



Universiteit Leiden

## Sex trafficking and tourism

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The emergence of 'sex hubs' in Panama and Mexico



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The trade in humans for forced labor is the fastest growing criminal industry, with estimated annual profits of \$150 billion, whereby trafficking for commercial sexual services (henceforth sex trafficking) generates \$100 billion alone and hereby is responsible for the largest proportion of the profit (Luscombe, 2014).

This thesis focuses on forced migration of women and children to work in the sex industry; other potential reasons for people to migrate will not be outlined further. 'Forced migration' is here equivalent to 'trafficking'; meaning victims are forced to cross borders or regions, i.e. migrate, by criminal trafficking organizations and networks. Here, traffickers can also mean family members or boyfriends that sell their 'loved' ones to other actors involved in trafficking to make money. Thereby taking a post-modern stance on the topic of sex trafficking within the area of International Relations.

The sex industry is assessed in terms of debt bondage, meaning only women and children forced and sold into prostitution by their traffickers or pimps are taken into account, not considering the 'voluntary' prostitutes. Little research has been done on the impact of increased demand for sex workers in wealthier tourism areas on the scale of trafficking and migration within Latin America. Moreover, it is important to distinguish between opportunistic trafficking, mostly observed in Mexico, and more traditional patterns that involve the forced migration from outside the continent, as experienced in Panama (UNODC, 2011). This specific comparison is not yet studied sufficiently by other scholars, as they tend to discuss sex trafficking in the region as a whole. This study will create an important link between the role of migration, globalization and altogether trafficking on the formation of certain 'sex hubs'. Therefore the research question is as follows: *How does sex trafficking contribute to the emergence of 'sex hubs': A focus on tourism areas in Panama and Mexico.*

The term 'sex hub' is used in this thesis to describe a location with an extensive sex industry that attracts international tourists. Sex trafficking is expected to satisfy the demand for sex workers in tourism areas to a large extent. Hence the case studies will explore whether trafficking routes intersect with popular tourism destinations such as Cancún and Panama City.

Globalization influences the sex industry and the emergence of sex tourism, while simultaneously affecting both trafficking and migration. Globalization enables the vast accumulation of profit within our global capitalist system. While International Relations does not consider globalization necessarily as a theory or lens through

which to look at trafficking, globalization is used here as a concept and linked to the trafficking and sex tourism debate throughout the thesis.

The first chapter of the thesis starts with a definitions of all useful terms and presents both globalization and trafficking theory. ‘Sex hubs’ are defined in more detail, followed by a literature review of all relevant scholars that includes the regional context and history of trafficking. Chapter two entails the case studies of Mexico and Panama whose findings are analyzed and compared in chapter three and links to the theoretical framework are provided. After a brief future outlook on sex trafficking, the paper concludes.

## 1. The trafficking debate from various theoretical angles

This first chapter provides an overview of the different facets of the sex industry, including global sex trafficking and the emergence of so-called ‘sex hubs’, indicating both the regional and urban character of trafficking. The point of departure of this research is ‘forced’ migration, therefore the debate will not further distinguish between voluntary and forced migration.

United Nations Article 3a in the Protocol on Trafficking in Persons of the UN Convention on Transnational Organized Crime (2000) defines *human trafficking* as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation”. While trafficking occurs for various forms of forced labor such as agricultural, domestic and factory work, this research will focus on sex trafficking of women and children.

### **Globalization Theory**

Globalization theory shows how something as abstract as globalization can visualize itself on the ground and become embedded within many different spheres of society. In our case, globalization becomes visible in the global clandestine trafficking industry, on sex tourism and prostitution sites, in economically prospering cities and on border crossings. Globalization has made the world a global trading platform with

goods, resources, knowledge and people moving across borders. Globalization tends to be praised for advancing our society greatly and making the world more connected.

However, globalization also has a dark side. The forces of globalization enable clandestine criminal activities to take place on an international level and criminals to earn immense profits within our capitalist structure. Economic globalization in particular has transformed the international division of labor in a way that has led to a deepening of poverty and marginalization for many (Bigeij et al., 2012: 109). As Bigeij et al (2012: 109) puts it, “Globalization provides an ideal climate for the exploitation of vulnerable populations internationally, which is contributing to the trade of human beings”.

Advanced communication and widespread Internet access, often considered positive outcomes of globalization, in fact help the trafficking industry to function efficiently. Border controls in particular have declined and international agreements such as NAFTA enact to promote free trade and cross-border movement (Shelley, 2010: 42). However, while this free trade allows for the growing mobility of capital and goods, this liberalization is not necessarily extended to human beings (Campani, 2009: 235). This is where trafficking has found its niche and is thriving. Demand of markets, here the sex industry, remains high but the workers can often not be supplied in a legal manner. Hence why our current world system provides a large and profitable incentive for trafficking and smuggling within that “contradiction between economy and global information” (Campani, 2009: 235).

Our dynamic world economy allows certain places to prosper at different times. Panama and Mexico can both be seen as prospering countries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however that does not entail that the whole country is benefiting from prosperity. With rising prosperity in certain cities, also came a rise in tourism in both countries; a rise of tourism fuelled by international well-off travelers that seek exotic locations and luxury. Consequently, in many of these exotic high-frequented travel destinations a thriving sex industry tends to develop around the regular tourism. ‘Sexual tourism’ is not a new phenomenon, however its scope and organization has developed into a truly global occurrence, which has important implications for the development of the sex industry.

## **Trafficking Theory**

Globalization theory is undeniably closely connected to trafficking theory, with migration routes established across borders and within countries and consequently people also being trafficked across those same borders and routes. This overlap is studied in more detail within the Case Studies. Further, overlaps exist between smuggling, trafficking and criminal networks. As the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2011: 55) points out in their report on *Trafficking of women and children within Central America*, victims may be kidnapped or forced into prostitution by people who were previously their smugglers. Also drug networks are increasingly used for trafficking of humans and organized crime groups and gangs from Mexico and Central America are often identified with smuggling and trafficking within the region and the U.S. (Shelley, 2010: 268). This overlap however will not be studied in more detail.

Capitalism is thriving in the current world system and illegal activities and industries are able to continuously grow on the back of huge profits. The current development of trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation “can be included in the growth of an activity hovering between legal and illegal sex business”, with a strong tendency towards the illegal according to Campani (2009: 236).

Sex trafficking occurs in different areas of the sex industry, from brothels, street prostitution, strip clubs and pornography to prostitution on tourism sites (Jeffreys, 2009). Trafficking differs from *smuggling*, that UNODC defines as “a crime involving the procurement for financial or other material benefit of illegal entry of a person into a state of which that person is not a national or resident”. The traffickers compared to the smugglers have to deliver their victims to persons that will buy them and keep them enslaved in debt bondage. Human smugglers are merely required to bring victims over the border of their destination country (Jeffreys, 2009; Shelley, 2010).

