refers to a certain separation of the male and female spheres (Meuser 2005). Such male bonds offer men a space within which to reinforce mainstream notions of heterosexual masculinity often based on homophobia, as homosexuals are not considered to be ‘real men’ (Kimmel 1996, 8). Homosociality also alludes to asexual intimacy among heterosexual males – male bonding – by which women are usually excluded or they exist only in order to accommodate the needs of men (Kimmel 2000, Kimmel 1996). Although women themselves might be totally excluded from these groups, men can talk about women and sex in ways that cement their feelings of heterosexual masculinity and manhood (Flood 2008). These ways of talking intersect with the prevalent, established and (germinating) representations and discourses of masculinities and femininities (Lehtonen 1999).

Michael Kimmel (1996) maintains that masculinity and homosociality are inseparable from each other. Men want to have approval from other men when identifying and competing with their male counterparts. This means that homosocial settings serve as a ‘cradle’ for the development of masculine identity. Sharon R. Bird (1996) also states that homosocial processes chiefly sustain a collection of core components of ‘hegemonic’ masculinity: emotional detachment, competitiveness and the sexual objectification of women. The above dimensions of homosociality and male bonding can depend on place and context (Arxer 2011). Homosocial bonding might be situational and linked to certain stages of a man’s life (Flood 2008, Sea-ling 2000).

Homosocial groups can establish a space that acknowledges attributes of the prevalent ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (Redman et al. 2002). Individuals or groups that do not fit in to these male groups can be positioned as others according to their gender, ethnicity, class, race, disability and/or sexual orientation etc. Barrie Thorne (1993) has conceptualized such practices as ‘borderwork’ (Redman et al. 2002). This borderwork can also describe clientless/non-clientless settings for prostitution within which men’s sexual practices enable bonding. In his book Rahasta vaan ei rakkaudesta. Prostituutio Helsingissä 1867–1939, Antti Hakkinen (1995, 74) asserts that while mainstream society might maintain its disapproval, the procurement of prostitution has been largely tolerated within masculine culture. Within some circles, he continues, it has even been revered. In such groups (stu-
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dents, business men) men might have (rival) status for consuming sex and in competing with each other in terms of the number of women with whom they have had sexual relations. For men, such as sailors, whose line of work separates them from society at large, the sexual abilities and skills attained though encounters with women in prostitution have served as part of their collective cultural narrative as a way of bonding (Flood 2008, Häkkinen 1995, 75). Such bonding experiences might give men mutual experiences of ‘recognition and respect’ rather than competition (Zheng 2006, 167).

On the basis of vast literature analysis of the power dynamics of the erotic triangle between two men and one woman, Eve K. Sedgwick (1985) asserts that contesting heterosexual men can bond homosocially by way of the female body. Women are in a patriarchal heterosexual order trafficked between males. Homosocial bonds/networks often underline men’s superiority over women (and men positioned with (less powerful) submasculinities) (Flood 2008, 342). In proper sense, the sexual trafficking of women between men happens within the context of the sex trade. In the context of prostitution, a man can more easily arrange group sex situations and engage in sexual acts with multiple women during these escapades. The women and other men present along with the man in question become the audience for his own virility and sexual prowess. Typically, women who sell their sexual services might have sex with many different men during any given day. Beside the erotic arousal commonly associated with such situations, such gatherings might also be understood as prime settings for collective male bonding through the female body and an emotional detachment from these women as human beings. Knudsen (2012) argues that such situations can be interpreted as expressions of ‘ritual equality’ although conflicts between men might take place as well in the group.

