

“Sponsorship” as A Way of Self-support for Female University Students in Poland: Sex Work or Legitimate Response to A Real Need?

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Abstract

During the present time of growing polarisation in employment opportunities, students are showing a willingness to look for new solutions to this problem. In the opinion of the author, one such solution has been “universitation.” Universitation is a neologism created by combining the words university and prostitution to describe prostitution at universities. In this article, the author focuses specifically on forms of so-called “sex sponsorship.” This article raises issues such as the scale of the universitation phenomenon, its root causes and negative consequences. The author focuses only on female students, because there is almost no data available on male prostitutes at universities. This article seeks to describe in scientific terms this social phenomenon in Poland without passing moral judgment on it.

key words: sex sponsorship, polarization in employment, universities in Poland, sex work

Introduction

“Universitation” is a new word created by combining two existing words, university and prostitution to refer to prostitution at universities. It is a type of sex sponsorship, in which a person receives money or other financial benefits (rent, holidays, gifts) in exchange for companionship and often sexual favours. Some people say that sex sponsorship is not prostitution (because you don’t need to have sex), but most experts say that this is a type of prostitution. I will follow this way of thinking and treat sex sponsorship as a type of prostitution. This special type of sex-work is a subject worthy of discussion in Poland, because, on the one hand it underscores underlines the problem of changes in interpersonal relationships while on the other hand, it points out how bad the situation is in the labour market for students. Popularity of universitation indicates that the relations between people in society have changed. It also calls attention to economic changes, which encourage the popularity of this practice. I have focused exclusively on the activities of female students, because there is almost no data about male prostitution at Polish universities. It is important to

note however, that the focus of my article will be on the scientific context of this social phenomenon in Poland. I shall make no moral judgments.

Real life examples

“Święta ladcznica,” a Polish expression meaning “holy harlot,” is the pseudonym of a famous Polish prostitute. She earns about 9,000 zloty (3,000 USD) per month, roughly three times the average income in Poland, which is about 3,000 zloty (1,000 USD). She earns the above sum through universitution, combining study with sex work. As she explains on her blog. escortgirl.com, “One of the advantages of sex-work is flexible work hours”¹. She writes that she enjoys her contacts with clients as much as the large amount of money she makes. She tells her readers that she believes prostitution and all its forms are jobs similar to other work because everyone sells his or her body. She tries to humanize sex work through her blog on which she also posts feminist content.

There are many examples of female students who enjoy working in the sex industry. Patrycja is one of those girls. She works as a sex cam girl, selling her nude photos in front of an Internet camera. She claims that taking her clothes off is a sign of “strength, not oppression”². We can read many interviews with prostitutes on the Internet. While going through such interviews and articles about girls who make a living through universitution, we can easily come to the conclusion that almost every female student in Poland is a prostitute, especially if we come across a headline such as “One in five female students claims that she has a sexual sponsor”³.

Scale of the phenomenon

Of course, the above headline would seem to exaggerate the scale of the phenomenon. Unfortunately, our knowledge about sex work is based largely on information available through the mainstream media. Such sources fundamentally distort the problem that we are talking about. It is also hard to say how many students are earning money from universitution or other types of sex-work based on statistical data; this is because of the problematic status of prostitution in all its forms in Poland. While on the one hand, sex-work in Poland is not a crime, on the other it is not a legally recognized profession (e.g. persons engaged in this type of work do not pay any taxes). It is also important to know that being a sex-worker in Poland

¹ <http://escortgirl.blog/2018/01/09/elastyczny-grafik-udoskonalonej-organizacji/> (17 April 2018)

² <https://www.vice.com/pl/article/433k43/rozbiezanie-sie-przed-kamerka-jest-dla-mnie-sila-nie-opresja/> (17 April 2018)

³ <http://krknews.pl/piata-studentka-przyznaje-ze-sponsora-mysla-ze-sa-prostytutkami/> (17 April 2018)

causes stigmatization; such a way of earning money is not socially acceptable in Poland and is rarely openly talked about. Almost all sociological data that describes universitization and prostitution in the broad sense is qualitative, meaning that it is based on observations, interviews and evaluations.

In my opinion the most important research about prostitution and its various forms comes from the OBOP – Ośrodek Badania Opinii Publicznej (Polish Public Opinion Research Centre) and the work of Jarosław Wypyszyński. Among the 70 prostitutes Wypyszinski interviewed, eight were students.⁴ Unfortunately, researchers fail to create a single category for students, limiting their focus only to the categories of age and level of education. But as we know from past research, prostitutes tend to be between 20 and 25 years of age and have education up to secondary level.⁵ We can assume therefore that in this group there will be some students, the age and education level of prostitutes and students being roughly the same. However, such thinking is ultimately based on conjecture.