Trafficking in women and girls into *debt bondage* is becoming the main method of supply for national and international sex industries and is the way traffickers earn their money (Jeffreys 2009). The 1956 Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery defines debt bondage as “the practice of repaying a loan with services, whole length, value and nature have not been specified, performed by the debtor or by another person”. Bonded labor, i.e. debt bondage, still exists in spite of being explicitly outlawed by this convention.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2011) defines ‘opportunistic trafficking’ as traffickers exploiting the vulnerability of the large flow of irregular migrants in certain countries, i.e. Mexico and “using the ‘opportunity’” to make money. The ‘traditional model’ of trafficking is seen as the import of women from outside regions to satisfy the local demand of a sex industry, i.e. women from Eastern Europe imported into Panama as ‘entertainers’.

### **Sex hubs: the urban character of trafficking**

A hub is a geographical model “explaining how linked regions can cooperate to fulfill elements of an industry’s value chain” (Fleming and Hayuth, 1994: 5). The Oxford Dictionary (2014) defines a ‘hub’ as a “center of activity and interest”, here sex-tourism and sex being the activity and interest respectively. In this thesis, the term ‘hub’, as a location and geographical space, will be applied to the organization of cities with an extensive sex industry, therefore ‘sex hub’. The ‘linkage’ element is reflected in the global nature of the sex industry, as a city’s sex industry links together trafficking routes, international trafficking actors, and local and international visitors. Thus in a way, different countries and actors of different nationalities cooperate to ensure the functioning of a city’s sex industry. “The local, regional, national or continental, centrality of a city has a fundamental impact on the city’s function” and on its traffic capacity (Fleming and Hayuth, 1994: 3). This traffic capacity refers to both the amount of sex trafficking taking place and the amount of people physically passing through the city, i.e. in the form of sex tourists.

Thus the term ‘sex hub’ is used in this thesis to describe a location with an extensive sex industry and consequently a place where a lot of trafficked women and children from within and outside the continent end up. These hubs tend to be associated with sex tourism and an international clientele, given the location’s globalized nature and easy accessibility for international travelers.

### **The tourism dimension of a sex hub**

A sex tourist is described as a “person who travels from their homes, usually across international borders, with the intent of engaging in sexual activities with others, including children” (Estes, 2001). Estes (2001) further refers to sex tourism as “commercially organized travel and related services (e.g. hotel, transportation), usually across international borders, for persons seeking to engage in sex with citizens

of other countries” (Estes, 2001). However, as witnessed in Cancun, sex tourists are increasingly also from Mexican origin.

Gender inequalities play a further role when determining who the main actors of sex hubs are. Gender inequalities are deeply entrenched in both society and the state and a cause for trafficking according to Cacho (2012: 107). “Mexican women are often seen as objects to be used and discarded, to be thrown on the rubbish heap, as literally happens in Ciudad Juarez” Reyes (2006) adds.

Gender relations form part of the larger social relations and practices embodied in tourism. Tourism practices as power relations are gendered in their construction, presentation and consumption and men and women have different access to the employment opportunities opened up by tourism (Robinson, 2008: 150). This lack of opportunities in tourism areas and the women’s role in the labor market makes women and children more vulnerable and explains their role as actors in the sex hubs. The supply of women is greatly increased by “mass migration resulting from destabilizing economic development” (Jeffreys, 1999: 186). In other words, women especially flock to tourist hubs in search of work and become vulnerable to being trafficked into prostitution there instead.

Trafficking takes place in a global context and the following literature review summarizes what other scholars have written on the issue so far and provides an overview of the trafficking situation in all main regions of the world. Historical accounts of trafficking are also taken into account.

### **Trafficking and sex tourism from a global perspective**

Human Trafficking isn’t new; it has merely taken on different dimensions and names over the centuries. Traditional slavery dates back to the ancient civilizations of Asia, Africa, Europe and pre-Colombian America and was recognized as a public, recognized fact (Cullen-DuPont, 2009: 6). The word ‘trafficking’ was first used in the twentieth century in terms such as ‘white slave traffic’ or ‘the trafficking in women and children’ to refer to forcing women and children into prostitution. While modern-day slavery, officially termed human trafficking, is now regarded as an “unconscionable crime against humanity” (Quirk, 2011: 241) and has been legally outlawed, it is nevertheless present in one form or another in every country.

Transatlantic slave trade may have ended in 1807, but it has now taken on a modern form where victims get trafficked across continents and sold into debt



bondage. Debt bondage has long existed, however the "modern-day version differs in that it frequently involves abduction of persons into servitude" and forces these persons to even pay for their own imprisonment (Cullen-DuPont, 2009: 7). As expenses get shifted from the trafficker, i.e. slaveholder, to the victim, "buying a slave is no longer a major investment as it was in old slavery" as pointed out by Kevin Bales, director of 'Free the Slaves' (in Cullen-DuPont, 2009: 8).

Trafficking in women and children takes place in all regions of the world. Asian crime groups are particularly renowned for their trafficking practices compared to their West-European and Latin American counterparts who are more specialized in drug traffic. Debt bondage is widespread and has been for centuries (Shelley, 2010: 142). Shelley (2010: 143) adds, "Trafficking of children in Asia assumes a more significant proportion of overall trafficking than in other regions of the world". European sex tourists have been engaging in sex tourism in Asia for many years, and as authorities in Asia crack down on child sex tourism from Europe, the "problem is displaced to regions where there is less risk for the traveler" (Shelley, 2010: 279).

Therefore, parts of Africa and particularly Central America have become priority destinations. Poverty plays an essential role in Africa, especially when compared to Asia. Hence, the profits of the trafficking industry in Africa are much lower. Colonization also ended much later in Africa than in Asia. Many countries' former ties with their colonizers supports the trafficking routes from Africa to Europe, whereas trafficking routes from Latin America predominantly terminate in North America. Sex tourism is less common in sub-Saharan Africa than in Latin America, with the exception of South Africa, because there are fewer tourists from affluent countries who travel there (Shelley, 2010: 280). However, the extensive tourism of North Africa has contributed to the importation of women into the region, particularly Egypt, which has an active trade in women from the former USSR (Shelley, 2010: 282).

