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The University of Sydney and the University of Wollongong

The University of Sydney

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Making the Best of What You've Got:
Sex Work and Class Mobility in the Riau Islands

Michele Ford and Lenore Lyons
The University of Sydney and the University of Wollongong

Tanjung Balai Karimun is a town of approximately 95,000 people in the Riau Archipelago.[1] Together with the islands of Batam and Bintan, Karimun became part of a Special Economic Zone proposed in 2006 with the aim of enhancing economic development by capitalising on the islands' close proximity to Singapore.[2] Its development has not been limited to the export of raw materials such as tin, rubber, timber and copra, and more recently sand and granite; like Batam and Bintan, it has an extensive sex industry which caters predominantly to working-class Singaporeans and Malaysians. This chapter examines the place of 'sex as work' for women in the town of Tanjung Balai Karimun, and the impact of women's engagement in the sex industry on other parts of their lives.[3] In particular, it focuses on the life histories of Lia and Ani,[4] two former commercial sex workers who have since left the industry as a result of their marriages to foreign men. Like many of their peers in the Riau Islands, these women have managed to *mencari kesempatan dalam kesempitan* (to find opportunities in hardship), and turn their exposure to foreign clients in the brothels of Tanjung Balai Karimun into a chance to move into the lower middle class.[5]

The Riau Islands' location just kilometres from the much wealthier Singapore and Malaysia provides sex workers like Lia and Ani with access to the social and economic capital (Bourdieu 1977) not available to their counterparts in other places in Indonesia. We argue that the opportunities available to these women are the product of the Riau Islands' particular spatiality, and a pattern of migration which has seen large numbers of temporary and long-term migrants from throughout the Indonesian archipelago move in and out of the islands in search of work. Our analysis draws on the writings of Kamala Kempadoo (1999), who argues that the structure and significance of sex work is locally and historically specific and is determined by patterns of economic development, histories of colonialism, and normative constructions of sexuality and gender. Attention to these specificities allows us to see that neither 'sex workers' nor 'clients' are

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[1] This figure is based on the population of the Districts of Karimun, Meral and Tebing as of May 2002 (Kabupaten Karimun 2002). The fieldwork on which this paper is based was funded by an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project grant *In the Shadow of Singapore: The Limits of Transnationalism in Insular Riau* (DP0557368) – see project website http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/research/intheshadow/. Research for this chapter began during initial visits to Karimun, Batam and Bintan in 2004; repeat visits were made in 2005 and 2006. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian and translated by the first author, who has been travelling to the Riau islands since 1993. Thanks to Nick Long and Lyn Parker for providing helpful comments on an early draft of this paper.

[2] Before the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) was announced, the three islands were part of the Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle (IMS-GT) which was established in 1990. The underpinning philosophy of the IMS-GT was economic complementarity in which Singaporean capital would be combined with Indonesian and Malaysian labour and land to facilitate cross-border regional growth (Sparke et al. 2004). In recent years, the promise of the IMS-GT has not been realised and the new SEZ is an effort to reinvigorate economic development in the islands. The history of economic interaction between Karimun and Singapore is much longer than the life of the Special Economic Zone, or the growth triangle that preceded it. See Ford and Lyons (2006).

[3] Unlike destinations like Bali, the islands are not a recognised destination for female sex tourists. Male homosexual sex work represents a relatively small segment of the industry. Researchers working on this area have confirmed the presence of homosexual sex tourism in the islands, but note its underground nature (Personal communication with Dede Oetomo, March 2007).

[4] Pseudonyms are used throughout this chapter at the request of informants, except in the case of NGO activists. The stories of Ani and Lia are based on in-depth interviews conducted in August 2006, which were taped and transcribed.

[5] For accounts of other sex workers in the Islands see Lindquist (2002; 2004).

fixed, universal or transhistorical; in other words, 'prostitution is not a single thing' (Nussbaum cited in Schotten 2005: 212). Such an approach allows us to pay attention to the culturally embedded meanings associated with commercialised sexual behaviour in particular local settings, and to recognise that not all sex workers are 'the same'. Many women succeed in making the transition from brothel-based sex worker to Batam wife,[6] but the different modalities of sex work in the islands demonstrate that not all women are able to take full advantage of opportunities for social and economic advancement presented by the particular socio-economic conditions found there. The incompleteness of these strategies suggests that framing sex work within either an empowered or coerced model overlooks the complex realities of women's lives.

In the literature on sex work in Southeast Asia, a structure/agency binary is often used to describe the choices that sex workers face (Law 2000). This binary, based on a forced/voluntary dichotomy, operates between those who privilege free will (women freely choose to enter prostitution) versus those who emphasise the constraints on women's choices (the structural factors that make prostitution a job opportunity for women) (Law 2000: 97). For example, in her brief account of freelance sex workers working in nightclubs and discotheques in Jakarta in the mid-1980s, Alison Murray (1991: 125) describes sex work as a 'rational choice in response to the economic prospects of the city, and in selling their bodies as commodities [the women] are exploiting the capitalist system for their own purposes'. In the absence of a more detailed study of these women, however, Murray risks overstating the extent to which these sex workers are able to turn the tables and take control of their situation. As Rebecca Surtees (2004: 50) notes, it is important not to falsely dichotomise the ways that women experience sex work because 'sex workers do not conceive of their lives and experiences only in oppressive or empowered terms'. Our study supports this view and shows that some sex workers may shift between oppressed and empowered narratives of their entry into – and experiences of – sex work depending on the audience.

