

# WORKING WOMEN IN TOURISM IN QUEPOS, COSTA RICA

Shahinaz Ayoub

June 23, 1998

**ABSTRACT:** *Tourism has brought profound changes in the lives of women, as well as for the community at large. The kind of changes that tourism has brought to the lives of women is in question. It is hypothesized that there is a paradoxical impact that tourism brings to the lives of women. Tourism can elevate the status of women because of the job opportunities it generates. But it can also put Tica women in a position where they are exploited. Based on interviews with women who work in the tourism industry and business owners who are expatriates, it is concluded that a woman's social class determines whether or not she will be exploited in the industry of tourism.*

## INTRODUCTION

Costa Rica is a very interesting country in which to study tourism. Before I began this study five weeks ago, I had expected that the manifestations of how tourism has effected women would show a more elevated status. This is somewhat surprising since I have always thought that getting a job and making your own money was a sure enough way to have that measure of self-respect. But it is more complicated than that. The kind of jobs that tourism generates for women are the kinds that seem to utilize the very skills that it takes to be a housewife in this country.

As I walk through the streets of Quepos, I see a lot of hotels and restaurants that are suited for the average tourist. But if you look in these hotels and restaurants, you see women working as waitresses and maids. You don't see many women working at the front desk. To that end, it would be logical to conclude that women who work in tourism may have been freed from the tyranny of their husbands but they are victims of a new kind of enslavement. This is the paradoxical impact of tourism.

### ***Paradoxical Impact of Tourism***

The principal objective of this report is to investigate the effects of tourism on the lives of women here Quepos. Gender inequality is a little understood facet in the tourist development experience. I wanted to see if tourism was really good for the women in Quepos in terms of making them less timid and dependent on men.

I wanted to see if the American culture spilled over into the lives of these women. Because you see, in the U.S. there seems to be a lot of emphasis put on being independent and achievement. In Latin American culture there seems to be a lot of emphasis put on relationships and harmony. From what I gather in my experiences talking with people here is Quepos, a lot of the women who work in tourism are not thinking about emancipating themselves from their husbands. They are thinking more about how they can bring more income to feed their families.

### ***The Dark Side of Tourism in Costa Rica***

I was reading The Tico Times, a Central America English newspaper, I noticed a headline that read: TOURISM BOOM SHOWS SLUMP OVER. According to the Costa Rican Tourism Institute, tourism has increased by 29% in April (Guillermo Escofet in Tico Times: 1998). But then the dark side of tourism appeared when I turned the page. On page three it read: POLICE SEEK CLUES IN U.S. CITIZEN DEATH. A man who *lived in San Jose as a tourist and*

*frequented neighboring bars and business* was hit on the head with hammer 17 times. It is suspected that this man was killed because somebody was trying to exact revenge against. The motive for revenge against would be the selling of pornographic photographs and video of young Tica woman. It is suspected that the killing may have been perpetrated by one of the brothers of the women who may have been in one of those pictures or videos. According to an informant, this man was *frequently flirting with young Ticas and giving money to drug addicts who stopped by his shop at all hours* (Christine Pratt in Tico Times:1998).

I hypothesized that there are such negative impacts such as gringo men sexually exploiting Tica women in conjunction with them becoming more financially emancipated from their husbands. One of the things that came to mind was the exploitation that women would be experiencing from the expatriates. As such, a lot of my questions centered around whether or not the women felt that they are getting paid an adequate amount of money for the work that they do and whether or not they see any chance for a promotion. I also wanted to see what kind of jobs they did do. My end hypothesis is: that women do get financial independence from their husbands and fathers, but the end result is that there is high price to pay which may imply that they get exploited outside of their families.

### **PREVIOUS RESEARCH**

Anthropologist A. Lynn Bolles states that there is a dearth of research conducted on women as a category of analysis. It actually has been difficult to ascertain the effects of tourism for any part of the host population That is because tourism brings costs and benefits to the host population at large in direct and indirect ways.