Trafficking within Europe has distinctive features which are a consequence of its "history, politics and economy; its current demographic situation; its existing immigrant populations; and social welfare system" (Shelley, 2010: 210). Child trafficking is prevalent throughout Western Europe due to its proximity to poorer countries in the East with large numbers of street children. Europeans tend to travel outside their territory to have sex with minors predominantly into Asia or Latin America. However, the Netherlands is a main destination within Europe for

prostitution tourism. The Dutch sex industry is well integrated into the overall European sex market and the majority of women in fact travel between brothels and sex clubs in different European countries (Jeffreys, 1999: 188).

The Latin American region has two very distinctive submarkets for trafficking of women and children according to UNODC (2011): “waylaid irregular migrants, especially around the U.S. border, and “women trafficked from further afield” to cater to wealthy interests in Panama and Costa Rica. Domestic trafficking is also widespread throughout Latin America due to high economic disparity within countries, i.e. trafficking from rural to urban. Latin America is becoming an important tourist destination, accompanied by a rise in sex tourism in countries such as the Dominican Republic and Brazil.

The multifaceted phenomenon human trafficking has been approached from various theoretical angles. While some scholars look at human trafficking from a global perspective (i.e. Jeffrey, 2010; Naim, 2006; Shelley, 2010), some consider it mainly a human rights issue within the framework of modern day slavery (Scarpa, 2008) or study it as embedded within sex tourism (Oppermann, 1999; Jones, 2001; Carr and Poria, 2010). Within political economy, Wheaton et al. (2010) point out that profit is the driving motive for human trafficking, hence why they use rational choice theory to explain the dynamics behind trafficking. Human trafficking is also seen through the lenses of irregular migration (Ghosh, 1998; Campani, 2009).

Shelley (2010) initiated research into global human trafficking from both a comparative and historical perspective, showing that human trafficking varies widely between different regions of the world, as aforementioned, and therefore has to be dealt with using different measures for different regions. This understanding forms the basis of more focused research into the Latin American region by other subsequent scholars.

In Shelley’s book *Human Trafficking: A Global Perspective*, globalization is characterized as the root cause of increased demand and supply for human trafficking. Various researchers continued to focus on the relation between sex trafficking and irregular migration on a global scale (Campani, 2009; Ghosh, 1998), while others emphasized country-specific research on the nature of the sex trafficking industry in Latin America (Cacho, 2012; Langberg, 2005; UNODC, 2011; Zdrojewski, 2008). Campani (2009), Held and McGrew (2007) along with Cameron and Newman (2008) identify and elaborate on a contradiction of the global economy that Shelley (2010)

only briefly touches on. The contradiction entails that work frontiers still exist, while the economic barriers of these same countries have been brought down by globalization, making global clandestine trafficking almost necessary.

My study will extend Shelley's (2010) approach of the spatial dimensions of global trafficking and migration routes to include the phenomenon of 'sex hubs'. In terms of the structure-agency debate, the focus of this research will not be on agency, but rather on the structure that enables agency to take place and to look at how the structure materializes in the space, i.e. in a sex hub. While the different actors of the sex industry are essential to understand the workings and 'success' of trafficking, their roles are only mentioned briefly throughout the study.

Sex tourism, according to Jones (2001), is a complex concept and "goes far beyond the immediate images of men traveling to the Amsterdam red light district for sexual gratification". The term itself has been predominantly used in the literature to describe a wide range of commercial and other forms of sexual encounters between visitors and hosts; however, Oppermann (1998) questioned the use of the term "sex tourist", finding it simplistic and unable to adequately describe many of the sexual encounters that occur during periods of travel away from home. Prideaux et al. (2004: 6) use the term 'exotic' in the sense of a touristic space that is "differentiated from the tourist's normal daily life space and experiences by differences in location, culture, society and activity". This study refers to sexual activities within the Latino culture of both Panama and Mexico and their respective tourist areas as 'exotic'. Jeffreys (1999) on the other hand associates the term 'sex tourism' with euphemism and therefore believes "prostitution tourism" to be a more accurate term as it does not suggest fun and entertainment so much as the abuse of women.

Literature with a crucial focus on the interconnectedness of migration routes, sex tourism and sex trafficking in particular is still sparse. However, Zdrojewski (2008) and UNODC (2011) undertake research on sex trafficking of women and girls in Central America whereby Mexico is identified as both a destination and a transit country for illegal migrants and victims of trafficking on the American continent. Meanwhile, Panama is described as gaining status as a frequented destination country for trafficked women from South America, but also from Eastern Europe.

To sum up, my study can be seen as a continuation of the approach by existing scholars, however with a narrower and detailed focus on the emergence of 'sex (tourism) hubs' in Mexico and Panama, a term not yet established in existing

literature. The trafficking to these ‘sex hubs’ and the emergence of sex tourism will be discussed both as a result of and facilitated by globalization and international migration and trafficking flows, drawing from the studies of the aforementioned scholars and their separate fields of research on trafficking. The following chapter takes a closer look at Panama and Mexico as separate case studies to determine whether Panama City and Cancún in particular can be identified as ‘sex hubs’ in the Latin American region.

## 2. A focus on the sex industries in Mexico and Panama

The real number of victims of trafficking in Central America and Mexico is unknown because of the clandestine nature of the operation and existing official registers are likely to under report the real number of victims of trafficking (Rodriguez and Davies, 2012). Taking into account the victim’s fear of punishment if they were to release sensitive information about their traffickers, data is scarce and incomplete for the Latin American region.

The specific countries, Mexico and Panama, serve as the unit of analysis for the case studies, with the sex, tourism and trafficking industry being sub-units. Due to the fact that trafficking in Latin America tends to be generalized into one category by existing literature, Mexico and Panama have been chosen to demonstrate how countries in the same region can in fact exhibit quite different characteristics in their trafficking routes and their sex industries. Hence, why I expect to see some differences in the trafficking pattern and the nature of the sex industry in both countries, however I predict both countries to be identified as overall ‘sex hubs’ nevertheless.

The case studies’ goal is that the specific findings can be linked to and add to the existing theories of trafficking. Hence this chapter will provide the necessary information on trafficking, sexual exploitation and sex tourism hubs in both countries separately. The theoretical implications and case findings will be compared and analyzed in more detail in the third chapter, as full conclusions are not drawn within the case studies at this stage.

### *2.1. The Mexican case study*

Mexico is a transit, receiving and sending country of people from diverse nationalities for reasons of migration and trafficking. Acclaimed Mexican journalist and activist Lydia Cacho (2012) is quoted saying “*Mexico is now the Thailand of Latin America*”. Why is there so much sex trafficking taking place in Mexico? How is this trafficking related to migration routes across Mexico? How has Cancún in particular emerged as a ‘sex hub’? What is the role of tourism? Mexico is the unit of analysis for the following case study that seeks to answer these questions.