Therefore, the homosociality that is expressed within the context of prostitution by male groups often originates from an underling commonality that these men share amongst themselves (friendship, profession/place of work, hobbies etc.) and the buying of sex functions as a collective and ritualized way for the group to bond and express their (masculine) values and understandings of masculinity and sexuality. Tiantian Zheng (2006, 175) has in her article argued that having sexual experiences and dispensing them in some cases in karaoke bars with hostesses might be the way to stress and improve the social trust between men in business in China. Zheng (2006, 175 ) says that ‘men who are able to demonstrate their deference, self-control and sexual prowess in the consumption of sex can successfully prove themselves to be trustworthy, responsible, and capable business partners in an alliance’. For example, the Finnish film Porttikielto taivaaseen (1990) includes an episode in which Finnish businessmen and their foreign business partners are shown bonding and relaxing by way of partaking in the services of Finnish sex workers. This elite clientele and their networks of bonding through (transnational) prostitution are well hidden and rarely discussed in Nordic countries and Russia.
Borderland sexscapes

In the borderlands heterosexual prostitution has emerged as a normalized part of the regional landscape. It is often embed in legal tourism (Ihamäki 2012). According to Denise Brennan (2004, 16), ‘sexscapes link the practices of sex work to the forces of globalized economy’. She gives three criterions for sexscapes:

1) International travel from the developed to the developing world
2) Consumption of paid sex
3) Inequality

In the case of the borderland town of Sortavala, Russia, these criterions are easily confronted. On the other hand, the concept of developing is ambivalent in the case of Russia for several reasons. However, the socio-economic (political) structures suffered after the collapse of the Soviet Union and high rates of unemployment coupled with the breakdown of the social security system became the reality among the population at large. Regional development differences are noticeable in Russia. Located within close proximity to the border, Sortavala that is in the Republic of Karelia has been struggling with its socio-economic development. (Foreign) tourism has been one of the new economic activities developed in the region. J. P. Singh and Shilpa A. Hart (2007) have argued in their article ‘Sex workers and cultural policy: Mapping the issues and actors in Thailand’ that the sex industry has become part of the culture industries of Thailand. This seems to also be the case partially in Russian Karelia as well despite current legislation.

Brennan (2004) says that it is important to distinguish sexscapes from the red-light districts (or other sites where sex is sold) in the developed world. By this she means that in global sexscapes ‘the sex trade becomes a focal point of a place, and the social and economic relations of that place are filtered through the nightly (and daily) selling sex to foreigners. In contrast, the sex trade in red-light districts like the developed world – such as Frankfurt, Rome and New York – by no means defines the social and economic life outside of these districts. Nor do the female denizens of these places necessarily become associated with sexual availability or proficiency’ (Brennan 2004, 16.) In the case of Sortavala, prostitution and prostitution-like relationships have become part of the everyday life strategies for some women. Finnish men (tourists) offer a certain possibility for women trying to improve their lives financially and/or in their daily means of survival. The research participants in my study saw the possibility for sex as a given, presuming that every woman in Russian Karelia would be eager to pursue sexual relationships with Finnish men.

Brennan (2004) continues that within sexscapes the economy is based on an appetite for difference. Therefore, sexscapes maintain and create images, fantasies and desires that
are interlinked with intersections such as gender, ethnicity and race (Brennan 2004, 31). In the case of Sortavala, Finns seem to be the major foreign players in creating and experiencing and sharing culturally erotized and stereotyped imaginations of that specific place and Russian-speaking women. In the end, without crossing a single border these have become part of transnational networks of ‘imagitative body marketing’ in different specific locations (Brennan 2004, 18). For Finnish men the geographical location, the price of sex, women's (imagined and fantasized) availability and (eroticized) cultural differences are the key factors that make Finnish men eager to venture into Russian Karelian sexscapes. In this sense, the buyers of sex can be interpreted as ‘embodied objects’ of the global touristic sexscapes although many times more privileged than the sellers of the sex (Penttinen 2004).

Ethnographic fieldwork in the sexscapes of Sortavala

This article is based on data collected for the project entitled ‘Ethnosexual Processes in Finland, Estonia and Russia. A study on Border-Crossing and Border Creating Sexuality’. The key aim of this inductive (descriptive) qualitative research has been to study Finnish-speaking men construct their masculinity and manhood in relation to their sexual partners and escapades in Russia (Ihamäki 2010, 55). During the research process, however, focus has increasingly shifted to the separate but interlinked questions concerning fieldwork, crime, homosociality, ethnosexual zones and sexscapes within the context of prostitution experiences of Finnish men in Russia since the relaxation of the Finnish-Russian border regime. The data collected on these areas of interest have been mainly presented by way of separate articles. The timeframes of the research participants’ experiences with prostitution in Russia have on occasion presented some limitations as some of these escapades date back to the Soviet era.