When a tourist comes to Costa Rica and spends money that can not only benefit the business that it is directly taking it, but also all the people who have to deal with that business. Tourism has a way of yielding positive externalities for the whole community involved. And these benefits are difficult to measure, particularly the ones that are not counted in financial terms. Issues such as quality of life and the gender roles are difficult to measure and to attribute to tourism. If quality of life has improved or gender roles have become less rigidly defined, then who is to say that these changes are more effected by media than tourism?

Lynn Bolles analyzed the roles of women in tourism in Negril, Jamaica. She interviewed 50 women. When she describes the gender ideology of Negril, she points out the advertisements that depict the Jamaican men and women as being very masculine and very feminine respectively. She further adds that women are what attract visitors to their locales, because of their image and the fact that they are the ones that perform most of the work in the tourist industry.

Bolles further makes a distinction between classes with regards to the roles that women play in the tourist industry. She says that working class women are most apt to work in the informal sector. *Under the broiling sun, women vendors walk up and down the beach, trying to sell crafts, or fruit or to braid the hair of visitors, at the same time being harassed by hotel security guards because they do not have a vendor's license issued for fee by the Chamber of Commerce. Seven days a week, for many hours per day, women do this kind of work with no guarantees of meeting expenses* (A.Lynn Bolles in Erve Chambers: 1997).

With the middle class women, they are more apt to have an advanced degree when entering into the tourist industry and, as such, are treated with higher regards than the working class women. They are most apt to be the proprietors of business. As such, it appears that tourism has had negative and positive impacts on women. And it appears that depends on what jobs you

are working, which has a lot to do with what social status your family is situated in.

But Bolles also reminds us that when looking for women who work in tourism, it is important to look at the fact that tourism touches lives indirectly. There are multiplier effects to tourism.

*Women play other roles in the tourist trade besides being chambermaids. They are cooks, tourist market vendors, artists, recreational supervisors, nannies, barkeeps, waitresses, and nightclub entertainers. ...Women are travel agents and sell fine jewelry and Waterford crystal in fashionable boutiques/duty-free shops. Women also manage cottages, villa complexes and hotels....They are agents for car rental services and they serve as tellers in local banks. ....women work as accountants, bookkeepers, bankers, nurses, and are culinary art, hospitality, and recreation experts (A.Lynn Bolles in Erve Chambers, p.86:1997).*

In light of Bolles' discussion, it would be logical to conclude that most working in Quepos are affected by tourism, either directly and/or indirectly. As such, I would think that a lot of women that I interview are touched by tourism, because tourism is sustaining the economy of Quepos.

## METHODOLOGY

The principal method I employed throughout my research was interviewing. Initially my interviews were unstructured just to get a feel for what was out there. Then the more conversations I had with women working in the tourist business, the more comfortable I felt about composing a set of questions to ask in a structured interview. These interviews included women who owned/managed businesses such as hotels, restaurants and souvenir shops. There were also interviews that included women who were retail sales people, waitresses, receptionists, hotel maids and prostitutes. In order to get a variety of opinions I also had interviews with expatriates. These expatriates were generally people who owned either a real estate piece of property and/or their own businesses here in Quepos.

In conjunction with the interviews I also recorded some observations that I have seen in the workplace of women. I took notes on women working in the souvenir shops. I took notes on women working at the restaurants. I took notes on women working as a receptionist. What I am about to discuss are the findings that I acquired from the interviews, observations and conversations I have recorded.

## FINDINGS

The following is an account of what I have observed as a participant in Quepos in terms of everyday life. I also included data derived from the interviews and informal conversations.

### ***Benefits of Tourism***

In every interview that I had with my respondents not one person denied the importance of tourism to the community of Quepos. All the respondents agreed that tourism is good for the community. And maybe some were unwilling to look at the dark side of tourism: *tourism is always good - it does not bring problems. It brings a lot of money, it is good for business. It brings new experiences, it brings more professional job skills....The tourists give bigger salaries and they establish more business. Having this business- he will make profit to establish another*

*business...When we have more tourists we have more prestige...It is very important it supports the town...The more tourists that come to this town the more clients that I have.*

Women talked about what Quepos might be like if there was no tourism. *In the low season- sales are very low- some people end up closing their businesses. Beyond tourism- there is very little opportunity here except fishing....This town would be dead, no action, no life- the women will be more dependent on men- she is more apt to be a victim of domestic violence...I don't know. I think there would be a lot of apathy. The thing is - the problem here is not many have a highschool degree.*

