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Sustaining and Contesting Commodity Frontiers: Gendered Bodies and Sex Work in Kenya

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Abstract: This contribution considers sex work as social reproductive work in gendered capitalist structures. Exploring the role that sex workers played and continue to play in Kenya, the article argues that this commercialized social reproductive labor has historically enabled and continues enabling commodity frontier expansion and extractive processes by supporting both the workers directly engaged in extractive economies, and the vulnerable households that would struggle to survive capitalist conditions otherwise. At the same time, sex work is an extractive capitalist labor in its own right, which allows women to independently accumulate capital, and so opens the possibilities to contest some gendered notions of the local economies.

Sex work is not only work, but also social reproductive work. In a gendered capitalist system, it has a dual character. On one hand, sex work reproduces workers, enabling capitalist dynamics of exploitation, while on the other hand, it is extractive in its own right, both internalizing and contesting capitalist logics by commodifying the social reproductive function. With that said, sex worker bodies underlie and constitute commodity frontiers; they are both used to support resource extraction and incorporation into the world economy, and they contest patriarchal economic processes by creating a separate avenue of extraction for women who are marginalized. This article explores these commodity frontier dynamics by focusing on Kenyan sex workers.

When discussing capitalist development and commodity frontiers, the focus tends to remain in the economic sphere, in formal production relations and dynamics. It is a long-standing feminist critique that such a focus misses a lot of important issues and processes that make economic dynamics possible in the first place, such as social reproductive labor (Federici 2004, Fraser 2015). Assessing processes of resource

incorporation into commodity regimes from the perspective of women allows us to see the ways that sexual divisions of labor and subjugation of women's reproductive labor are essential for the smooth functioning of economic relations and broader capitalist systems. Focusing on social reproductive labor as enabling capitalist dynamics also draws our attention to gendered bodies as sites of exploitation and resistance. As Sylvia Federici has argued, 'the body has been for women in capitalist society what the factory has been for male wage workers: the primary ground of their exploitation and resistance' (Federici 2004: 16).

Federici, of course, writes about European contexts. Taking her ideas more broadly, we would find that globally, laborers are exploited in a variety of contexts beyond factories, from plantations to boats to service industries. Yet despite different sites of work, the women's bodies that enable exploitation by providing social reproductive labors are a constant feature around any of these sites. Sex work is one form of reproductive labor, nearly ubiquitous, but woefully under-studied.

This contribution is based on data collected in Kenya since 2010 while working on different projects exploring questions of sex worker agency, organization, and participation in public life (Česnulytė 2017, 2019). Collecting life stories and in-depth interviews with women selling sex on the Kenyan Coast and in Nairobi, as well as years of work with sex worker organizations in the country, allow me to demonstrate the duality of sex work in the context of global capitalism. On one hand, the article traces how commodity frontier expansion has historically relied on commercialized social reproductive labor to reproduce laborers in the country and to make up for the increasing household vulnerability to shocks in these new capitalist realities.

On the other hand, I demonstrate how female sex workers contest gendered capitalist structures by extracting in their own right and creating alternative livelihoods for women. Finally, tracing the life and work strategies of women who sell sex, this contribution shows the ways that rural and urban locations are intertwined in shaping capitalist processes in Kenya.

Enabling commodity frontiers in Kenya

Social reproductive labor provided by women selling sex was crucial for spatial commodity frontier expansion through colonial occupations and, I argue, continues to enable extractive capitalist processes today. It does so in two major ways: by responding to the social reproductive needs of workers who are directly engaged in endeavors important for capitalist extraction; and by creating an alternative route of support for households that would not be able to survive extreme exploitation otherwise.

These dynamics also demonstrate the ways in which the livelihoods of families engaged in contemporary capitalist enterprise cannot be easily classed as rural or urban and would be better understood as the ever-shifting relation between the two, just as they were from the beginning of Kenya's incorporation into global capitalist structures.

Colonial extraction and sex work

The first written mention of women selling sex in what we know today as Kenya appears in records on the Uganda railway construction of the late 19th century (White 1990). It is along this newly constructed railway line that women from local villages started selling sex to male workers (both laborers brought from India, and local men) as they moved with railway construction. Imperial projects that were to enable commodity frontier expansion into new geographical areas relied on male laborers drawn from different parts of the Empire, and rarely considered these laborers' social reproductive needs beyond food.

Men working on railway construction were considered temporary laborers, so they were separated from their families for lengthy periods of time, often accommodated in crowded and brutal conditions lacking in basic hygiene with insufficient food provisions (Ruchman 2017). In such a context, women's commercialized social reproductive labor of intimacy and care contributed to making laboring on imperial projects bearable. The colonial state occasionally recognized this role of women, at times condoning prostitution to maintain control of migrant laborers as, for example, it did in South Africa in the early 1900s (Van Onselen 2001).