Wetherall and Edley (1999, 338) in their work on masculine identity have argued, ‘when people speak, their talk reflects not only the local pragmatics of that particular conversational context, but also much broader or much global patterns in collective sense making and understanding’. Identities and subjectivities are not revealed as such in interviews but are more or less developed reflexively. The interviewers have the sensitive task of considering their positioning in the interview process (Stahl 2012, 12).

The research participants have been contacted through several channels, not only through fieldwork.

In such a research context, fleeting moments can be very revealing – not only in the words spoken but likewise the overall mode of expression. The things that are considered socially indecent are of key importance as are things that encroach on the boundaries of the legal and illegal (Ihamäki 2010, 2012). Conducting research on the realm of the sexu-
al can place the researcher in uncomfortable situations and the dynamics of that predicament warrants closer introspection.

In order to protect the anonymity of the research participants and preserve confidentiality, I have given the research participants pseudonyms and divulge only minor details about their personal background. The research participants’ ages range from early forties to seventies. Participants have been encouraged to speak freely of their intimate experiences though some structured questions were also posed to them. For some research participants, it was easy to tell their stories while others needed the guidance of more structured questions. All together, fourteen interviews were conducted and all of them have been recorded on audiotape. The interviews lasted from one to four hours. Only two of the interviews were done in Sortavala where I did my fieldwork periodically between 2008–2009. The rest of the interviews were carried out in Finland. Of the research participants, eight have frequented Sortavala; the remaining six detail their experiences in other places in (North-West) Russia. A total of ten research participants were interviewed twice.

After a second round of interviews in Finland, two research participants who are friends suggested to me, a trip to Sortavala, show me their ‘typical’ night out. I agreed without hesitation to their proposal to show me the town ‘through their eyes’. In August 2009 I made this one-night road trip to Sortavala with Janne Nivala and Miika Virtanen. This article focuses on my own reflective positional analysis gained especially through the field experiences (incidents) that I gathered with Janne and Miika in Sortavala. The field notes that were transcribed the following day and a short taped interview done in Janne’s car as we drove together to Sortavala have served as the primary data sources. The interviews conducted in Finland have been the secondary data in this article. While spending time with the research participants in Sortavala, I observed how heterosexual experiences in Sortavala’s sexscape can organize men’s mutual relationships. Women (having heterosexual sex) were not the only motivators for these journeys but the interest of maintaining the social relation of between these men was also of importance. I do not argue that all Finnish men have collective experiences of prostitution although prostitution itself manifests collective masculine culture (Häkkinen 1995). Some clients of prostitution might enjoy partaking in these activities out of personal interest and with discretion. Therefore, the concept of homosociality emerged during this fieldtrip after which I paid special attention to such instances in men’s stories when carrying out the first stage of open coding of the taped interviews. Since this article is limited to the reflective experiences and discourses of these two research participants, it does not claim to give any generalized picture of the commonalities of Finnish men’s bonding in sexscapes of Sortavala.

The Russian Karelian town of Sortavala is located approximately 70 kilometres from the Finnish border and used to be part of Finland prior to the Second World War. The population of town Sortavala is approximately 22 000. The Niirala checkpoint located in
Finnish North Karelia was opened at the end of the 1980s for international cross border traffic. Prior to this the border regions were off limits to foreign travellers to the Soviet Union. The only exception to this was the city of Petrozavodsk. Sortaval was a so-called closed town. As the Finnish-Russian border has become increasingly more open, Sortavala has proven to be a popular destination for Finnish tourists who venture east to gaze upon their old homesteads, visit significant World War II sites and to shop. Since the town was a closed town to foreigners, sex tourism hardly flourished there during Soviet times. Whether or not local prostitution existed during the Soviet era is hard to answer. As one woman activist in Sortavala once asked me rhetorically, ‘was there sex in Soviet times?’ During 2009 there were 934 006 border crossings. The sex or age distribution of Finnish or Russian border crossers is not registered by the Finnish border guard. With the proper travel documents, the Niirala-Värsilä border checkpoints are open to vehicle traffic around the clock.