Causes

Whatever the scale of universitization may be, it is undeniable that students in Poland are earning money through prostitution. Reading the growing number of websites where men can find women wishing to be sponsored, we can say with some degree of certainty that the practice is popular. According to research papers and sociological articles⁶ economic polarisation seems to be one reason students turn to prostitution. Economic polarisation can be understood in at least two ways: the process by which the middle class shrinks while the upper and lower classes expand, or as a progression of rich getting richer and poor getting poorer. According to Tomasz Panek from Szkoła Główna Handlowa in Warsaw, in Poland we can observe the growing polarisation in the second sense.⁷ Moreover we are also observing progressive job polarisation, which means that there are fewer and fewer jobs that require a middle level of qualifications and an increased number of jobs requiring either a high level of skills or almost none at all.

⁴ J. Wypyszyński "Raport badawczy środowiska prostytutek w Wielkopolsce", wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek (2011)

⁵ Ośrodek Badania Opinii Publicznej. Zachowania seksualne i wiedza na temat HIV/AIDS w grupie kobiet świadczących usługi seksualne – raport z badań. (2002)

⁶ such as: R. Gardian-Miałkowska "Sponsorowana prostytutka w środowisku uniwersyteckim", *Academic Journal of the Institute of Social Prevention and Resocialisation of the University of Warsaw*, no 20, pp. 291-304 (2012); D. Myślińska "Społeczne i indywidualne oblicza prostitucji", *Studia gdańskie. Wzjęcie i rzeczywistości*, no 11 (2014)

⁷ Panek, T. "Polaryzacja ekonomiczna w Polsce". *Wiadomości statystyczne*, no 1 (2006), pp. 41-61.

Job polarisation can be seen to be behind the increased popularity of university education in Poland today. According to CBOS, popularity of universities in Poland is on the rise.⁸ An ever greater number of young Poles believe that it is important to obtain a university education. Proceeding to university from secondary school has become the new normal in Poland. It is important to note that higher education in Poland is free, a fact that definitely contributes to its popularity. According to CBOS, in 2017, 81% of Poles stated that it is important to acquire the maximum level of education. Respondents to the CBOS survey also stated that education should be available for everyone. Moreover 42% of Poles (in universities) proceed to a master's degree, the highest ratio among all European countries (according to OECD data⁹). At the same time students are afraid that they will not find a job appropriate to their level of education.

But Polish students are concerned not only about their future job prospects but also their financial stability while at university. Many students come from families too poor to support them. As a result, they must find part time work. However, students are not always able to find the time to combine both their studies and work. And even if they are able to do so, most jobs available for students are physically demanding and poorly paid. The most popular student jobs are to be found in the hospitality industry, at fast-food restaurants such as McDonald's. Fewer and fewer students wish to work long hours for basic pay. Faced with this conundrum, some have opted for alternative solutions, one of which is sex work. According to Joanna Leśniak, who works for Hydra, an organization in Berlin that helps prostitutes in the German capital, prostitution is one of few fields where women can always count on being able to earn money, regardless of their social status or home situation.¹⁰ But it is also important to remember that student prostitutes are only one part of this phenomenon, the other being their clients, for not only is it necessary that students be able to work as prostitutes, it is also essential for there to be clients able to earn enough money to afford the services of prostitutes and be willing to avail themselves of the prostitutes' services.

Returning to the economic aspect of student sex work, we need to pay attention to both sides of this phenomenon, the side of the clients and the side of the prostitutes. According to various studies most of the women who choose sex work do so for economic reasons. One of the most important sources of data that we have on poverty in Poland is "Ubóstwo w Polsce w świetle badań GUS" (Poverty in Poland, Based on Research by the Polish Central Office of

⁸ Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej. Czy warto się kształcić? Warszawa (2017).

⁹ OECD. Education at a Glance 2016. Paris (2016), p. 324.

