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Sex work, gender and develop man in Vanuatu

Kate Burry¹

Abstract

The number of people engaging in sex work is increasing in the South Pacific, and the same is true in the context of Vanuatu (an archipelago nation located to the east of Australia) due to the demands of urbanisation alongside underemployment. To understand the experiences of people exchanging sexual acts for money and other goods in urbanising and developing settings, qualitative research was undertaken in Luganville, a rapidly developing town on the northern island of Espiritu Santo in Vanuatu. Those interviewed were male and female sex workers, 'middle men,' who manage sexual transactions, a client and an ex-boyfriend of a local sex worker. Discussions focused on the technicalities of Luganville's sex industry, as well as sex workers' sexual and reproductive health and rights, and the extent to which sex workers are able to exercise agency during interactions with clients. Expanding on Marshall Sahlin's (2005) concept of develop man , I analyse these interviews through the lens of gender and develop man in Vanuatu; that is, the ways in which gender underpins how ni-Vanuatu have understood, adopted, moulded, and rejected that which is introduced, and who is able to arbitrate, control, and even bestride these changes. I argue that analysing sex work through the lens of gender and develop man reveals the specific challenges to ni-Vanuatu sex workers exercising agency, as well as modern configurations of gender in Vanuatu in general.

Key words: gender, development, sex work, sexual/reproductive health rights, personhood

1. Introduction

Sex work seems to be on the rise in much of the Pacific, however remains illegal or on the legal margins, and there are reports of significant maltreatment faced by the Pacific Island sex worker population (Amnesty International, 2016; Godwin, 2012; McMillan, 2013; McMillan & Worth, 2011a; McMillan & Worth, 2011b; Stolz, Lutunatabua, & Vafo'ou, 2010). The research, undertaken over several months in 2016, on which this article is based was the first to explore the sex work industry in the rapidly urbanising context of Luganville on the island Espiritu Santo in Vanuatu. At the time of this research, Luganville was undergoing significant modernisation efforts, such as the expansion of the main wharf, funded by the Chinese government, to increase trade, industry and tourism to the island. This research is thus an important case study for analysing the links between the sex work industry, gender and development, and, importantly, the ability for sex workers to claim their sexual and reproductive health rights in this context of significant and rapid change.

In this article, I explore the sex work industry of Luganville as embedded in a historical analysis of the dynamics of, as I conceptualise, gender and develop man in Vanuatu.

2. Background

I begin below with a review of key literature: first I discuss the concept of gender and develop man , before considering Margaret Jolly's (2015) discussion of the practice of 'bride price' in Vanuatu as an example of gender and develop man , and then give an overview of existing literature on sex work in Vanuatu.

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2.1 Gender and develop*man*

Sahlins (2005) encapsulated some of the fundamental differences in how Pacific Islanders respond to the incursion of Western commodities, principles, and 'ways' in the concept of develop*man*. The concept of develop*man* refers to 'tradition' as a 'distinctive way of changing' (pp. 36) in relation to that which is introduced. In contrast to Western societies' underlying values of individualism and self-betterment, Pacific peoples 'are still embedded in relationships of kith and kin [... and] have not yet acknowledged the radical opposition between 'satisfaction' and 'obligation' by which we [Westerners] rule our lives.' (Sahlins, 2005, pp. 23). Furthermore, the modern-day Pacific cannot be described in the dichotomous terms of tradition versus modernity, as neither terms denote a static state of affairs (Sahlins, 2005). Rather, develop*man* is a nonlinear process that describes how people understand, adopt (or discard) and mould that which is 'introduced', and generally cope with contradictory colonial or neo-colonial structures (Mitchell, 2000; Sahlins, 2005).

While the concept of develop*man* is an important framework for thinking about 'development' for Pacific Islanders, these changes are deeply intertwined with gender relations. In general, the analytical framework of 'gender and development' explores how a person's gender impacts how they are affected by development efforts and processes, and prioritises the analysis of underlying gender constructs and subsequent power imbalances within specific cultural, economic, social, and historical contexts (CEDPA, 1996; Momsen, 2004; Rathgeber, 1995). However, here I rephrase 'gender and development' as 'gender and develop*man*' as this phrase more accurately represents the unique and complex ways in which various external influences have been mingled with, adopted, and resisted in the Pacific Island nation of Vanuatu, and as such have transformed gender relations. Through the conceptual framework of gender and develop*man*, we may analyse the ways in which events, things, and people are gendered and re-gendered as they interact and cope with introduced commodities, beliefs, and ways. Furthermore, historical gender and power relations in Vanuatu have underpinned the distinctive ways Vanuatu has changed, and who has control over Vanuatu's social, political, and economic transitions.