In the Russian Karelian borderland, Finnish men dominate prostitution’s clientele.

Its proximity to the border makes this town enticing, especially to Finnish men living in the nearby border regions, but others as well. After crossing the border, Finnish men have the possibility to have sexual encounters without marketing themselves to women. These men can be relatively old, fat, unemployed and lacking in social skills but yet still consider themselves to be sexually desirable to much younger women. Raewyn W. Conell (2002) remarks that the process of transforming men into consumers of sex takes place alongside the fetishization of men’s sexual desire (Marttila 2006). With the relaxation of the border regime in recent years, Finnish men seem to have been socialized into buying of sex (effectively) in the borderland’s sexscapes. However, Finns partaking in sex tourism was already witnessed in Soviet times in touristic places such as St. Petersburg, Tallinn and Vyborg (Jokinen & Veijola 1990, Marttila 2008, Åström 1997). Therefore, there is a certain continuation in Finnish sex tourism to Russia.

Sortavala’s sexscape represents a traditional form of heterosexual prostitution. Homosexual prostitution might also exist, but unlike the heterosexual prostitution taking place, it goes unnoticed. The roadside prostitution once visible after the Niirala-Värsilä checkpoint has nowadays vanished. However, on the way to Sortavala one can still bargain for sex in the parking lots of certain cafes. In some of Sortavala’s hotels and bars, you can find women who offer their sexual services in exchange for money. Sortavala’s sexscapes of today are therefore less prominent and could even be described as being fairly modest, without provocative sex shows or shades of transgender orientation. Sortavala offers men who are not seeking any high-class services or performances a straightforward place to consume sex and the exotic and erotic cultural others. Estimating the numbers of women
involved in prostitution is difficult due to the illegal nature of the activity and because women might engage in prostitution irregularly and in different locations. According to the research participants, sex work merely constitutes supplemental income for some women and might be practiced only occasionally or, alternatively, on a daily basis by others.

During their stay research participants can have their cars serviced, get a haircut, buy alcohol and tobacco and take advantage of the cheaper petrol prices. They might seem more like commercial tourists than sex tourists in some situations. In general, going out for drinks is cheaper than in Finland and hotels are still relatively inexpensive in Sortavala for Finns, making the region lucrative to visitors. A sex tourism vacation experience here is feasible even on a modest budget. For Janne and Miika it was not the money spent, but the money saved that made them successful (expert) visitors. Nevertheless, the money flowing into the local economy from sex tourism is most likely an important revenue source for the region. And so the phenomenon continues despite its negative overtones (Ihamäki 2012).

At the time of the study, both research participants were unmarried and considered themselves to be single. Both men were also retired. According to my understanding, their monthly incomes were modest by Finnish standards. A significant part of Janne’s and Miika’s sexual relationships were limited to Russian-speaking women living in the border regions of Russian Karelia. It was obvious that they did not travel to Sortavala and its surroundings out of fear of getting caught cheating in Finland (see O’Conell-Davidson 1998). For them, crossing the border was more like having a collective (sexual) adventure. Without such a pastime, they would consider their everyday life in Finland to be rather dull. For them, visiting Sortavala and its environs had become as much of a bonding experience as it had become part of their respective sexual lifestyles. Neither Janne or Miika were ashamed of their sexuality or how it manifested itself in the sexscapes of Sortavala. The border was a possibility for them to enhance their sexual lives.

It is apparent that my gender and shared ethnicity affected the displays of the research participants’ masculinities during this trip. I was the audience of their erotic adventures as ‘conquerors’ of Russian-speaking women in the borderland. During our trip the older research participant especially wanted to prove his sexual potency. He wanted to make known how easy it is in the sexscape of Sortavala for him to procure a Russian-speaking woman for the purpose of having sex, an accomplishment that made journeys to the sexscape so rewarding.