### **The history and geography of migration in Mexico**

Mexico has a rich history of migration, both within Mexico and across borders, most notably the migration across the U.S.-Mexico border. The U.S.-Mexico border has always been a place of shifting and contested boundaries, legal and illegal immigration, cross-border trade and illegal smuggling (Walters and Davis, 2014: 368). During the Mexican Revolution, which began in 1910, the poor majority was in conflict with the few wealthy landowners. Consequently, the population of the new northern border of Mexico increased significantly for political and economic reasons, further fuelled by the introduction of NAFTA in 1994. During this period, migration patterns from communities in the south to towns in the north and along the border became established. These migration patterns have largely stayed in place ever since (Walters and Davis, 2014: 369).

## Migrant Routes Through Mexico



As the map shows, migration into Mexico is also comprised of migrants from Latin American border countries such as Belize and Guatemala, who then join the migration streams within Mexico and potentially further into the United States. Trafficking occurs along some same routes, as vulnerable migrants are easy targets for exploitation by criminal networks.

Overall, migrants from Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and to a lesser extent South America, the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, Russia and Asia are trafficked in Mexico for sexual exploitation or taken through the country en route to the United States. Central American children have fallen prey to traffickers while traveling unescorted through Mexico with the goal of joining family in the U.S. (Risley, 2010: 104). Tecun Uman, located on the Guatemalan-Mexican border, is an especially busy crossing point for migrants entering Mexico. The same goes for migration and smuggling along the Mexican-U.S. border towns such as Tijuana, Juarez and Nuevo Laredo into the U.S.

Despite the presence of international migrants, prostitutes and trafficking victims from outside Mexico, the focus in this case study lies on regional movements. Hence, only migration and trafficking *within* Mexico are given further consideration.

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1 Amnesty International (2011) 'Invisible victims: Migrants on the move in Mexico' Available: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset>. [17 June 2014]

### **Trafficking and sexual exploitation in Mexico**

Mexico is dealing with a case of opportunistic trafficking, i.e. as a “direct by-product of migrant smuggling” (UNODC, 2011), meaning that vulnerable migrants are picked up by traffickers on their way and sold into the local sex industry to work as prostitutes. Mexico’s internal traffic ensures a supply of women and girls from the country’s interior to perform sex work in the larger cities, tourist spots and/or border towns (Risley, 2010: 104). One study estimates that some 10,000 women from southern and central Mexico are trafficked for sexual exploitation to the northern border region each year (Seelke, 2012: 275). Cacho (2012: 139) states that in the neighborhood of La Merced in Mexico City, “there are 1,528 trafficked women who are kept in mafia-protected brothels, 974 of whom are girls under the age of seventeen”. Trafficking in women from the state of Chiapas also increased by 50 percent from 1992 to 2002, when more than 3,000 women were taken each year to Mexico City, Acapulco, Cancún and other destinations to be prostituted according to Acharya (in Risley, 2010: 104). Victims have been identified in over a dozen cities in Chiapas, but Tuxtla Gutierrez and Tapachula seem to be particularly prominent.

It is important to point out the legal framework around the sex industry and the laws that are in place in Mexico to assess how the industry is able to thrive in spite of these legal restrictions.

Prostitution is decriminalized and regulated at the state level. Regulated prostitutes must be at least 18, register and pay for and receive health checks. Prostitution cannot be in public though many cities have a red light district or ‘zona roja’. Brothel ownership and pimping is both illegal (U.S. Department of State, 2012a). Loza (2009) confirms that most major cities in Mexico have developed ‘zonas de tolerancia’ where sex work is quasi-legal, and in some cases, regulated. The legal age of consent for sexual intercourse in Mexico is eighteen years, yet underage sex workers are common. There are many locations in Mexico where Child Sex Exploitation (CSE) ‘flourishes’ under the protection of corrupt elements of local police forces-including tourist resorts on the border. Sex with a child in Tijuana for instance can be obtained for as little as \$40 (Walters and Davis, 2014: 372).

While the legal framework exists, the enforcement is weak. A federal anti-trafficking law was adopted in Mexico but it is limited in scope and jurisdiction. Most prosecutorial authority remains with the states; hence individual states must adopt their own legislation to counter trafficking (Shelley, 2010: 280).

### **Cancún: sex hub and tourism**

Laws to punish clients of forced prostitutes are not enforced in the state of Quintana Roo, making Cancún and Playa del Carmen the ideal destination for American and Canadian sex tourists (Cacho, 2012: 107). Mexico's most popular tourist destination Cancún is now examined in more detail as an example of a 'sex hub' and location for sex tourism.

Cancún is one of the Mecca's for international mass tourism and, specifically, for the classic sea, sun, sand, and sex tourism. Meyer (2004:9) from the Overseas Development Institute counted over 250,000 people that call Cancún home on a year-round basis in 2004 and the hotel zone hosted over 2 million visitors a year at that time, a number that had already increased to 3 million one year later (SECTUR, 2005). The residential section of Cancún is located on the mainland, while the 'Hotel Zone' is situated on Cancún Island, which is where most sex tourism takes place.

The Cancún resort was built out of the jungle in 1974 and the goal was an artificial city that would serve as a 'pole of development' for the impoverished state of Quintana Roo (Hawley, 2006). While Cancún the resort has been a grand success, Cancún the city has severe problems, showing that economic development and tourism comes at a cost. The documentary 'The dark side of Cancún' (2012) acknowledges that Cancún was built for the pleasure of foreigners from the beginning and now has around 26,000 hotel rooms on offer. Hotels provide private space for single men who are looking to have sex with young women and girls (Cacho, 2012: 107). Our modern technology enables tourists to book and pay their all-inclusive sex holiday in advance being provided photo catalogues by travel agencies.

The findings of the Protection Project in 2008 (in Risley, 2010: 105) confirm, "Mexico's flourishing sex tourism industry is contributing to the traffic in women and girls". The U.S. State Department also identifies sex tourism as a growing trend in Mexico, especially in Cancún (in Risley, 2010: 105). Many child sex tourists found in Cancún are from the United States, Canada, and Western Europe, though some are Mexican citizens (United States Department of State, 2012a). Gorbman (2010) claims that about half of the Americans visiting Mexico today are headed for Cancún airport and that the risk of sexual exploitation is always high in such a popular destination, whose commercial livelihood depends largely on tourism.



### **Sex trafficking to Cancún and the local law**

More than 16,000 Mexican children are estimated being trafficked and forced into sex work in the country's popular tourist destinations, i.e. Cancún, with the Mexican government putting the estimate at 20,000 (Bigeij et al., 2012: 113), despite child sex tourism being criminalized. Cacho (2010) refers to Cancún as a 'sexual trade haven', with many trafficked victims ending up on the sex circuit in Cancún.