2.2 Gender and develop*man* in Vanuatu

To contextualise the unique process of gender and develop*man* in Vanuatu, it is important to briefly consider the broader encompassment of gender in Vanuatu as not merely comprising social constructions of individual sexed bodies, but also objects of wealth and ceremonial events. Historically, the accumulation and ceremonial exchange of wealth (such as pigs, woven mats, and yams) has been an important part of Melanesian 'big man' societies for male attainment of higher ranks within socio-political hierarchies (Jolly, 1994). However, as Strathern (1988) explains, exchange processes or transactions in Melanesia are not 'gender neutral', but rather 'men's and women's ability to transact with this or that item stems from the power this gendering [of the 'gift' or valuable for exchange] gives some persons at the expense of others, as does the necessity and burden of carrying through transactions' (pp. xii). In other words, where a valuable for exchange is gendered male, often in the sense that it is believed to have originated from the body of a man, this entails male ownership and control over these goods as they are 'not only embodied male labour but transformations of male bodies.' (Jolly, 1994, pp. 85).

The power and influence associated with the gendering of things entails that certain grade taking rituals *are* male, as is the authority ascribed to attaining a higher grade within the exclusively male socio-political hierarchy. While women's labour may be involved in the production of valuables, the gendering of valuables as male entails that women cannot exert control over the production and distribution of goods on an equal footing with men (Jolly, 1994). Ultimately, women's labour is 'eclipsed' during male-male ritual exchanges, as goods of supreme value, such as pigs and yams, 'takes on a singular male identity in transactions with other males' (Jolly, 1994, pp. 85).

Capitalism, colonial patriarchal and political systems, labour migration, and Christian gender paradigms of feminine modesty and domesticity have been significant factors in the process of gender and develop*man* in Vanuatu (Jolly, 1994; Jolly, 2000). To consider the complex gendered dynamics of develop*man*, I will focus on the introduction of capitalism which has been co-opted in ways that represent both continuity and rupture from historical gender relations and practices. The practice of bride price is one example of gender and develop*man* in relation to capitalism. Historically, bride price describes a custom where a man's family gives a woman's male relatives valuables (which are sometimes reciprocated), such as tusked pigs, woven mats, and shell money, in order for the two of them to become married and the two kinship groups to become connected (Jolly, 2015). Bride price has often been observed as the first in a series of compensation payments to the woman's family for the loss of her labour, and for the loss of her blood in childbirth (Jolly, 1994).

Concerns about bride price practices have emerged since the first explorers and missionaries visited Vanuatu (Jolly, 2015). Accordingly, debates also emerged over whether bride price was a gift, or symbolic of the commodification of women entailing that a husband has possession over his wife due to the fact he has ‘paid’ for her. Criticisms of bride price mostly centred on the latter, and the integration of capitalist commodity principles contributed to the expansion of this conception (Jolly, 2015). Money is now often incorporated into, or sometimes replaces customary payments (i.e. payments of traditional forms of wealth such as pigs and mats) of bride price. Consequently, money has been seen to ‘distort’ the practice, not only via the inflation of the financial cost of bride price, but also in terms of perceptions of what the payment means (Jolly, 2015). Specifically, what the inclusion of capitalist forms of payment (i.e. money) in bride price promotes is the perception of women as a commodity within a marital transaction. This perception, however, does not eliminate the former notion of bride price as a gift-like exchange signalling the ongoing relations between clans. Rather bride price, as with other aspects of gender relations in modern Vanuatu, can be seen as a complex internalisation, and a mingling of the two conceptions (Jolly, 2015).