During the trip I occasionally found myself in a position where I was considered to be ‘one of the guys’. It felt as though I too participated in the verbal sexual harassment of female Russian-speaking passers-by, an activity that Janne and Miika were keen on as we strolled the town’s centre (Marttila 2010). The authenticity of these expressions of manhood during the fieldtrip is, of course, a question that I had to evaluate. My own displays of gender in the field as a woman researcher might also include some elements that were
unintentional and more unconscious. Culturally we belonged to the same gender system but our gender displays changed within the context of these sexualized spaces of Sortavala. Upon noticing the strong male bonding taking place, I attempted to distance myself from the Russian-speaking women involved so as not to become a target of these men’s sexism and sexual harassment. From time to time, I felt as though I had become a quite uncomfortable agent in the field when witnessing and partaking in their collective ‘embodied erotized adventure show’.

Had I not been engaged in this research, as a woman I would have been inclined to simply walk away from the disturbing situations that I encountered in Sortavala, a passive reaction that would actually further strengthen the gender division and norms that are associated with this (sexist and racist) behaviour and practice. Had the research participants asked for my opinion on their behaviour I would answer truthfully. They did know that I would write about this trip and maybe they wanted to give (and felt social pressure to do so) a good show of Finnish (sex) tourism for the on looking Finnish female researcher and for themselves.

In general, complimentary images of the clientele of the sex business is hard to come by. Although my political opinion of prostitution is not heavy-handed, I find many elements of the sex trade to be oppressive to the women involved. When viewed subjectively, sex work might be experienced differently during different life stages and in different places of (voluntary) sex work, however certain social structures and processes often result in a striking commonality of sex work in the world over, one that exhibits similar risks and involves women with similar life stories.

Homosocial structuring of heterosexual prostitution

Sexscapes are places where men gather together to drink, socialise with one another and have sex. These experiences can be shared online afterwards (Jyrkinen 2005). For example, Anne-Maria Marttila (2004, 2008) has noticed in her research that the space of the erotic bar can be a certain homosocial space where men can enter into a dominant position over women in a traditional sense without the demands of egalitarianism or other social pressures. Men can relax and chat with each other as women are/were not the sole reason to frequent such places. This highlights the meaning of such social spaces and sexual practices as a way to bond with other men (Flood 2008). As Julia Conell-Davidson (1998) has argued visiting hostess clubs, striptease clubs and erotic dance clubs without partaking in any actual sexual services can serve as a means for bolstering sexualized masculine identity and male bonding through the objectification of women. According to Conell-Davidson (1998, 165–166) this furthers ‘an esprit de corps’. It is more akin to a ritualized act that fortifies the relationships among men in networks along with their masculine identities.
During the fieldtrip it became apparent that the way in which Janne and Miika were acting was in keeping with the spirit of male-bonding. The doings of their masculine identities – verbal sexual harassment, drinking with other ‘mates’ and having sex in ‘ethnosexual encounters’ – seemed to serve as a way to affirm their privileged (western) masculinity to each other and in relation to the Russian-speaking women and (men). Such forms of masculine affirmation in public places would be quite difficult to express so openly and flagrantly within the Finnish context, where the gender order is grounded publicly more or less on values of gender equality. Their idea of masculinity and sexuality in Sortavala’s sexscape was rooted in collective homosocial practices of conquest, control and domination.

Episode one in the field: Male bonding in a spirit of solidarity

The tourists do not know how to behave. They (women in prostitution) steal money. The money should be left in hotel’s reception where you leave your passport. It that sense I have been as a guide – many times advising how to do it (Janne instructing inexperienced Finnish sex buyers in Sortavala’s bar)

In the bars of Sortavala, men can talk and share their sexual and other experiences freely if they want to do so among other Finnish men. These shared sexual experiences create a closeness and solidarity amongst the vast group of Finnish ethnosexual consumers who cross the border. For example, Janne and Miika, not being Internet users, the only possible way for them to relive and pass along their ethnosexual encounters collectively was through their interaction with other congenial Finnish men in Russia or in Finland.