The Cancún brothels exploiting minors are often disguised as massage parlors. Grillo (2005) states in the *Houston Chronicle*, "child prostitution continues unabated in Cancún". "In the Hotel Zone, taxi drivers hand out color pamphlets showing miniature photos of prostitutes at Pleasure Principle, which calls itself an adult spa" Hawley (2006) adds from the Republic of Mexico City bureau.

Under municipal law, prostitution is illegal in the hotel district of Cancún, however the brothel owner's friendships and protection networks override even the power of the current governor of the state (Cacho, 2012). The brothel owner receives protection from federal judges who prohibit local authorities from shutting down these bars. Mexico's weak rule of law has significant implications for sex trafficking. Organized criminal groups such as trafficking rings are to some extent free to operate beyond the reach of law according to Risley (2010: 109). Police officers in Cancún even sexually (re-) exploited victims of commercial sexual exploitation who were in their custody (Risley, 2010: 110). The problem is that sex trafficking has been subtly integrated into the 'escort service' branch of the prostitution business in Cancún. This way, the client will not be able to tell whether the woman is working voluntarily or whether she is the slave of a trafficking ring that controls her and her earnings. The owners of the business understand that they "need to mix the slaves into a group of 'voluntarily' prostitutes in order to keep rotating the women on the sex-trade circuit" as Cacho points out (2012: 135).

To sum up, the strong presence of tourism, international sex tourists and women and children trafficked into sexual exploitation combined characterize Cancún as a 'sex hub'. There are strong indications that the causes and factors of sex trafficking in Mexico evolve around a weak rule of law, exploitable immigrants and socioeconomic issues such as income- and gender inequality, reinforced by the negative effects of globalization and the strong presence of tourism. How can these findings add to the existing theories connected to trafficking? After looking at Panama

next, it will be clearer whether these factors are responsible for trafficking also in other countries of the region or whether the causes for trafficking in Mexico are unique to Mexico as a country.

## ***2.2 The Panama case study***

Historically, Panama has been a country of destination and transit for migrants (IOM, 2011), less a country of origin. Panama is an increasingly important link in the global flows of people and money. Panama is considered a safe place to invest, providing it with a temporary niche in the region, with many economic advantages. Evidence is the “rapid commercial and residential development in the capital city” attracting a large flow of migrants (Jackiewicz and Craine, 2010: 5). What role does this economic prosperity play for trafficking patterns in Panama? How has Panama City emerged as a ‘sex hub’? This case study attempts to find answers to these questions with Panama being the unit of analysis.

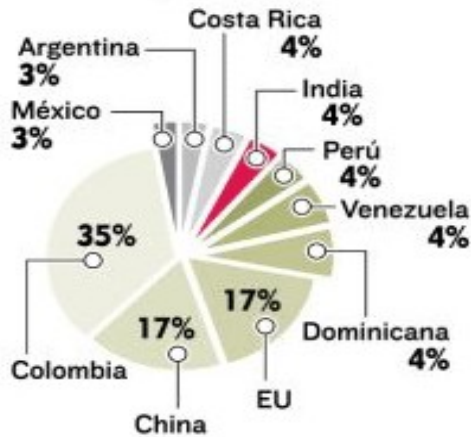
### **History and geography of migration in Panama**

Migration has played a significant role in the lives of Panamanians and has followed a distinct pattern throughout the twentieth century. Population movement has been predominantly into the districts and provinces that are enjoying a period of economic prosperity, generally associated with the canal. Between 1910 and 1920, for instance, the Chepigana District in Darién was in the midst of a boom and enjoyed a significant influx of population, while the neighboring Pinogana District lost most of its population. Their roles were reversed in the following decade.

The number of U.S.-born individuals living in the country is also important to note. The number declined from 1970 to 1990 before increasing 57.8 percent between 1990 and 2000 after the overthrow of Manuel Noriega, a total of 5,113 U.S.-born individuals living in Panama already in 2000. The earlier declines may reflect “increasing political instability and the decreasing presence of U.S. Canal Zone residents” after the United States agreed to hand over the canal in the late 1970s, according to Dixon et al (2006).

## Ciudadanos legales

### Diez principales nacionalidades en Panamá / Años 2004-2007



Fuente: Dirección de Migración

Infografía/Anetha Mc Lean/LA PRENSA 2

This infographic demonstrates the international nature of Panama's citizens between 2004 and 2007. Most notably is the high presence of Colombians (35 percent); coincidentally also the dominant nationality of the women trafficked into Panama every year. The second biggest regional group legally residing in Panama is China and the European Union, both at 17 percent. Europeans especially make up a large proportion of the expatriate community in Panama City.

The Darién and Kuna Yala provinces located on the border with Colombia are also the poorest in Panama and the International Organization of Migration (IOM) has implemented Emergency Assistance Programs for persons seeking protection on Panamanian soil. Panama's strategic location and government initiatives attract a large number of migrants every year. The IOM (2011) states that the expansion of the Canal, the real estate boom and investments by companies that have selected Panama as their central operations hub, have positioned Panama as a very attractive country and explain the influx of migrants from diverse economic and cultural backgrounds.

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2 Dirección de Migración (2008)

## Trafficking and sexual exploitation in Panama

Map 10: Trafficking flows of women and girls in Central America, 2011



3

As the above map illustrates, trafficking flows of women into Panama originate both from inside and outside the continent. Women from poorer South American neighboring countries and women from Eastern Europe are renowned trafficking victims lured into Panama. In Panama, trafficking follows a more *traditional model* (UNODC, 2011: 56). Women are imported both from Eastern Europe and South America to serve high-end local demand, the sizeable expatriate community, and sex tourists, particularly from the United States (UNODC, 2011: 56). Zdrojewski (2008: 17) adds that “illegal migration in Central America flows primarily on the north-south axis”. States with growing number of tourists such as Panama are thus principal receiving states for woman and children trafficked from surrounding states.

The *Trafficking in persons report* for Panama by the U.S. Department of State (2012b) describes the majority of foreign trafficking victims found in Panama as adult women from Colombia. Most of these women are estimated to migrate voluntarily to Panama to work, but are subsequently exploited in sex trafficking.

The principal traffickers in the country are owners of houses of prostitution, and most transnational trafficking occurs using valid travel documents and is conducted through official ports of entry. The Panamanian ‘alternadora’ visa for instance was specifically designed for females working in the adult ‘entertainment’ industry. This visa was eliminated in 2009, the sex entertainment industry is still

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3 UNODC (2011: 56)

booming however. The situation creates a blurred line between the spheres of legality and illegality surround the trafficking situation in Panama. The primary destinations for people trafficked from the country are Jamaica and Europe (U.S. Department of State, 2008).

