



Original Article

Oil, sex, and temporary migration: The case of Vienna City, Sekondi-Takoradi, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Does the presence of temporary sex migrants trailing a resource boom cause crime, lead to a breakdown of morality, trigger a crisis of sexually transmitted diseases, and depress property values? While popular representations suggest that the answer to each of these questions is an emphatic 'yes', and hence the 'right to the city' of sex workers should be revoked, preliminary primary data unobtrusively and indirectly collected from sex workers trailing a resource boom in a West African port city suggest that the posited direct connection between prostitution and socio-economic 'bads' is not always definitive. Further research is required to probe popular characterisations of temporary sex migrants, the effect of sex work on resource-rich cities, and how they vary at different stages of the oil industry. For now, however, the evidence suggests that there is the need for alternative urbanism that recognises sex workers' 'right to the city' in ways that can make the state use its powers to support rather than exclude such minority groups.

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1. Introduction

While research (Rosewarne, 2010; Page and Mercer, 2012) shows that some migrants work in precarious conditions, there is a substantial body of evidence which suggests that temporary migration can offer reprieve from poverty (e.g., Saunders, 2012; Carling and Hoelscher, 2013), prompting John Kenneth Galbraith, a well-known institutional political economist, to argue that '[m]igration. . . is the oldest action against poverty'.¹ For this reason too, Henri Lefebvre (1970 [2003]) endorsed policies to promote migration to cities and forcefully argued that cities must be for all, and not fashioned after the image of the rich, mighty, and powerful. This idea is widely regarded as the 'right to the city' and has been greatly extended and espoused by Harvey (2008), a towering figure in contemporary urban political economy. For Glaeser (2011), migration to urban centres is a *Triumph of the City*.

Sekondi-Takoradi, a twin-city in Ghana, is currently experiencing substantial migration following the recent discovery, production, and exportation of oil (Obeng-Odoom, 2012). This outcome is not surprising because it is well established that temporary migration invariably accompanies resource extraction, although the rate of migration may differ according to the stage (growth, stagnation,

decline, and collapse) of the industry (Nyame et al., 2009). These migrants work in various sectors, including the sex industry. That is evidently the case in Ghana's post 2007 oil city, and especially in Vienna City, a settlement in Sekondi-Takoradi 'notorious' for sex work.

The entrance to Vienna City is located at the Shippers' Council Roundabout, House 2, Cardmore Pharmacy. It is near the luxurious Akromah Plaza and Captain Hook Restaurant in Takoradi, the twin of Sekondi. 'Vienna', as it is popularly called by taxi drivers, is open most of the time to its large customers. From 11am to 4am, however, is the official time to visit this entertainment site in Takoradi. The Vienna City Club is fitted with a casino, poker machines, and pool tables, among other electronic entertainment devices that can be seen in clubs in Australia, the USA, the Netherlands, the UK, and other industrialised countries. In turn, it is a magnet for many expatriates and people with a taste for 'overseas' experiences in the local setting of Takoradi.

The atmosphere in Vienna City can be, and often is, electrifying. A range of music genres blasts from loud, gigantic and hi-tech speakers. From afar, one can have a foretaste of what lies in Vienna City. Beginning in the large car park and even beyond it, through to the main club premises – indeed the entire Vienna City – one can see and feel the frenzy in the atmosphere. Within the club, activities vary: some visitors drink at the bar or play games while others relax by looking around.

In the midst of these activities, migrants in sex work or, the 'sisters', as some taxi drivers call them, are busily working: negotiating, persuading, or inviting, sometimes through their great

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¹ Taken from P.7, *Awake!*, 'Immigration: Dreams and Realities', February 2013.

dance moves and good looks in a theatrically impressive setting. To one observer commenting generally about women he had seen in Sekondi-Takoradi, they can be very 'seductive' and their presence, 'an embodiment of the great beauty of its people and culture' (Addo, 2013, p.11). Anyone who has read 'cities, culture and happiness' written by the happiness economist, Frey Bruno (Bruno, 2008) will be led to the conclusion that Vienna must be a very happy place for all and that migration scholars are indeed right: that migration can offer sex workers a route out of poverty.

However, this would be a hasty conclusion. A great danger looms for the sex workers in Vienna City: their 'right to the city' is under threat because most of the comments on the sex industry and the migrants working therein have been decidedly negative. Vienna City is typically regarded as plagued by high levels of crime, immorality, and disease and hence blights prices or values of adjacent real estate (see, for example, Boyefio, 2012; Kokutse, 2012; Essien, 2011; Ghana News Agency, 2012, 2013).

These media discourses require urgent attention for two major reasons. First, the media is a major part of the oil story, formulating expectations and disseminating information about the extractive industry. Indeed, generally, media discourses are a major part of Ghana's urban development processes because they directly and indirectly influence public policy and shape the views of people (Bob-Milliar and Obeng-Odoom, 2011; Selormey, 2013). Second, these sentiments are widespread. They are held by people of influence beyond the media. State officials such as those in the planning department of the Sekondi-Takoradi Metropolitan Assembly (STMA) and officers at the Centre for National Culture, Western Region (CNC), where Vienna City is located, hold similar views.² These reasons are important enough to warrant a study of the representation of sex workers, particularly because they can undermine actual public law and social harmony (after Bindman and Doezeman, 1997).