The above analysis of the transitioning conceptions of bride price reveal how the incorporation of capitalist values of individual satisfaction and possession, and tokens of prestige linked to accumulative wealth under this system (i.e. money), have been co-opted in gendered ways. The underpinning dynamics of gender and development has meant that ni-Vanuatu male’s interactions with capitalist notions and forms of wealth, mixed with colonial and missionary interpretations of bride price, has manifested in ways that have brought about adverse effects for women. Specifically, some ni-Vanuatu men have been reported to perceive bride price as an economic transaction that entitles them to exercise control over their wives, including through the use of violence (Hess, 2009; Jolly, 2015). However, as Jolly (2015) suggests:

‘...perhaps this [oscillating understanding of bride price as gift and/or commodity] is not just dependent on the temporal phases in a wedding and beyond, but on the gendered perspective of the interlocutor. For a violent husband, the worth of a woman *does* seem to be the equivalent of her bride price.’ (pp. 72, emphasis in original)

It is important, then, to consider not only broader notions of traditional customs and colonial incursions along gendered lines, but also the more intimate negotiations of those socio-political beliefs and practices, especially as they relate to gender power dynamics. In the instance of bride price, this necessitates a critical engagement with the ways in which capitalism has been incorporated into bride price transactions, both overtly via cash payments, and in terms of capitalist commodity-based values and perceptions.

Gender in Vanuatu needs to be understood in broad terms, encompassing a multiplicity of factors that underpin life in Vanuatu. The sex work industry is further revealing of some of the tensions related to the process of gender and development in Vanuatu.

2.3 Sex work in Vanuatu

Vanuatu is an archipelago nation in the South Pacific with a population of approximately 300,000, around one third of whom are under 15 years of age (United Nations, 2019). Vanuatu has over a hundred indigenous languages; however, Bislama (an English-based creole language) is Vanuatu’s lingua franca, and children who end up in formal education will go on to learn either English or French. Vanuatu gained independence from their English and French colonisers on the 30th of July 1980. Since independence, the capital city of Port Vila on Efate Island, and Luganville on Espiritu Santo (considered the northern capital) have seen an upsurge in ni-Vanuatu moving into town to find work in the cash economy. However, paid work, especially for the sizeable youth population, is often difficult to attain, resulting in very high unemployment rates and few opportunities to take part in further training (Vanuatu Young People’s Project, 2006). The Vanuatu Young People’s Project (2006) report also states that even for young people who are able to gain paid employment of some kind, wages are low. In light of the lack of economic opportunities for young people, the report also acknowledges an ‘increase in transactional sex work in Port Vila’ (Vanuatu Young People’s Project, 2006, pp. 56).

While this statement was mostly based on anecdotal evidence, the claim has been elsewhere substantiated, such as in a UNICEF (2010) report of a survey of 510 youth from Port Vila, Malakula, and Tanna. Of these 510 youth, 326 had had sex, 66 (including 22 males) had engaged in commercial sex (i.e. sex in exchange for money), and 101 in transactional sex (i.e. sex in exchange for other goods such as alcohol, kava, marijuana, clothes, food, or transport).

Only 39 percent of those who had engaged in commercial or transactional sex reported that they had used a condom the last time they had sex. McMillan and Worth (2011a) also produced a comprehensive report of qualitative research undertaken with sex workers in Port Vila in 2010, revealing many challenges Port Vila-based sex workers face, including around condom negotiation.

Despite evidence that people who engage in sex work are vulnerable to abuse and harassment (Amnesty International, 2016; McMillan & Worth, 2011a; UNICEF, 2010), sex work activities are largely illegal in Vanuatu under Sections 101 and 148 of the Penal Code, including soliciting for 'immoral purposes' (Godwin, 2012, pp. 177). Thus, people who are abused in the context of undertaking many activities associated with sex work in Vanuatu are further precluded from seeking justice.

Threats to the wellbeing of ni-Vanuatu sex workers is often linked to the stigma and shame associated with being sexually active outside of marriage (particularly for women), and this stigma is compounded by the public perception of sex work as a product of modernisation. This association between sex work and modernity means sex workers are perceived by their communities and by community gatekeepers (mostly men) as a direct threat to *kastom*, a catch-all term for traditional beliefs, values and practices in Vanuatu 'which distinguishes the indigenous from the foreign' (Cummings, 2008, pp. 133). Foreignness and its ties to *rabis fasin* (dirty or trashy behaviour, including 'Western' dressing up, e.g. women wearing trousers, short skirts/dresses, or shorts) also has links to the transmission of *rabis sik* (i.e. sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS) (Cummings, 2008).