### **Panama City: sex hub and tourism**

Panama City remains the hub of most real estate activity, particularly that which serves foreign clientele, such as from the U.S. or Europe. It is also the “jumping off point for most visitors” to the country and the majority spend at least a day or two there to experience the Canal and other urban attractions before heading off to the rainforests, islands, and/or rural communities, i.e. Panama city is an important tourist hub (Jackiewicz and Craine, 2010: 5).

In 1997 there were perhaps 1,400 hotel rooms in Panama City, now there are more than 15,000, says Neville (2013:1) from The New York Times. Neville (2013) describes this city of about 880,000 people having gone from “a ho-hum business center on the navy blue Pacific to a major leisure destination in record time” and that Panama City has become “a place full of paradoxes” in doing so. With the influx of wealthy tourists came a growth in sex tourism to cater to the tourist’s needs. While commercial sex is carried out on the streets, local bars and massage parlors throughout the city, it is the tourist hotels and nightclubs in the central tourism district, notably the ‘gringo’ area with its concentration of men’s clubs and American-style sports bars that has the highest presence of sex workers (Winner, 2007).

### **Sex trafficking to Panama City and the local law**

In Panama City, women from Colombia and Eastern Europe (Ukraine, Romania, Moldova and the Russian Federation) comprised the bulk of the trafficking victims detected in 2011, though these high profile cases are not necessarily representative of the overall victim pool. This is reflective of a wealthy local clientele that is able to pay for the luxury of imported women and simultaneously indicates a strong tourist trade (UNODC, 2011).

The laws of prostitution and the sex industry in Panama are complex. Although prostitution is legal and regulated, with prostitutes required to register and carry identification cards, the majority of prostitutes are not registered. Panamanian officials categorized cases of human trafficking that did not involve movement, such

as commercial sexual exploitation, as different crimes treated differently than human trafficking cases involving movement, according to the *2008 Human Rights Report on Panama* (U.S. Department of State, 2008). Further, child sex tourism is prohibited by law, though there were no reported investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of foreign tourists engaged in the commercial sexual exploitation of children in 2012 (U.S. Department of State, 2012b). In theory, a penalty of imprisonment is imposed on the promotion and organization of international sex tourism, however in reality, advertisements for sex tourism in Panama City are abundant. As stated in the Panama City guide (Winner, 2007: 1), “rules and laws are conflicted with reality on the ground” and according to immigration officials there are “zones of increased tolerance”, places where they do not enforce the law as written and thus “there’s no chance of jail time”.

To sum up, Panama City is both an attraction for international tourists and a location of extensive sex trafficking with a high tolerance for illegal brothels. Trafficking occurs less from inside the country, but originates in the South American countries instead, as well as from overseas. Panama City can therefore be classified as a ‘sex hub’ according to the aforementioned criteria of such a hub. Trafficking patterns are shaped by Panama’s economic prosperity, its real estate boom attracting wealthy international migrants, its strategic location with the Panama Canal and weak national law enforcement.

What do these findings implicate for the broader debate on sex trafficking and sex tourism in the region? Is Panama City the same type of ‘sex hub’ as Cancún? The following chapter serves as the thesis’s analysis and compares both case studies after which conclusions are drawn for the overall theoretical framework of sex trafficking.

### 3. Analysis and comparison of the case studies

This chapter takes a closer look at the findings of the case studies and compares both countries’ findings with each other. The main argument of this chapter is to evaluate whether Panama City and Cancún are in fact both the same sort of ‘sex hubs’ and in what aspects they also differ. The comparison focuses on aspects of the tourism infrastructure, the urban space level, the sex industries and their surrounding legal framework and the specific trafficking routes. This analysis further links globalization

theory to the case findings to see how the globalization phenomenon has influenced the emergence of the 'sex hubs' in question. On a more general level, can the situation in both Panama and Mexico be seen as representative of sex industries, trafficking routes and the occurrence of sex tourism in other countries in Latin American and ultimately, representative for the region as a whole?

Mexico had a total population of 120.8 million in 2012 with 52.3 percent of its population at the national poverty line. Panama in comparison is much less populated with a population of 3.802 million of which only 27.6 percent find themselves at the national poverty line. The significantly smaller population can be explained by the country's smaller size of 75,416 km<sup>2</sup> compared to Mexico's 1,072,550 km<sup>2</sup>. With these statistics in mind, different aspects of the case studies are compared next.

## **Comparison between Panama City and Cancún**

### ***Tourism infrastructure***

To start with, Cancún has an estimated number of 26.000 hotel rooms available while Panama City, despite being a capital city, has merely 15.000 (The New York Times, 2013: 1). However, Panama City has increased its hotel capacity significantly in recent years, hinting towards a general surge of tourists and business travelers in the city. Both Cancún and Panama City are easily accessible for international travelers, however Panama City has more frequent flights to other capitals in the world and therefore attracts more businessmen compared to Cancún. Notably in Cancún is the fact that half of Americans visiting Mexico are in fact heading to Cancún airport (Gorbman, 2010), indicating that a high proportion of Americans are holiday tourists seeking the classical sun, sand, exotic destination. When it comes to access to beaches and beach resorts, Cancún has a clear advantage over Panama City, as tourism in Panama City has less of a resort culture and no convenient access to the beach.

### ***The urban space level***

Panama City, as well as a tourist destination, is the centre of business activity in Panama. Panama City tends to also be used as a jump-off point for tourists that want to venture further into the country. Therefore, one can conclude that Panama City is

less of an ultimate destination for tourism when compared to Cancún. Yet Cancún has less of a traditional city sphere since the tourist area, i.e. Cancún the resort is located on the island and hidden away from downtown Cancún, located on the mainland. Therefore, the concentration of night clubs and hotels that are frequented by the international tourists are not integrated into the urban space level of Cancún the city, but one can speak of a separate tourist enclave instead. In Panama City, as the case study has shown, there is a high concentration of night clubs and American-style sports bars in the so-called ‘gringo area’ of the city (Winner, 2007), hence the sex workers are more integrated into the urban city space when compared with sex workers in Cancún.