Like male railway workers, men who were targeted for work in colonial Nairobi – a city founded in 1899 as a bridgehead on the Uganda Railway – were separated from their families and intended as temporary residents in the segregated city who would return 'home' to the rural areas after their work was completed. As a result of these colonial labor control measures, in 1911, Nairobi men outnumbered women six to one (Bujra 1975: 217). Male laborers employed in colonial extractive sites often lived in overcrowded conditions with little privacy for lengthy periods of time.

Women, who came to live in Nairobi on their own, commercialized social reproduction and targeted these men by providing the 'comforts of home': a clean bed, home-made meals, intimacy, and privacy (White 1990). As such,



Graffiti on Kenya Railway Museum walls, Nairobi, 2019. Photo: Eglė Česnulytė.

colonial prostitutes made otherwise brutal working and living conditions of many male workers bearable. By extension, they enabled imperial extractive projects.

Contemporary extraction and sex work

Today tourism is central to the Kenyan economy not only because it is a major source of government revenue or foreign exchange, but also because it has high multiplier effects and its growth stimulates developments in other sectors (MoT 2020). The tourism sector also accounts for over 10% of total employment opportunities in the country (KNBS 2020). The general tendency in Kenya is that the informal economy accounts for 80-90% of the economy, and the tourism sector is no exception, as most tourism jobs are informal in nature.

While the Kenyan National Bureau of Statistics does not collect gender-segregated data on employment opportunities, feminists have long pointed out that jobs in the formal economy and better-paying jobs in the informal economy tend to employ men, while women's employment opportunities tend to concentrate in lower paid, fractional and more precarious sections of the market (Kinyanjui 2014, Kabeer 2014).

The life stories of sex workers that I collected in Mombasa in 2010-11 confirm these tendencies – before turning to sex work, many women attempted to find jobs in the tourism sector. Some of them worked for periods of time as maids, waitresses, or guards in resorts around Mombasa. While such jobs are hard to get and require at least a secondary education certificate – excluding many struggling less educated women in the area – they were not well-paid and were often seasonal, so women

struggled to make a living in these conditions. Informal sector employment opportunities were also limited for women, generally in areas of social reproductive work – cleaning, serving food and drinks, cooking, petty trade, massages – and poorly paid. It is in this context of gendered economic opportunities that many decided to turn to sex work.

Sex work in this context is not only an alternative for better earnings, but also an important part of a local economy that enables global capital extraction through the tourism sector. While colonial prostitutes were targeting men drafted into colonial armies or migrant laborers in towns, today many women focus on tourists, businessmen, and men employed in the local (tourism) industries. Although they might not be providing a clean bed and tea with sugar as in the 1910s (White 1990), they are still selling social reproductive labor that these men desire. They sell romantic entertainment and

the illusion of intimacy for Western tourists in their ‘sunset years’ (Omondi and Ryan 2020), the companionship of a ‘flashy lady’ for visiting businessmen, or sex and laundry services for the town’s working men, who are underpaid in the tourism sector and thus cannot afford a wife (Česnulytė 2019). As such, sex work is tightly intertwined with tourism industries, serving as a partial attraction in itself, an additional entertainment, and a support for the tourism labor force.

Sex work is important for the tourism sector not only because of the sale of social reproductive labor, but also because it supports many locally-owned small businesses and makes their existence possible. From local bars, clubs, restaurants, and discotheques, where sex workers and their clients are a significant source of profits, to beauty salons and petty traders specializing in sex worker outfits, to landlords who rent their rooms and houses to people



Fields and railway track next to sex workers’ drop-in clinic in Mowlem, Nairobi, 2023. Photo: Eglė Česnulytė.

engaged in the sex trade, to taxis and matatus ferrying sex workers from one hot spot to another in their nocturnal journeys; there is a whole local economy ecosystem that does well if sex workers are active and earning money. What we are observing here then, is the bodily labor of sex workers as an unacknowledged, yet important part of the global capitalist (gendered) extractive processes, both historically and today. It allows exploitation of local populations by providing fractional and commercialized social reproductive services that are needed for commodity frontier expansion.

Sex work as a family labor of precarious households

Agriculture is another cornerstone of the Kenyan economy – the sector accounts for 65% of the export earnings, provides livelihood for more than 80% of the Kenyan population, and is the main driver for the non-agricultural economy, providing inputs and markets for sectors such as construction, transport, tourism, education, and manufacturing (FAO 2023). Most Kenyans employed in agriculture are smallholder farmers, rely on family labor, consume most of their production to sustain themselves, and are characterized by high poverty rates and food insecurity (Kimathi 2022). While commercial agriculture is an old colonial commodity frontier that incorporated Kenya into global capitalist commodity regimes through tea and coffee cultivation, in recent decades horticulture – and new crops that came with it - became important in the Kenyan economy as well.