Further to the apparent tensions between *kastom* versus modernity and 'foreignness,' Mitchell (2002; see also Cummings, 2008) observes how the stigmatising phrase *woman blong rod* ('woman of the road'), a euphemism for women who sell sex, is a transposition of the phrase *rod blong woman* ('the path of women'). 'Rod blong woman' is associated with the metaphorical understanding of women as 'paths' in *kastom*: through marriage and reproductive labour their wombs are 'paths' connecting clans to future generations, and their productive labour is an integral part of the upkeep of *kastom* ceremonies, and in graded societies, the movement of (often male) kin to higher ranks (Jolly, 1994). So, sex workers in Vanuatu are not only on the margins of Vanuatu society, but are the antithesis of feminine paradigms, and are even conceived to be the catalyst for broader social issues, such as youth delinquency and sexual assault (Cummings, 2008).

3. Methods

Over several months mid-2016, I undertook qualitative research with sex workers, middle men, and other men in Luganville, Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu. I conducted a total of 23 interviews throughout this research: 16 with female sex workers, three with male sex workers, three with middle men (who facilitate transactions between sex workers and clients), one with a client, and one with an ex-boyfriend of a sex worker. Having lived and worked in the area of sexual and reproductive health and rights in Luganville, and being fluent in Bislama, meant I had the appropriate community knowledge, connections and language skills that enabled me to contact people involved in sex work.

Participants were initially recruited by voluntary response sampling method via a local youth worker and four health workers who had connections with people involved in sex work, and who also all had a sound professional understanding of confidentiality and informed consent. Subsequent participants were recruited via snowball sampling where participants spoke to others in their networks (i.e. sex workers spoke with other sex workers) and told them about the research. The voluntary and targeted nature of the sampling methods, using professionals and acquaintances who were already known to potential participants, was crucial given the sensitive nature of the research and the covert nature of sex workers' income earning activities (Dewey & Zheng, 2013). This research gained approval from the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics committee, as well as a research permit from the Vanuatu Cultural Centre prior to its commencement.

Semi-structured interviews were held in private spaces chosen by participants prior to the interview, usually in kava bars, which is a key location for sex work transactions, thereby assisting participants to reflect on that aspect of their lives and livelihoods (Elwood & Martin, 2000; Manderson, Bennett & Andajani-Sutjahjo, 2006). Interviews were semi-structured to enable a more conversational tone while still having core questions in order to grasp 'descriptive, thoughtful or emotional' information about particular experiences (Longhurst, 2003, pp. 119-121). Key literature on researching sex work guided the ways questions were asked to give the men and women who were interviewed more control over the conversation (Chapkis, 1997; Dewey & Zheng, 2013).

Specifically, questions were asked in general terms to allow the person being interviewed to decide the extent to which they wanted to draw on their own experiences. An example of how I framed questions is, instead of asking ‘How did you begin as a sex worker?’ I would ask ‘How do people initially get involved in sex work?’ (Dewey & Zheng, 2013). Research on sex work can also be both ethically and practically challenging, so I paid careful attention to the ongoing informed consent of all participants, for instance participants were regularly reminded throughout interviews they did not have to answer a question if they felt uncomfortable, and that they could pause or stop the interview at any point.

The privacy of interviews and the confidential nature of any information provided by participants was prioritised, keeping in mind ‘that most sex workers only selectively disclose their income generating activities.’ (Dewey & Zheng 2013, pp. 20). It is for these reasons that pseudonyms are consistently used for participants, no identifying information has been revealed, participants were not asked to sign anything (they instead gave verbal consent), the locations of the interviews were private and out of ear shot of others, and only a selective few (i.e. the youth worker and health workers) beyond the research participants knew of the specific nature of the research.

The conversations broadly covered entrance into sex work; what and how much is given in exchange for sex; the kind of people that pay for sex; condom use; awareness of STIs/HIV and treatment seeking behaviour; awareness and use of family planning methods; and risks and challenges faced by sex workers. The interviews were all conducted in Bislama, which I then transcribed and coded based on themes that emerged from interviews using the software NVivo. I translated all quotes used in this article into English.