### ***The sex industry and its legal framework***

In both countries, prostitution is by law legal and regulated, however related activities such as pimping and brothel ownership are illegal. Mexico’s different states in addition can adopt its own legislation against trafficking and hence legislation in the state of Cancún, Quintana Roo is reportedly weak. As the case study showed, laws to punish clients of forced prostitution or sexual exploitation of minors are not enforced in the state according to Cacho (2012: 107). This is similar to the situation in Panama City where witnesses have reported that the rules and laws are not coherent with reality on the ground, especially in the “zones of increased tolerance” with no “chance of jail time” (Winner, 2007:1). Overall, one can conclude that legal enforcement is weak in Mexico and government officials and brothel owners often enjoy impunity. As Cacho (2012) explains, the protection networks of the brothel owners are very powerful. While corruption is not reported as widespread in Panama, there have been no investigations and prosecutions of child sex tourists so far, indicating that the sex tourism industry prevails despite being rendered completely illegal (United States Department of State, 2012b).

### ***Trafficking routes***

In terms of the trafficking and migration routes, both countries differ greatly. In Mexico, internal migration, from rural to urban and from south to north, and international, plays a significant role, while in Panama, migration to Panama City is mostly incoming from outside the country. As the statistics showed, Mexico’s proportion of its population living at the national poverty line is nearly double that of



Panama. Consequently, we see more trafficking victims in Mexico being of Mexican origin compared to Panamanian victims. This can be accredited to the vulnerability of women and children that live in poverty and the higher possibility of them being lured into debt bondage labour in their own country. Panama also has a lower incidence of people living in *extreme* poverty compared to the 65 percent of Hondurans, 56 percent of Guatemalans and 48 percent of Nicaraguans living below the poverty line in 2011 (Rodriguez and Davies, 2012). This inequality explains the different trafficking routes leading to Panama more often being the destination country for women from Central America and Eastern Europe, while Mexico is also a main country of origin of trafficked Mexican women throughout Mexico.

Furthermore, Mexico as aforementioned far exceeds Panama in terms of its size. Hence, the pool of potential victims is larger and migration routes from rural to urban and from South to North are better established and far more used than in a much smaller country such as Panama. The fact that Mexico borders the United States makes Mexico a particular popular transit country for migrants looking to cross the border. The border crossings, most notably in Tijuana, Juárez and Nuevo Laredo are not only used by Mexicans, but also by all other Latin American migrants coming from the South. Therefore, these prominent routes and border towns in Mexico are well established, of which internal trafficking networks take advantage.

Due to an established transportation infrastructure, the trafficking routes of a country are therefore proven to intersect with the country's migration routes to a large extent. Hence the trafficking routes observed in Panama in this study consequently have a more international character compared to the Mexican routes as victims are also trafficked across oceans. The majority of trafficking routes in both countries however tends to trace along the south to north axis.

### ***Sex tourism and its clients***

In relation to sex tourism, Mexico has received more international media and legal attention on the issue, as Mexico owns famous tourists destinations, such as the Cancún resort, where sex tourism can be considered a common practice. However, that does not imply that sex tourism does not take place to the same extent in Panama; it has merely received less attention and the practice is potentially more well hidden. This can be coupled to the previous section on tourism infrastructure, as the practice of sex tourism in Panama City is more widespread throughout the urban

space of the city, whereas sex tourism in Cancún is concentrated in the beach area and hence expected to be more visible.

The fact that Panama has experienced an investment and real-estate boom and GDP growth exceeds that of Mexico, leads to more wealthy tourists and foreigners that retire in Panama seeking more high-class prostitution services. In comparison, the Mexican sex industry has a more mixed clientele, from spring break students, local and poorer migrants to American and Canadian tourists.

In summary, the observations of the different aspects of the case study findings lead to the conclusion that while both Cancún and Panama City can be labeled as ‘sex hubs’, they differ in some aspects. The study has shown that they are both internationally accessible and frequented tourist hubs with an extensive sex industry, however the tourist dimension is slightly more significant in Cancún. Panama City, as the capital of Panama, is naturally less of a tourist destination and more a permanent residence for foreigners compared to Cancún, which in contrast has explicitly been designed and developed as a tourist magnet.

### **The case findings linked to globalization theory**

Globalization has resulted in the tremendous “growth of tourism that has enabled pedophiles to travel and many to engage in sex tourism”, while trafficking has simultaneously expanded “because the transportation infrastructure is there and transportation costs have declined”, as Shelley (2010: 3) states. Mexico and Panama have both seen a growth in tourism and better transportation infrastructure as a result of globalization.

The international advertisement of sex tourism in particular has been facilitated by globalization and the resulting “speedy, low-cost, and anonymous” communication is extremely helpful to the activities of traffickers (Shelley, 2010: 41). “Improved information technology as a result of globalization further confers upon the tourism industry powerful means of organization and management” (Lanfant et al. 1995: 29), in which so-called ‘sex packages’ available in the sex tourist hubs of Cancún and Panama City can be offered online and are bookable in advance.

Demand for trafficking correlates with an increase for sex tourism (Ambrosie, 2010), which the high amount of trafficking cases both in Mexico and Panama confirms. A further problem illuminated by the case studies is the high generation of

profits from sex tourism, which leads to state authorities tolerating the industry as an economic strategy. Mexican officials are known to facilitate the sex trade and participate in the trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and minors in high numbers due to the profits to be made that tend to be much higher than their job salary provided by the state.

The “legal and information gaps generated by capitalism” further allow trafficking organizations to hide in Globalization’s “interstices” (Cacho, 2012: 210), ensuring the continuation of the trafficking circle, despite the legal framework surrounding trafficking in both Panama and Mexico. This legal framework has so far proven ineffective in curtailing trafficking and sex tourism in both countries. The case studies furthermore illustrate that economic growth, as experienced in Mexico and Panama, is not an indicator of less trafficking, on the contrary; “the growing economic disparities within these countries instead result in increased problems of trafficking” (Shelley, 2010: 30) and sex tourism.

To conclude, globalization has influenced the trafficking and sex tourism industry on multiple levels and the industry can be described as truly global due to several reasons. Sex tourism links multiple regions around the world, as the advertisement and booking of it takes place overseas, followed by the sex tourists traveling, usually across borders, to the country of destination, i.e. Mexico and Panama, to engage in sexual activities with women and children. These women and children in turn are trafficked both within and across borders as well. Furthermore, the demand for sex arises in various countries around the globe, the trafficking routes reach across borders and continents and the trafficking networks tend to include actors operating in different countries.

### **Future Outlook on trafficking and sex tourism in Mexico and Panama**

Is the sex tourism and trafficking industry in Mexico and Panama likely to thrive in the future? In 2010, it was estimated that sex trafficking in Latin America generates “US16\$billion each years in profits” (Risley, 2010: 101). As long as the profits remain as colossal and high demand for sex and sex tourism continues, the trafficking and sex tourism industry is unlikely to disappear any time soon. Our capitalist structure, encouraging the ceaseless accumulation of profit, will continue to reward those industries that operate on a large, global and exploitative scale.