An American man I spoke to who happens to own property in Quepos and has lived here for eight years has seen the various changes the town has undergone. For example, he pointed out that eight years ago people were only using bicycles for transportation and no one owned a car. Now there are a lot of people who have either a car, truck or jeep. He said before tourism came here, Quepos was like a small fishing village. He compared Quepos to the way Key West used to be. In the beginning before the tourists were flocking to Key West, it could aptly be described as a small fishing village. Then it started to evolve like Quepos is now. Then it got further than Quepos with the sprouting of condos and commercial establishments everywhere. I asked him what Key West is like now, he described it as *ruined*. Apparently all the costs that accompany a flourishing city has become a more or less a fixture to Key West. And perhaps, my respondent tells me, Quepos is probably headed in that direction.

### ***Tourism and Women***

I asked questions that pertained a lot to how gender relations and the status of women have been affected by the growth of tourism here in Quepos. Most of the women I interviewed unequivocally agreed that tourism yields much needed benefits for the women and their families. For example, one woman stated *if women work only in the house her mentality is not expanded*. Another woman was quick to point out *if there are no hotels or restaurants, there are no jobs, and if there are no jobs- women will have to be more dependent on men*. Another woman made a distinction between being a housewife and working outside of the home: *when I have money in my hand I feel more strong*.

Even though there have been many comments about the validity of tourism in elevating the status of women, there have been respondents that have been quick to point the fallacies in that kind of thinking. A few women spoke of their husbands disapproval with their time spent at work: *my husband doesn't like me to work- because I am not attending to the home...I don't suffer discrimination in the workplace- it is more in the home with my husband*.

In conjunction with discrimination at home, women have also been found to experience discrimination in the workplace: *yes - I feel discrimination here- but I don't feel it my personal life*. A woman who owns a tourist agency with her boyfriend had this to say: *it is more common for women to work - it is not the same as it was years ago...yet, people still prefer to speak to my boyfriend instead of me*.

The women who own a business seem to have the most distinguishing answers with regards to discrimination in the work place. One of the women I interviewed appeared to be somewhat pessimistic about the status of women in the midst of a flourishing tourism industry: *it is not good - for many women work means cleaning in the hotels - women here don't study- there is a big demand for women cleaners- it is all part of the mentality. We have a lot of foreigners who own businesses and will give the most menial jobs to the Costa Rican women. I think that the women don't take the advantages or take advantage of opportunities. The only jobs that*

women think that are available are for housecleaning. This is indicative of how the jobs that are available for women are most apt to be the ones that seem most natural to her. Through my interviews I found that a lot of women resort to sewing out of their own homes and selling their items to gift shops. An American business owner echoed the same sentiments when she described how she has tried to delegate more responsibility. She goes on further to say that the problem runs deeper than just women not believing in themselves: *Latin American women do not aspire to anything greater than having enough money for their children. When they get a job they are not thinking ahead about getting any kind of promotion like people do in the United States. They aren't thinking about acquiring new skills for the future. I tried to give one of my employees more responsibility in managing my restaurant, but she won't take it. I've even tried giving her a little bit at a time- it doesn't work. ...Latin American culture does not value ambition and achievement- people here only think about providing for their families and they just thank God they have a job. Latin American life is pervasive here- there are still three generations living under one roof- there are extended families living in the same neighborhoods..they don't think like us.* Her statement was confirmed by what another woman had said to me when I asked her if she thought there was any chance of a promotion or advancement in her job. She said: *I just thank God I have this job- I don't think about trying to get more.* Another woman pointed out that women here just don't go for the gold.