4. Selling sex in Luganville: Research findings and analysis

The findings of this research fall into two key themes: the technicalities of the sex work industry of Luganville, and the extent to which sex workers are able to exercise agency in relation to their sexual and reproductive health and rights. Below is an overview of my discussions with research participants in relation to how the sex work industry and sexual transactions operate, and the wellbeing of those involved in the industry.

I think that sometimes you’re stuck at your husband’s home, and you find it hard to get enough money, then you see a friend of yours [earning money via sex work], then you think – ‘Perhaps I can also try this kind of behaviour, then I’ll make money – I can pay for sugar, pay for food for us, soap...’ Maggie (female sex worker, 37 years)

There’s the kind of thing where we sit down at a nakamal [kava bar] to drink kava, but if you see a man come and buy lots of kava, then you say, ‘Hey, that guy’s got money, let’s try and pinimnekblo hem?’ [‘stick a pin in his neck,’ slang for soliciting money, often as part of sex work] [laughs]. It’s like that. Sometimes... yes, lots of times at the nakamal. But once a man meets you at a nakamal, and he knows your number, you’ll just start receiving lots of calls from those men who want to give you money, that kind of thing. Sarah (female sex worker, 23 years)

These quotes by Maggie and Sarah reveal several key points regarding why people may enter into sex work: due to financial need (particularly for women with dependants, including married women, however lack of parental support was also identified by younger participants), and as part of participating in the social life of town. The quote from Sarah also reveals a challenge experienced by many sex workers of setting boundaries around interactions with clients, who may demand ongoing contact after a transaction has concluded. Participants also identified relationship breakdown as another reason behind engaging in sex work, especially where a household provider had left and provided no further support, and some cited engagement in sex work as a form of revenge against unfaithful partners. For some participants, engagement in sex work was the result of encouragement or coercion from peers, some of whom may be involved in the sex industry themselves, and some of whom are young men who have some social or financial incentive to engage their young female peers in sexual transactions at the request of clients or middle men.

As the final point above may indicate, there appears to be an extensive network of people involved in any given transaction. Middle men in particular play a significant role in facilitating transactions between clients and sex workers. Throughout this research, the hierarchical structure of the middle man system also became apparent. The three middle men interviewed for this research all seemed to be of a higher status, with access to wealthier clientele, and each reportedly had the contact numbers of around 50 female sex workers. These middle men are also paid, or take a cut of the money provided by the client.

Younger men play a similar role as intermediaries in sexual transactions, brokering interactions between clients and young women whom they know from their street or area, however they are not necessarily paid, at least not to the extent of higher-level middle men. Younger men may also be employed by higher level middle men as 'runners'; for instance, they are sent by a middle man to collect a female sex worker from her house and drop her at a place specified by the client. These young men had less claim over the money provided by the client, and are often instead compensated by the middle man in the form of marijuana or kava.

Freddie: Sometimes I'm around, but if I'm not present at the time, there'll be another one of my boys who'll be around.

KB: So, you and your brother [also a middle man] have some boys as well?

Freddie: Yes, my brother and I, we've got some boys. If a client comes and requests a woman, if we're too busy, the two of us send one [boy] to go and arrange [the transaction] with the woman. But if our boys aren't around, we will just go. They are all young guys; we can't deal with older men, only young guys – they're easier for us to control.

KB: How old are they?

Freddie: Like, 18 to 25.

KB: Do they also get commission?

Freddie: Their commission, we re-pay them in a different way... they don't receive a cut out of the money we get – that is for us. But there are ways we can compensate them for their work. Like, we'll give him a small packet of marijuana, and he'll feel that's sufficient. Most of them really like smoking weed, so when they want to smoke weed, then, OK, give them some weed, 'Go and find...' like this. But some, if they don't smoke weed, we'll give them kava if some has been prepared, or 1000 vatu, enough. Freddie (middle man, 24 years)

Clients, as the quote below by Jeremy reveals, were often described as 'men with money', namely, older men in paid employment:

Older guys have money, men that work – middle-aged men, married men. They have money because they work, so these are the guys who pay for c**t. Jeremy (middle man, 29 years)