To be sure, such depictions are common for most sexual habitats around the world, including Amsterdam, which has long been regarded as friendly to sex workers (Manuel and Magdalena, 2012), often forming the basis of state policies that essentially revoke sex workers' 'right to the city' and make them second class citizens. These constrictions over-sensationalise sex work, and tend to brand sex workers as evil, exploited, pathogens of disease, and a bad influence on society (Mendes et al., 2009). Yet, recent international research (e.g., Prior et al., 2012; Hubbard et al., 2013) shows that there is often a schism between the popular depictions and actually existing experiences in the 'real world'. Further, moralists tend to exaggerate and misrepresent the nature of sex in the city.

So, it is important to conduct more careful, grounded and empirical research to probe these claims. There is considerable research on sex, women, children and mining (e.g., Yakovleva, 2007; Hilson, 2010; Scorgie et al., 2012), but there are currently no existing studies in Ghana on Vienna City. While Women, Media and Change (WOMECA) (WOMECA, 2012) reports of the research conducted by Akosua Darkwah of the University of Ghana Sociology Department, which was delivered at an annual lecture, this work is yet to be disseminated formally to the scientific community.³ Thus, to date, no research in Ghana has looked at prostitution in Sekondi-Takoradi's oil phase and verified the post 2007 representations of sex work in Vienna City.

The growing literature on oil has cohered around the resource curse doctrine (e.g., Dagher et al., 2010), livelihood changes (Boohene and Peprah, 2011), politics in an era of oil extraction,

accountability, management and transparency (e.g., Gyampo, 2011; Gyimah-Boadi and Prempeh, 2012). In addition, several consultants are trying to prepare various physical development plans for Sekondi-Takoradi as a whole (e.g., The Consortium, 2012). Ackah-Baidoo (2012, 2013) has shed much light on transnational oil companies, their corporate social responsibility, and community-corporate oil interest relationships in the oil era, and one study by Geertrui Vannoppen at the Institute for Anthropological Research in Africa (IARA) in Belgium is exploring the role of chiefs in the land deals taking place as a result of the discovery of oil within the context of the general transformation of the twin-city of Sekondi-Takoradi (Personal discussion and several email exchanges between 2012 and 2013).

This paper helps to bridge this gap. It is a part of a larger study, 'Oiling the Urban Economy: Land, Housing, and Labour in West Africa'. It is not a comprehensive assessment, but it highlights the nature of the issues in the sex industry and tries to stimulate further research by problematising existing popular representations and claims about the sex industry, temporary migrants, and the city of oil in Ghana. The remainder of the paper is divided into three parts: methodology, an analysis of the level of congruence between perception and 'actually existing experience', and a conclusion.

2. Methodology

Even at its origins, Sekondi-Takoradi had several pubs, clubs, and hotels. They included The Sphynx and The Mainland Social Centre, both in Takoradi, and The Empire Night Club in Sekondi (The Sekondi-Takoradi City Council, 1963). At present, the old Zenith area and Paradise (currently being refurbished) are key places for sex work. This paper, however, focuses on the Vienna City club area, as distinct from Vienna City beach in Chapel Hill mainly because it is a feature of the new oil age in the city and is poorly understood. The approach taken to collect data is adopted from economic anthropology, and recently promoted by Hann and Hart (2011). It was unobtrusive, non-participant observation over a three-month period, starting from December 2012 to March 2013. During this period, Vienna City was visited regularly. Transect walks were carried out around the area frequently, amid photo taking to capture phenomena which could not be physically experienced because of institutionally imposed procedural barriers. The photos were also taken to aid recollection and enhance communication, presentation and analysis.

Photography was only a part of the methods used. This visual ethnography works best when used in combination with other data collection methods (Athelstan and Deller, 2013). The images captured served as a mental reminder or prompter, but also markers of credibility, if not believability, and ingredients of picturesque presentation (Jang, 2010). They were complemented with field notes.

Note-taking took place between 9 and 11 pm, and was interspersed by walking in and being driven around the area at various times. On one occasion, a detailed and lengthy conversation between a self-identified sex worker and her friend, a male trader selling pay-as-you-go phone units/credit (often called 'phone card seller' in Ghana), was overheard. The parking and seating areas in front of the club were visited twice, and activities within the club were witnessed on one occasion.

Further, conversational style discussions about sex workers and their activities were held with taxi drivers who drive the sex workers around in the city. One taxi driver in particular, 'Long Story' – a nickname given to him because of his interest in telling his passengers his life story and sharing personal experiences – and the author's personal taxi driver, was particularly informative. Vienna provides a good market for taxi drivers. Some are very

² Field interview with planners at STMA (December 2012) and officers at CNC, Western Region (February 2013).

³ Google scholar, for example, has yet to report this work, although Dr. Darkwah's other papers are visible in this database.

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