While we were sitting in a hotel bar, a Finnish man approached our table and took a seat. Janne and Miika began to converse with the man. Janne asked him right off the bat if he had done his ‘business’ already. The man replied affirmatively, stating that he had phoned the girl beforehand and met up with her immediately after his arrival to his hotel. Then they continued their discussion about the number of times they’d each visited Sortavala and shared previous experiences in the spirit of Finnish camaraderie. In the case of Sortavala, the act of buying or having sex is an important aspect of men’s visits to the region. It can be understood as collective action that makes prostitution prosper in the region. For example, one of my other research participants, Jaakko Lahtinen,7 stated to me that when he goes out to bars in Sortavala, other Finnish men routinely assume that he is also loo-
king to buying sex. However, he considered Finnish men who are buying sex in Sortavala to be losers and distanced himself from Finnish sex tourists in Sortavala.

Both Janne and Miika proudly identified themselves as ‘experts of prostitution system’ who know how to behave due their wealth of experiences visiting Sortavala. They set a clear rivaling division in this sexscape between Finnish men based on their experiences and achievements as ‘ethnosexual consumers’ (Nagel 2003). By this they confirmed their status and self-conceptualizations on masculinity and sexuality (Arxer 2011, Flood 2008).

Therefore, such male bonding interactions give men the possibility of ‘surveillance, policing and encouragement of their social and sexual relationships’ (Flood 2008, 356). Such discourses also establish social ranking among men (Arxer 2011, 399).

**Episode two in the field: Viewing desirable bodies on the street**

Pukeutuminen voi mahoton miten se pukeutuminen kiihottaa suomalaista miestä ku ne pukeutuu, pitkät piikkikorot, mustat sukkahousut ja kun kesä lämpenee tulee minihameet ja kaikki kampaukset ja kaikki nätätä.
(Janne)

The way how women dress up in Sortavala real turns on Finnish men. High heals, black stockings and miniskirts during summer time and all that how women do their hair. All are pretty.
(Janne)

Välillä kun istutaan siinä baarissa siinä kulkee monenlaista (kadulla), kävelee ees sun takaisin vähän niin kun näytillä.
(Miika kertoilee baarin ikkunan ohittavista naisista kadulla)

Sometimes when we sit in a bar we are watching women on the street. Walking the streets are various kinds of women. They walk while showing themselves.
(Miika speaks about the women passing a bar window on the street)

While sitting in one bar, Janne explained that they regularly spend time in that particular bar upon arriving in Sortavala in the afternoon. Since the place was adorned with huge had huge windows and a nice view of the street, it was a good spot for people watching or, in their case, women walking. When we took to the street, my participants also commented on the appearances of the women passing by. They stopped, ogled and evaluated them. They commented on these women’s body parts, dress and general appearance. These women were typically in their twenties, some with children in tow. Janne and Miika said to me in all seriousness that ‘girls’ mature much faster in Russia than in Finland.
It was really as if all the women occupying this space served as their sex objects and were open to their sexual conquest. Such practices were a sort of amusement and a means for male bonding for Janne and Miika. Having sex with a woman picked up from the street was an achievement that they were both proud of (Flood 2008, 347). I was more or less positioned in these episodes of (rude) heterosexual harassment as one of their buddies without any ‘sensitiveness’ or ‘respect’ given to female gender. Michel Flood (2008, 350) argues that male bonding feeds sexual violence against women and sexual violence against women feeds male bonding. In this case such (coercive) sexual harassment operated in both ways as a sign of men’s bonding.