¹⁰ <http://sexwork.info/wywiad-z-joanna-lesniak-z-berlinskiej-hydry/> (17 April 2018)

Statistics). According to GUS, poor people in Poland are becoming poorer, confirming the existence of the type of economic polarisation mentioned above. Moreover, GUS data also indicates an ever-growing fear of falling into extreme poverty. As we know from sociological data, the group at greatest risk are young people entering the labour market. Within the above group, it is those who work in jobs requiring very few qualifications who face the greatest danger. By way of contrast, job seekers who have completed a master's degree need to fear the least about falling into extreme poverty.¹¹ Seeing the data, it is not surprising that students who wish to obtain education should turn to universitation to be able to do so, and to be able to support themselves while engaged in their studies. Of course, we ought not to ignore the side of the clients. In my opinion, the increased earning power of those at the upper end of polarisation is the reason why some people are able to afford to spend a night with a prostitute or even become a sponsor of one.

Marketisation of feelings

We can observe growing popularity of websites where students and clients can link up with each other. According to the data prepared by website piekniibogaci.pl the average sugar daddy (an English expression for sponsor that has been translated into Polish) is a university graduate between 35 and 45 years of age who is in a stable financial situation. More than half of sponsors declare that their annual income is about 30,000 USD (100,000 PLN) while one third put their earnings at over 65,000 USD (200,000 PLN).¹² Most sponsors have a regular partner. The young lover is a break from routine. She is also a kind of status symbol such as, for example, a car.

But in any group of sponsors we are likely to find singles. Sometimes they are too focused on their career to think about a stable and permanent relationship. Leading a fast-paced life and driven by a desire for material success such individual sponsors come to perceive feelings (including love) in economic terms. The sugar dating websites, where sugar daddies and sugar babies seek each other out, give the impression of being a marketplace for feelings. Tomasz Szlendak in his article "O sponsoringu i jego przyczynach" (About sponsorship and its causes) called this phenomenon the "marketisation of feelings".¹³ A close examination of a sugar dating website reveals at least one element that confirms the above phenomenon. Before meeting both sides have to agree on preconditions – just the same as in

¹¹ Główny Urząd Statystyczny. Ubóstwo w Polsce w świetle badań GUS (2013).

¹² <http://www.polskatimes.pl/artykul/3828301,sponsoring-po-polsku.id,t.html> (17 April 2018)

¹³ <https://szlendak.blog.polityka.pl/2012/02/25/o-sponsoringu-i-jego-przyczynach/> (17 April 2018)

marketing. In most of the cases this relationship should be pleasant and without emotional connections. But sponsorship does not always follow this pattern. Sometimes sponsors need something more. Some sponsors show a desire to become intimate. They seem to feel the need to talk about their successes and failures. The sponsorship is kind of a substitute for a normal relationship for which they lack time. The film “Sponsoring” (Sponsorship) directed by Małgorzata Szumowska offers an excellent opportunity to understand better these kinds of relationships. But a situation in which a sponsorship relationship changes into an emotional one is extremely rare. Normally it is an “exchange relationship”. The man controls both the woman’s body and her time. In exchange the man provides the woman with money or presents. These objects would seem to take the place of feelings. Sponsors want women who are easy to satisfy, both financially and emotionally.

We can now discuss if a sponsored girl is a prostitute. Sponsors perceive those girls more as ladies to be with. Sponsors can take such girls for example to business meeting to increase their position, strength and influence on business partners. Such girls can have influence not only by their beauty, but also by their intellect, brilliance, charm, familiarity and wit. One of the researchers who pays attention to sponsorship is British sociologist Catherine Hakim. In her article “Honey Money: The Power of Erotic Capital”, she states that erotic capital¹⁴ is essential to succeed in the sex work market. If a girl wishes to succeed she has to be clever, charming, interesting, etc. not only beautiful. The relationship between a sponsor and a student is also extraordinary in that it often takes the form of a master and a student, as in ancient Greece, where a kind of patronage, which was called “pederastia”, played a significant role in education.¹⁵ The sponsor wants to build up his ego and to satisfy his need to be perceived as someone in authority. The sponsorship relationship offers an opportunity to do so. Here one of the many problems of working in the sex industry becomes apparent, namely the objectification of women. But the case is not as simple as it may seem to be. In fact, our world is constantly changing. We can observe the change in all relationships that we are in, not only in sexual ones. One sugar blogger, a woman who describes her experiences with sugar dating on her blog, writes, “Many people assume that there are only two types of intimate relationships among people in general: those in which money plays the main role and those in which it does not. In fact, all interpersonal relationships contain various elements of giving and receiving. Traditional distinctions are disappearing in the 21st century.”¹⁶

¹⁴ C. Hakim “Honey money: The power of erotic capital”, *Penguin UK* (2011).