Moreover worrying is the weak law enforcement in both Panama and Mexico.

Crime statistics by Harrendorf et al. (2010) show that in 2006, 105.000 persons were prosecuted in Mexico compared to 597.000 in Panama, whereas the number of persons convicted was roughly the same around 100.000 in both countries. This indicates that while the criminal system is effective in prosecuting a high number of people suspected of criminal offences in Panama, the number of convictions however remain significantly low. The number of persons prosecuted and eventually convicted in Mexico is relatively equal, therefore signaling that actors of the trafficking industry seem to be able to operate beyond the reach of the law, making it more difficult to combat the issue with federal laws alone.

Promising is the fact that currently 32 countries have extraterritorial laws that allow the prosecution of their nationals for participating in sex tourism abroad, regardless of whether sex tourism or sex with a minor is punishable in the country where it occurred (Shelley, 2010: 15). Therefore, weak law enforcement in Panama and Mexico could no longer be beneficial to sex tourists due to stricter laws in the sex tourist's countries of origin. As countries such as the United States and France criminalize sex tourism, men have been seen returning home from Mexico to face prosecution, however the numbers are still too low to have a significant impact on Mexico's overall sex industry.

Mexico's GDP growth dropped significantly in 2013 (1.1 percent) however is forecasted to increase to four percent in 2016 (The World Bank, 2014b). Panama on the other hand experienced GDP growth at eight percent in 2013 despite an overall decrease, and is expected to reach a level of 6.4 percent in 2016 (The World Bank, 2014a). With the overall economic situation in Mexico experiencing a positive trend in the upcoming years, not just in urban centers, but also in rural areas, less migration from rural to urban is expected to take place, hence also less trafficking along those routes. However, it remains to be seen whether this theoretical improvement will manifest itself on the ground.

Panama remains a popular travel destination for wealthy travelers from Europe and Asia, and the economic situation remains promising despite the overall slight decrease in GDP, therefore trafficking from poorer Central American neighboring countries and Eastern Europe into Panama is expected to continue. Were the laws around trafficking, prostitution and sex tourism to be more strictly enforced, the wealthy clientele might consider Panama too risky and start seeking out other 'sex hubs' instead, for instance parts of Brazil, which have experienced a recent surge in

sex tourism. This development, however, is purely theoretical and speculative, based merely on the facts provided by the case studies.

### **Overall theoretical implications for the *global* trafficking debate**

Despite the observed differences in Panama and Mexico, many similarities across both sex industries have also been identified, indicating a regional trend of sex tourism. Does that render the Latin American region unique? While sex tourism is in fact increasing worldwide, it has in fact experienced the most rapid growth in Latin America in step with the promotion of tourism as a development strategy and encouraged by the way that the tourist industry has commercialized and gendered sexual images (Robinson, 2008).

Gender discrimination in these patriarchal societies and within the machismo culture of Latin America makes women even more susceptible to promises of employment elsewhere and easy targets to be lured into trafficking (Jeffreys, 2009). In Eastern Europe this gender discrimination is less embedded in the societal structures, whereas discrimination of children for instance is more prevalent.

All factors considered one could speak of a certain degree of uniqueness of the Latin American region and its trafficking and sex tourism industry. Notwithstanding, on a global scale, tourism itself has veritably grown in importance in the world economy. “As some poor countries have found themselves at a disadvantage in the new economic world order they have turned to sex tourism as a way to gain dollar income” (Jeffreys, 2009: 130).

Linking this to the regional context of trafficking, more countries and cities around the world were shown to be associated with sex tourism, for example Brazil, South Africa or Amsterdam. These places are simultaneously countries of destination for trafficked women and children. It is however questionable whether these places can be considered ‘sex hubs’ to the same extent as Cancún or Panama City. Again here, one needs to take into account the cultural, political, legal and historical context of each geographical space under observation as a ‘sex hub’. As the case studies demonstrate, Panama City and Cancún, despite both being located in Central America, very much differ in its historical and cultural dimension.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, both sex trafficking and sex tourism contain strong global elements and their dimensions reach across borders and continents. The study demonstrated how globalization facilitates the functioning of the sex industry both in terms of the better infrastructure of trafficking routes and the increase in sex tourism with more people on the move in search of exotic holiday destinations and sex. On a spatial level, trafficking networks make extensive use of established migrant routes that tend to lead from rural to urban, south to north and from economically deprived areas and countries to economically prospering cities and countries. These trafficking networks therefore supply the sex industries with forced prostitutes by trafficking women and children along those routes. These routes have been proven to pass through the 'sex hubs', thereby linking victims from diverse nationalities and multiple regions with international tourists that are engaging in sexual activities in those 'sex hubs'.

One can conclude that while the established definition of a 'sex hub' allows us to label different cities around the world as theoretical 'sex hubs', their exact dimensions may very much differ, as the Panamanian and Mexican case has shown. The legal framework and enforcement in both Panama and Mexico was shown to be weak and ineffective. High industry profits are a temptation for government officials and police forces to serve as accomplices to the traffickers and brothel owners and ensure the continuous sexual exploitation of women and children in tourism areas.

On an urban space level, Cancún is much more the traditional sun, sand, sex location with a high concentration of beach resorts on the island where most prostitution takes place, not in the city. The sex industry in Panama City however is much more centered on the nightclubs and sport bars in the city's so-called 'gringo' area. On average, the clientele in Panama City is mostly from wealthier European and Asian countries, along with Americans that retire in Panama, whereas Cancún sees a more diverse clientele ranging from spring-break students to Canadian and American tourists. Therefore, the sex industry in Panama City is more subtly integrated into the urban city sphere compared to prostitution taking place more openly in Cancún hotel resorts, nightclubs and beaches.

The study intended to show how sex trafficking contributes to the emergence of 'sex hubs' by focusing on tourism areas in Panama and Mexico in particular. While there an overall link between both occurrences was observed, the case studies have not succeeded in showing a strong *empirical* link between sex tourism and the traffic

of women and children. This is due to the fact that the methodological challenges of differentiating between voluntary and forced prostitution and determining which of the two is more common in tourist areas are obviously immense.

Overall, the study concludes that the sex tourism industries in Panama and Mexico, strengthened by sex trafficking, are not singular occurrences in the global landscape. However, they are to a certain extent unique as the Latin American culture and each country's historical migration routes, among other factors, play a role in the way these 'sex hubs' have emerged and continue to thrive. Having looked at future economic indicators, this study expects both Cancún and Panama City to continue being 'sex hubs' in Latin America for the next couple years. The study's theoretical framework can be used for further research into other potential 'sex hubs' in the region and the rest of the world, where sex tourism and trafficking persists.

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