**Episode three in the field: Bonding through women’s bodies**

Siellä nuoret tytöt niin ku haluoo vanhempaa miestä. (Janne)

There (in Sortavala) young girls are desiring older men. (Janne)

During the evening a group of Finnish men was seated at a table next to ours. When they noticed that I was a Finnish woman, a man much older than me suddenly said to me, ‘Well, if I had the choice, I would prefer to take this ‘Finnish maiden’. I grinned back at him as if it was a compliment. This comment, however, revealed that in this erotized bar space I was also the sexual object of older Finnish men. I was positioned as a woman who could be freely exchanged among these Finnish men inhabiting this sexscape as a body through which they might bond with each other (Flood 2008, Jokinen 2000). That comment also reveals that, at least for some older men without high statuses, it is quite difficult to have sex with younger women in their everyday surroundings in Finland. In the context of commercial sex, this has been made possible. In this peculiar way, I was set in a position where even I (despite being Finnish) could not be absolved of the Finnish men’s collective sexual desires in this bar space. Ethnicity plays an obvious role in Sortavala’s sexscape, but in the end it might have slightly different meanings among men if ‘Finnish maiden’ would be fine for sex as well in this sexscape.

The research participants, Janne and Miika, sometimes shared a hotel room in Sortavala. Nowadays they bunk separately during their visits to town. Jokingly they suggested that they could ‘take care of me’ in a shared room during this trip. In a sense they were not competing over me, rather their attitude towards me displayed a kind of sexual cooperation – ‘teamwork’. Obviously it would have been a triumph for them to bed a woman researcher. In practice, sharing the room cut their costs in Sortavala, but it also made possible for occasional shared moments of heterosexual sex with one or more wo-
men (Flood 2008). What role homoerotism and homosexuality play in such sexual encounters and in men’s social relations remains in the shadows – it is not talked about or referred to openly. Pease (2002) argues that for heterosexually oriented men homophobia could be the ‘suppression of homoerotic desire’ (Flood 2008, 354). The erotic charge is there, though whether or not it has elements of homoerotism or/and homosexuality is impossible to establish.

Commercial sex as a site for sexual and gender relationships often becomes ‘problematic’ in society for a variety of reasons. The male bonding that takes place within the context of prostitution (sex trade) carries a multitude of (troublesome) meanings. As Flood (2008, 355) puts it, the understanding of ‘the homosocial ordering of heterosexual men’s sexual relations is one aspect of the wider project of understanding men’s involvement in and negotiation of sexual and gender relations’. Within the context of heterosexual prostitution, expressions of homosociality among Finnish men serve to strengthen both shared perceptions of sexually available and willing Russian-speaking women and views of borderland prostitution as an ordinary means for these men to fulfil their sexual needs. Male bonding in this context involves not only the sharing of information and secrets but also the bolstering masculine and sexual identities – the ways in which these individuals conceptualize themselves as men. The racial and ethnic relationships at play likewise make commercial sex (sexscapes) a site in which questions of racism are central.

Taking a deeper, more nuanced perspective on the homosocial ordering of commercial sex would bring out from the shadows important aspects of masculine culture – its stereotypes and the ways in which it affects the sexual and gender relations of men in other contexts.

Notes
1 According to Connell (2005, 71) masculinity is ‘a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture’. Gender relations are therefore relational and hierarchical.
2 This article has been supported by the European Social Fund and the Regional Council of North Karelia.
3 The demand side of prostitution has often been at the centre of societal discourses in many Nordic countries during the past few decades. This has led to changes in prostitution policies and laws in some Nordic countries. In Finland the selling and buying of sexual services remains legal (though not in public places) if the person selling his or her services is at least 18 years old and has not been trafficked or pimped/procured.
4 The idea of hegemonic masculinity is changing according to the place and time, but it is hegemonic because it is the leading, ideal model of masculinity in that culture that holds power over other prevailing masculinities and women (Kimmel 1996). Such hegemonic position gives pattern of gender relations (Connell 2005).
5 In general women earn notably less than men in Russia.
6 Upon first mention in the article, I refer to each research participant by first and last name out of respect. This is also because, with the exception of two individuals, all of the research parti-
Cipants introduced themselves to me by first and last name. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

7 Jaakko Lehtinen has worked in Russia since the beginning of the 1990s, but nowadays only occasionally visits Sortavala. He worked in a high-ranking position in the business sphere of St. Petersburg and has had experiences with call girls in Russia.

8 In Finnish ‘suomineito’.

References


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Other material


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