Men who work in the public sector, in politics, and private sector business are amongst the higher paid individuals in modern, urban Vanuatu, and they are often conferred (including by participants in this research) a 'big man' status in this setting. Traditionally, as noted above, 'big men' earned their influence in societies via the accumulation and ceremonial exchange of objects of wealth and the slaughter of pigs. However, with the interspersed of capitalist economics, and a centralised Westminster system of government, this key masculine identity has shifted and moulded as a result. Importantly, within the sex industry, clients' position as 'big men' reveals significant discrepancies in financial and social power, which underpins the abuses and challenges faced by sex workers.

While some sex workers shared examples of exerting their agency with clients, for example stating that the transaction will not go ahead unless a condom is used, every sex worker involved in this research had experienced physical and sexual violence at some point. The violence ranged from harassment by clients, clients' refusal to use condoms, having bottles broken over them and stones thrown at them, to instances of forced marriage and pregnancy. Deception by clients was also a common issue described by sex workers in this research, for instance clients giving a smaller amount of money than was previously agreed upon, and agreeing to use a condom, before discarding it before, or removing it part way through sexual intercourse without consent.

Because mostly they [the man] want it like that [sex without a condom], because plastic, like, you don't feel good. Like, sometimes maybe they'll bring one [a condom], but when they go and have sex some will lie to the woman – they'll pretend that they've torn [the condom packet], they'll tear it, then just throw it away. Or sometimes, like, you put it on, and when you feel like you don't feel anything – like, you don't feel good – you take it off. This happens to lots of young... like, when it's happening [sex], once they've finished doing it, they'll just think about [STIs/HIV] after. Andrew (client, 27 years)

There was a strong and consistent narrative of clients' possession of the money involved in the transaction entailing their power over the proceedings, and potentially even sex workers' ongoing indebtedness to them which was highlighted by one female sex worker's account of being forced to become pregnant by a client, and another's story of a sex worker acquaintance being forced into a marriage with a client.

The power and control clients have over the terms and conditions of sexual transactions is significant, due to their financial ownership and position of relative socio-political authority.

4.1 ‘Like, we adopt the foreign attitudes’: Sex Work, Gender and Development

In this section, I discuss the findings outlined above in relation to the concept of gender and development, as embodied in the above quote by John (middle man, 34 years) where he was relating the increase in people engaging in sex work to the growing consumption of foreign media, principally pornography. I consider ways in which sex work exposes some of the key tensions related to life in town, which represents foreign ills and dependency on the cash economy, and village life, which represents respect for *kastom*, or traditional ways, including indigenised Christianity. I then argue that modern gendered paradigms related to women in Vanuatu inherently exclude sex workers, thus limiting their access to their rights as (gendered) persons, where gender is significantly intertwined with personhood in Vanuatu (Taylor and Morgain, 2015).

Generally, as discussed above, there appears to be a tension between urban and rural life, and the uneasy assumptions and sense of rupture associated with the former, as opposed to the sense of continuity and rootedness associated with the latter (Jolly, 1994; Mitchell, 2000). This tension influences fraught social perceptions of sex workers. Sex workers in Vanuatu seem in many ways to embody the problematizing of modernity; they are urban dwellers who are reliant on the cash economy, and are deemed as corrupt women who disrupt the ‘*rod blong woman*’, thereby in many ways subverting gender norms. Sex workers, then, seem to be positioned at the crux of the gendered contention between tradition and modernity, or village and town life, in Vanuatu.

The ways in which sex workers disrupt the ‘*rod blong woman*’ are twofold: firstly, in relation to women’s productive and reproductive duties as part of complex communal life in Vanuatu, and, secondly, in the disassociation of their labour from the money gained via sex work. The ‘*rod blong woman*’ reveals women’s agency in Vanuatu as encompassed by their social and kinship roles in relation to producing goods for exchange and consumption, and the continuity of the family line (Wardlow, 2006). However, this productive and reproductive duty towards the male partner and his kin becomes more complex in the case of sex work, which can be observed in the instances of forced marriage and pregnancy by clients shared by sex workers in this research. Sex work, conversely, is productive only for the sex worker, while the client gains nothing, at least in accumulative terms. Moreover, there is a clear divide here between sexual pleasure and procreation, where (conceptually at least) the former is the entire basis for the interaction, with no lingering, or overriding purpose (such as for the continuation of the family line). Sex workers may, therefore, be perceived as rupture in the most fundamental sense, as they attempt to operate outside of women’s typical social and reproductive duties in Vanuatu (Wardlow, 2006).