It was pointed that some women see the job opportunity in the tourists business as a chance to have knight in shining armor come rescue them out of Quepos and take them back to the United States: *sometimes the women have a relationship with the tourist, they get married and move to the United States.* Another woman had this to say: *some girls want the easy life- they don't want to work- they just want to party and have sex with the man. They still think that if they get involved with a tourist it is heaven. I don't know why....A lot of women have a dream to marry a foreign man with a dollar- and they don't prepare for tourism.*

### **Social Problems**

When I asked people if they thought that Quepos has any social problems, everyone would say yes. Some people would rank drugs as the number one problem and some would rank prostitution as the number four problem. Regardless of how people ranked the social problems like alcohol, drugs, prostitution and domestic violence, everyone did agree those were social problems that did exist. Some people called homosexuality a social problem. Others never even mentioned it. The number one social problem is alcohol- the second is drugs - the third is the prostitution and the fourth is homosexuals- there are both young boys and girls selling their bodies for money. In a certain way- prostitution is caused by tourism- tourists find out where they can get young girls real cheap.

There are some people that think that tourism is to blame for the social problems that exist in Quepos: *Tourism is bad because it brings drugs, alcoholism and prostitution...the tourist bring drugs, alcohol- that is the reason why tourism has decreased in the last years...the tourist living here in Quepos are bringing the drugs and alcoholism- there is a drug problem, alcohol- the most terrible impact is prostitution. Tourists always come looking for a young girl offering her money or they go to a hotel to look for prostitution..Tourism has caused drugs, alcohol, prostitution and a manifestation of more gay people.* There are others that think that people try to use tourism as the scapegoat for such problems and that they would exist regardless if tourism was around or not: *Poverty and drugs caused the problem here in Quepos...the causes are not tourism- the poverty and the lack of education is the cause..there is no unity in the family-*

*because there is a lack of communication between husband and wife. It is because the man is machismo- and that doesn't allow a man to talk very much...Before people used to say that the problem was the gringos. But the responsibility goes to the family. It is the way the parents discipline their children that determines whether or not they get involved in drugs.*

A few women distinguished between the good tourists and the bad ones when talking about which ones contribute to the social problems in the area: *There are two different kinds of tourists- they come with long hair- smoking, drinking - hanging around the beach. Some tourist come to the hotels, stores and go sport fishing - these are good ones. But there are tourists that come here looking for drugs and there are fourteen year old kids selling drugs... Sounds rude to say - but it really is true ....there is some prostitution... tourists find out from taxi drivers - they will ask if there is prostitution. Most of the girls go to the disco looking for business...It depends- one side is good- one side it is bad for the woman. The young girl can have relations with a tourist- she is unprepared. An eleven year old girl already looks like a woman. All the tourists want to make sex with her. It depends on whether or not she comes from a strong family or not. A lot of times she will go to the disco and have relations with no protection from disease.*

For a prostitute the going rate of what a Tico man will pay to have sex with her is three dollars. But the going rate for gringo to have sex with a Tica prostitute is one hundred dollars for an hour. If there are no gringos to pay the \$100 - there is a good chance that they will accept the \$3. There are girls that will generally start as young as eleven years old to sell their bodies for sex, but by age 18 or 19 years old it is not unusual for them to have one or two children. When a young woman goes home pregnant - she has no other place to go except home and her mother may have to help her take care of the baby. Or worse she may join the rising statistic of young unwed mothers who prostitute themselves just to make ends meet- because they feel they have no other job skills to survive.

When I was sitting at Dos Locus, a bar and restaurant for tourists, I met up with gringo that I knew on first name basis only. It would be difficult to mistake this man as anything but a gringo. He often wears these Hawaiian tourist looking shirts with Bermuda shorts and his blonde hair is always pulled back neatly into a pony- tail. He asked me what my paper topic was- from there the conversation turned to prostitution. While he takes a drag off his Marlboro cigarette he says that it is difficult to determine what came first the chicken or the egg. Is it tourism that evokes women to go out and sell their bodies or is it the prostitutes that promote tourism? He tells me that he does not think that either is correct- prostitutes would still exist regardless of tourism. Without the tourists - they would just do it for less money. He tells me that prostitution is not illegal and it is regulated in a hotel in San José. He says that eight years ago- there only drug problem was pot. Now crack has come into the town. He recounts hearing a sheriff say that he did not think cocaine was a problem here in Quepos- because it wasn't hurting our people (meaning the Ticos). Young Tico kids are selling to drugs only to the tourists.