¹⁵ C. Reinsberg “Obyczaje seksualne starożytnych Greków”, *Uraeus*, Gdynia (1998).

¹⁶ <http://blog.sugarbaby.pl/> (17 April 2018)

Negative consequences

When discussing the problem of working in the sex industry, it is necessary to pay attention to the threats that are lurking for people taking up this profession. One can assume that being a sex worker only has advantages, from reading blogs and interview with students who earn money from universitition or other types of sex-work. However, research points to a discrepancy between what sex-workers say in interviews/blogs and what takes place in real life. We cannot talk about universitition without referring to the many risks to which women are exposed, from sexually transmitted diseases to brutal rapes. What is more, many women work under the influence of alcohol and drugs, and almost half have had to undergo at least one abortion. (These facts are corroborated by the work of Wypczyński and the Public Opinion Research Centre - OBOP¹⁷). It is important to know that abortion in most cases is illegal in Poland. (Abortions are legal only in three cases: when the foetus is the result of a rape, when a child will be born with a serious congenital disease, or when the life of the woman is in danger due to the pregnancy). As a consequence, many women obtain abortions illegally. It is common knowledge that illegally performed abortions are extremely risky.

Prostitutes also face problems when attempting to quit the profession. Many find it difficult to give up the high income (median 3,500 USD – 11,000 PLN as reported in Wielkopolska, a region of Poland where Wypczyński conducted interviews¹⁸). Although most prostitutes would like to change their profession (this is confirmed by Wypczyński, OBOP and other researchers e.g. Myślińska¹⁹), many say they do not know what they would like to do after quitting. Some hesitate to give up their profession completely saying that they would like to continue part time. Some say that prostitution gives them comfort. As the prostitute blogger Holy Harlot writes, “I cannot complain. I have not felt so good since childhood”.²⁰

Conclusion

As it turns out from the presented analyses, prostitution in its various forms is still popular in Poland. If anything, sex is a growth industry. However, it is an industry in which there are no

¹⁷J. Wypczyński “Raport badawczy...”; Ośrodek Badania Opinii Publicznej. Zachowania seksualne i wiedza na temat HIV/AIDS w grupie kobiet świadczących usługi seksualne – raport z badań (2002).

¹⁸ J. Wypczyński “Raport badawczy...”

¹⁹ D. Myślińska “Społeczne i indywidualne oblicza prostytucji”, *Studia gdańskie. Wzję i rzeczywistości*, no 11 (2014)

²⁰ <http://www.fakt.pl/kobieta/seks-i-emocje/zwierzenia-prostytutki-tak-to-wyglada-naprawde/brecl9t/> (17 April 2018)

rights, and workers are not protected in any way. Joanna Leśniak, who has many years of experience in helping prostitutes in Berlin, writes, “All prostitution is one big scene for the exploitation of women”²¹. If this is the case, then, in my opinion, care should be taken to protect the rights of people working in the sex industry. It is also important to explain to society how prostitutes live, because most of us use stereotypes when thinking about the sex industry. Fortunately, the first steps are already being made to help prostitutes. Leśniak writes, “We are trying to make sure that women who work in the sex industry are treated as employees. First of all, we want to end the stigmatization of sex workers.... It is a job and people who do it should have their rights and duties”²². Moreover, there are organizations that fight for the rights of people working in the sex industry in Poland. One of the most active ones is “Sex Work Polska”. They engage in educational activities, write articles, and organize conferences. They created rules for sex work. They also publish many helpful articles for sex workers, such as “What should your first date with a sponsor look like?”²³

Maybe it is necessary to pass new laws, but I believe it is definitely necessary to think about the labour market in Poland and about the organization of universities. As Renata Gardian-Mialkowska states, sponsorship is primarily governed by the laws of supply and demand²⁴. As I have shown, the popularity of sponsorship is also because of the situation at the universities; we should think of solutions to this social problem. For me it is not acceptable that students should have to turn to universitation to be able to combine study and work.

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²¹ <http://sexwork.info/wywiad-z-joanna-lesniak-z-berlinskiej-hydry/> (17 April 2018)

²² Ibidem

²³ <http://sexwork.info/pierwsza-randka-z-twoim-sponsorem-na-co-zwracac-uwage/> (17 April 2018)

²⁴ R. Gardian-Mialkowska “Sponsorowana prostytutka w środowisku uniwersyteckim”, *Academic Journal of the Institute of Social Prevention and Resocialisation of the University of Warsaw* , no 20, pp. 291-304 (2012).

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