Furthermore, in subsistence communities, and during ceremonial exchanges and grade-taking rituals, women may be ascribed ‘*moral power* deriving from the fact that they perform more of the daily labour in herding’ (Jolly, 1994, pp. 73, emphasis added), even if their labour becomes ‘eclipsed’ during male-male exchanges. Town life, on the other hand, is notable for its cash-dependant economic system which creates an ‘increasing disembodiment of wealth from its origins in production’ (Jolly, 1991, pp. 77): in other words, money (or other goods bought with money) does not have obvious ties to its producers. According to this analysis, sex workers are not necessarily ascribed any ‘moral power’ over the transacting of money or goods for sexual pleasure, as the money or goods used in the exchange process are disassociated from sex workers who have had no role in their production. However, the potential value that may be attributed to sexual pleasure by clients may be seen as a key determinant in how sexual transactions are understood, and is worth considering.

The extent to which clients consider sexual pleasure as a valuable or ‘gift’ that is the result of a labour performed by sex workers, thus ascribing them moral power, seemed to be a point of contention in this research, and is a decision that is under the authority of the client. Consider this passage of dialogue from John (middle man, 34 years) explaining the different perceptions of money given in exchange for sex in villages versus town, where the former is more like a gift and the latter a commercial transaction:

John: [In the village] it’s up to you. You just give how much money you want to give. Because they [women in the village] don’t know what it is to earn money from sex; they’re not expecting anything, it’s up to your heart to give them.... In the village, you can have sex for free because they don’t know the life in [Port] Vila, or in town. [...] In town, it’s become like a business.

KB: But in the village...

John: It's up to your heart. I have sex with her, ok, and I give you 1000/2000 Vatu [USD8.80/17.50] which is my heart I give to you because I have had sex with you.

This dialogue reveals a gendered divide in the social perceptions of the role of money in sexual relations. Where sex workers are part of the business-like sex work industry of town, it seems that commodity-based perceptions of monetary transactions take precedence. In the village, on the other hand, the exchange of money for the 'gift' of sexual pleasure is 'up to your heart'. Arguably, this latter perception could be due to the view that rural areas are less corrupted by the harsh, money-driven, and 'foreign' ways of town; a view that is extended to social perceptions of women who frequent these spaces. Thus, just as women more generally in Vanuatu are perceived along the divisive gendered lines of either 'good' *kastom* and Christian women, or as 'women of the road', the interpretation of money as a part of sexual liaisons may similarly be perceived in dichotomous terms depending on the woman who is involved in the exchange or transaction. Notably, though, it is the male client who decides how the transaction will be comprehended. Here we are reminded of how the meaning ascribed to modern transformations of bride price depends on the 'gendered perspective of the interlocutor.' Similarly, for a violent client, drawing once more on Jolly's (2015) wording, the worth of a sex worker *does* seem to be equivalent to the payment he gives.

Here, the discussion relates to the concept of gender and develop*man*, or the distinctive gendered ways in which ni-Vanuatu men arbitrate and negotiate emergent practices and commodities. The sex industry not only reveals internal socio-economic inequities as, generally, men and women follow different trajectories within the sex work business, but the way each transaction is understood and treated also depends on the prescribed discursive power of clients as modern 'big men' (men with money and who have relative socio-political authority). Relatively speaking, sex workers are able to exert little authority in terms of how the transaction is comprehended and managed. When a client decides that his payment means that the sex worker is indebted to him in terms of sexual satisfaction, and even ongoing rights to sex and, in extreme cases, babies (Jolly, 2001), sex workers have a limited ability to contest these imposed conditions without violent consequence. Sex workers' position on the legal peripheries, and their defiance in relation to *kastom* law where they may face fines, or in some cases violence, exacerbate their vulnerability as they have no recourse to justice in instances where they have been abused.