Both he and I pause from the conversation for second, then we notice a woman standing outside of Dos Locus asking some of the customers for money. She is barefoot and she is wearing a t-shirt that says THEE DOLLHOUSE (a famous strip club in the United States). I remember giving her money the other week because she told me she was hungry. The gringo tells that the woman is a sad case. She has a crack problem. To support her habit she steals and prostitutes herself. When she got pregnant she tried to have an abortion by sticking a knife through her belly. When I first looked at her, I just thought she was a teenage boy. Her hair was short and her appearance was beyond unkempt. It looked as if she really needed a shower.

Shortly thereafter, the gringo tells me he is going to have a turkey with some his friends. He tells me he might be able to get me invited- he says *surely this must be better than rice and beans*. Rice and beans is the food that most Ticos eat for breakfast, lunch and dinner. There is no variety- just a lot of conformity and the gringo that was inviting me did even have to be told that was what I was going to go home to. I look behind me and there is a long table prepared with plates, bottles of wine with accompanying glasses and a turkey wrapped in tin foil with steam rising from it. As I saw the all the gringos gathering around the table and heard the American music - I couldn't help but think just how different their lives were from the Ticos that I have met. And here were Tica women hurriedly trying to get everything right for the customers.

It turned out that I could not eat turkey with the group- the gringo was unable to get me invited. So instead I went back to my Tico family and rice and beans. Then I met up with my friend at church.

Perhaps the lives of the Ticos are different from the lives of the gringos. But one cannot say that the lives are unaffected by the other. Gringos and Ticos have made each others lives better. But when you look at the degree - that is where the difference lies.

### CONCLUSION

I don't think that all tourism is the direct cause of all social problems that exist in Quepos. But I think in some ways, tourism has negative externalities just like it has positive externalities. Tourism generates the economy of Quepos by having multiplier effects. If the owner of a restaurant is serving fish for dinner- than he has to pay the fisherman for the fish. The fisherman needs supplies to catch the fish - so purchases them from someone who supplies them. Here are three business owners that are effected by the tourist wanting to eat fish.

On the other hand, there are negative externalities that tourism may causing. This is in particular a reference to the unraveling of the social fabric of the Quepos community. If a woman is working as a hotel maid and having to mother three children, then she is likely going to be experiencing a role strain. If a mother is too busy working - then perhaps her children are getting less quality time and less of a feeling of family unity. Her children may be engaging in what are called the social problems such as drugs and drinking. This is a negative externality.

Or perhaps these social problems are occurring because Quepos is ill-equipped to cope with the increasing economic changes due to tourism. Perhaps social problems such as drug dealing, drug abuse and prostitution are manifestations of the mismatch between the skills of the locals and the potential opportunities that Ticos could have in the tourism industry. The more elaborate skills such as entrepreneurial skills are needed to go for the gold. But the Ticos have yet to develop such skills. And maybe they never will. Maybe the Latin American culture won't allow for it.

Another possible explanation is that the town of Quepos may just solely exist for the sake of tourism and it is the locals who must deliver this service to the gringos. There is no movie theater. There are very few recreational clubs if any. There seems to be very little outlets for the Ticos to engage in leisure activities. There seems to be very little places for the Ticos to find help if they are having a problem with drugs, alcohol and/or domestic violence. Church seems to be the only place to deal with these issues on an emotional level. It is as if their lives are revolved around the tourism industry- because it seems that is the only reason why this town exists in the first place.

Maybe it is a combination of all the reasons that were just stated for the social problems.

There are similar negative externalities in the United States because of the increased job opportunities for women. Perhaps more social and psychological outlets are needed for the Ticos to deal with the negative externalities. And maybe it is going to take a while for the outlets to materialize because it takes time to deal with economic boom. Changes don't happen overnight. It is going to take a lot of adjusting and perhaps there are going to be some differences from the way gringos have dealt with a flourishing economy in their home state. Because the Latin American culture is very different from the culture in the United States. It looks like it is here to stay.

#### **REFERENCES CITED**

Bolles, A. Lynn. 1997. Women as a Category of Analysis in Scholarship on Tourism: Jamaican Women and Tourism Development. In *Tourism and Culture*. Edited by Erve Chambers. Albany: State University of New York.