Jobs in agriculture are highly gendered – on commercial farms, permanent and better-paid jobs tend to employ men, and women usually are daily laborers or employed on temporary, flexible contracts that often do not guarantee regular hours or a living wage (Kaaria 2022, Dolan 2005). On smallholder farms, family labor is also often divided following a patriarchal logic, which puts women at a disadvantage (Aju et al 2022).

The gendered nature of agricultural jobs means that rural households are highly vulnerable to the loss of a male breadwinner, and struggle if

the male head of household loses his job, leaves the family or dies. In cases where the male breadwinner is lost, women's options are often limited locally, and many choose to migrate to town with the hope of being able to send remittances to their families. Kimathi (2022) found that remittances from family members is one of six key diversification strategies for rural smallholder households in Kenya. In my research, most women selling sex in Mombasa were sending remittances back to their rural families to support their parents, siblings, and, sometimes, their children financially.

The fact that sex work earnings are relied upon by rural families in distress is again nothing new in Kenya. White (1990) has documented how the prices charged and patterns of prostitution in colonial Nairobi were closely linked to weather conditions and harvests in rural areas; when harvests failed, rural families would send daughters to work for cash in the city. So, for some women, selling sex, performing family labor, and contributing income allows survival and serves as a safety net for precarious rural households that would not survive otherwise. This is important when considering the role smallholders play in commercial agriculture – many are farming commercial crops that are the core of the Kenyan economy on contract or without a contract.

Considering sex workers traveling to urban areas to commercialize social reproductive labor and earn income that would then help to reproduce their rural families allows us to see the duality of sex work in the Kenyan context. Both by supporting laborers whose social reproductive needs are not met, and by sending remittances back to rural families, sex workers enable other capitalist processes that are exploitative and make social reproduction difficult for parts of populations.

Contesting gender unequal capitalist structures through independent accumulation

While sex work enables extractive capitalist practices as discussed above, it is also a labor that contests local patriarchal structures by allowing independent capital accumulation for women who otherwise would not be able to



View of Dandora slum from one of Nairobi's sex worker drop in clinics, 2023. Photo: Eglė Česnylytė.

accumulate independently. Not all women support their birth families and send remittances back to their places of origin. Many women who do not fit or do not want to fit into traditional community structures find their way to cities and live independently while selling sex.

Bujra (1975, 1977) and White (1990) demonstrate how some women who sold sex in colonial Kenya broke away from their birth families, created networks of kin crossing ethnic divides in urban areas, and accumulated wealth that was usually not available to other women. Many became landlords, renting rooms

to new generations of urban poor, and living relatively comfortable lives. Similarly, today, some sex workers manage to accumulate enough money and invest those savings into commercial activities that go beyond traditional 'women's jobs'. While many build houses and become landlords just as their predecessors in colonial times, today women use their savings to open beauty salons and shops, and also move in businesses ranging from butchery to transport businesses as my research indicates. Some even manage to make a transition and end up working in civil society organizations or NGOs, as, for example, their experience of being a sex worker is a valuable asset in the HIV/AIDS industry. What we observe here then, is that sex work contests local patriarchal structures and allows women to independently accumulate and reinsert themselves in a more advantageous position in local capitalist structures. As a result, many choose not to remarry, establish themselves as heads of households and live independent and comfortable lives.

Body as commodity frontier

Different bodies are integral parts of commodity frontiers in different ways. While some bodies labor in fields and factories, other bodies ensure that they make it to the

workplace in the first place, are nourished, reproduced, and taken care of. While some bodies are clearly in rural or urban parts of Kenya, other bodies are in motion, so their labors in reproducing multiple bodies as clients or as family members are difficult to classify as rural or urban. What is important, though, is that the gender of bodies determines the ways in which they are incorporated in contemporary capitalist structures and the range of possibilities available for them.

Women selling sex extract money from men who have access to better financial opportunities than women in the local and international economy. Sex workers' bodies are used to provide social reproductive labor in exchange for payment. Because some workers are reproduced by sex workers, they can continue being exploited in their jobs in key economic sites – tourism, agriculture, industries, and so on. Distressed rural families that rely on sex worker remittances can also continue being exploited by global capital. So, sex work is a commodity frontier that expands and enables capitalist logics through commercialized social reproductive labor. It also is a labor that contests some local, patriarchal, capitalist arrangements by allowing women to accumulate independently and reinsert themselves in local economies at more advantageous positions.

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*All photos provided by the author.

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