The tensions the sex work industry exposes in relation to the gendered values attached to *kastom* and Christianity, and those attached to modernity and town life ultimately links to the gendered personhood of ni-Vanuatu sex workers. As Taylor and Morgain (2015) explain, in Vanuatu '[p]ersonhood is [...] conceptualised as 'engendered' in both senses of the word: as fundamentally entangled with social codes of gender, and as brought forth through specific contexts, moments, practices, and experiences' (pp. 2). The sex industry in Vanuatu is deeply intertwined with 'social codes of gender', yet it may also be seen to be a context in which the gendered personhood of clients may be 'brought forth'. The sexual transaction for men may be an expression of modern configurations of masculinity; namely, of masculine virility (Jolly, 2016), of prestige due to the power accrued by having money at one's disposal (mingled with capitalist notions of possession and satisfaction), as well as the continuity of patriarchal socio-political power and male-male (i.e. client-middle man) negotiations and exchanges of wealth.

On the other hand, the sexual transaction does not appear to be a context where the (gendered) personhood of female sex workers may be recognised or 'brought forth'. Male personhood may be 'brought forth' in the context of sexual transactions as part of ni-Vanuatu males' ability to negotiate emerging social and moral codes of gender in Vanuatu. However, female personhood remains defined (and confined) by preconceived gender paradigms informed by *kastom* and indigenised Christianity, from which urban dwelling female sex workers appear to be disqualified. Thus, it appears female sex workers' personhood *cannot* be 'brought forth' during sexual transactions, as the acceptable manifestations of female personhood are inherently, and explicitly non-existent within this context. So, according to this argument, sex workers are essentially deprived of personhood during transactions with clients and middle men, thereby underpinning the extent to which they are also limited in their ability to enact agency or resistance within this social context, with the constant threat of violence and coercion from any client who perceives their right to control the interaction outright.

5. Conclusion

In this article I analysed the sex work industry in Luganville, Vanuatu from the framework of gender and develop*man*. Develop*man* (Sahlins, 2005) contextualises how Pacific Islanders adapt to, co-opt, reject, and generally cope with contradictory colonial and neo-colonial structures.

However, in Vanuatu gender underpins this process, especially with respect to who is able to access, control, arbitrate, and interpret those introduced commodities, beliefs, and ways.

The dynamics of gender and development in Vanuatu have a long history of men's access to, and control of aspects of colonisation, Christianity, and capitalist economics. This male access and control over these incursions can be perceived as continuity from masculine roles and identities (e.g. 'big men'), and also as related to the introduction of colonial patriarchal principles. The transformations in the practice of bride price reveal the complex gendered landscape of contemporary Vanuatu where multiple paradigms, norms, values, and practices have mingled, sometimes in ways that have brought about adversity, particularly for women.

In the second half of this article I discussed research I undertook on the sex work industry in Luganville, Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu, in 2016. I described the key findings of my conversations with sex workers, middle men, and other male non-sex workers, before analysing these findings through the lens of gender and development. As with the process of gender and development and the practice of bride price, male clients of sex workers seem to hold a significant portion of the discursive power over the interpretation of transactions; where a client decides his payment of money to a sex worker is 'akin to buying alienable commodities in a store' (Jolly, 1994, pp. 137-138), this may underpin his subsequent use of coercive control where he perceives his ultimate authority over the proceedings as the possessor of the 'products' of his purchase.

Thus, the instances of abuse faced by ni-Vanuatu sex workers is not separable from broader patterns of gender and development in Vanuatu: their experiences do not happen in isolation from the gendered context in which they are working. The experiences of ni-Vanuatu sex workers expose the prescribed gender paradigms from which they are marginalised. Furthermore, to the extent that personhood in Vanuatu is inextricably tied to social codes and expressions of gender, female sex workers may be divested of (gendered) personhood by clients and others in the context of sexual transactions which is problematic when it comes to their ability to exert their agency, such as regarding decisions related to their health or personal boundaries. However, gender and development also offers a contextually appropriate and sensitive framework from which we may move towards the re-negotiation and reconfiguration of autonomous and relational "forms and expressions of gendered person[s]" (Taylor & Morgain, 2015, p. 2) that is inclusive of such marginalised groups, and a situation of safer working conditions for sex workers.

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