Regardless of the extent of agency or choice involved in the way in which they entered the sex industry, the women we interviewed in Tanjung Balai Karimun describe the provision of paid sexual services as a form of 'work'. In adopting the language of 'sex work' to describe the commercial sexual exchanges that take place in Tanjung Balai Karimun, we are both using the women's own terminology and explicitly engaging with Western feminist debates about prostitution. Crudely summarised, the debate is marked by a continuum between two polar positions: the radical feminist position, which views prostitution as a manifestation of male domination and women's oppression; and the sex and work position, which sees prostitution as a form of labour under capitalism. Radical feminists view prostitution as the ultimate expression of male dominance – as Kathleen Barry (1996: 9) states, 'prostitution [is] the cornerstone of all sexual exploitation'. According to this argument, there is no place for sex workers to claim that commercialised sexual activity is not always entirely harmful or alienating. Radical feminists thus deny the possibility of women's agency in relation to sex work. In contrast, the sex as work position claims that prostitution is a form of income-generating labour, which allows feminist activists to focus on the criminal and legal dimensions of women's labour (e.g. pushing for decriminalisation or legalisation, and for recognition under international labour conventions); and to attend to the working conditions under which women labour (e.g. health conditions, safety standards, hours of work). As a discursive strategy it also 'opens up a space for the formation of new identities not based on passivity, or sexual exploitation and sexual victimhood' (Sullivan 2003: 78).

We begin this paper with an overview of our case study site. We draw on our visits to brothel complexes and hotels in Tanjung Balai Karimun, and in-depth interviews with sex workers, hotel and karaoke bar owners, public officials and NGO activists who deal with sex workers, and members of the general community, to describe the social, economic and cultural contexts in which the sex industry operates. We then turn to the stories of Ani and Lia to explore women's

[6] The terms 'Batam wife', 'Bintan wife', 'weekend wife' or 'mistress', are widely used to describe an Indonesian woman in a medium- to long-term relationship with a foreign man in the Riau Islands.

experiences of sex work. Both women have worked in brothels, while Lia also worked as a freelance sex worker.[7] Through their narratives we explore the working conditions of brothel-based sex workers, and the ways that ethnicity, class and nationality shape their interactions with their clients. We also examine the women's feelings about sex work and the role that dominant community attitudes towards prostitution play in shaping their management of working life and home life. Our research shows that regardless of how women enter the sex industry, their experience of sex work is, as Lia observes, ultimately shaped by their ability to 'make the best of what you've got'.

Sex Work in the Riau Islands

Girls and women engaged in the sex industry almost always come to the Riau Islands from other parts of Indonesia – from Sumatra, Kalimantan and Sulawesi, but mainly from Java.[8] As is the case for the informal sector more generally, it is notoriously difficult to determine the actual numbers of women who provide commercial sexual services, or the economic value of their work. The inherent problems of studying the informal economy are further compounded in the case of sex work because of the ambiguous legal status of prostitution in Indonesia, the strong moral proscriptions that surround prostitution, the temporary nature of this work for many women and the diversity of forms that sex work takes.[9] Although exact figures on the numbers of sex workers in the Riau Islands are difficult to obtain, in 2004 one NGO that deals with sex workers on Batam had over 3500 sex workers on its books, while an NGO in Tanjung Balai Karimun dealt with almost 1000 women.

The Riau Islands are considered to be a key hub in human trafficking activities in Southeast Asia. The close proximity of Singapore and Malaysia means that the islands play a strategic role in both domestic and international trafficking of women and girls for commercial sex work and domestic work (Agustinanto 2003: 178). Research suggests that women who are trafficked to the Riau Islands from all over Indonesia, but particularly from Indramayu in West Java, are tricked into sex work by promises of good jobs in factories or restaurants (Agustinanto 2003: 179). Irwan, an activist from a Batam NGO, argues, however, that many of the women who end up in the industry have previous experience as sex workers. His theory is that if girls are under-age, they are very likely to have been tricked into entering the industry, but most of those above 18 already have experience as sex workers elsewhere, especially those from Indramayu and Karawang:[10]

> If you go to the entertainment venues in Batam, Tanjung Balai or wherever you're sure to find women from Indramayu, Subang and Karawang. You can tell from the way they talk – they use Sundanese, but their accent is a bit different. In the *lokalisasi* (localised brothel complex) they're commonly referred to as *barang baru stok lama* (new items, old stock). What this means is that they've just arrived in Batam as new sex workers, but they've been sex workers in Jakarta for a long time. When we ask them where they come from, they say they used to work in Jakarta, but got moved on. When *lokalisasi* were torn down to make

[7] The sex industry in Indonesia, as elsewhere, is extremely diverse. Our study focuses primarily on brothel-based sex work. For a brief overview of other types of sex work see Surtees (2003).

[8] According to statistics supplied by the NGO Kaseh Puan, in September 2005 the brothel at Payalabu near Tanjung Balai Karimun employed 156 sex workers, of whom 10 were from the Greater Jakarta Area, 115 from West Java, 19 from Central and East Java, 10 from mainland Sumatra and 2 from Sulawesi. According to sources within the industry and NGO activists, some local girls go to the discotheques and 'sleep around', but they hardly ever engage in sex for money.

[9] In addition to the different forms of sex work, many women who receive money or gifts in exchange for sex acts may not consider what they do to constitute work and/or prostitution.

[10] These two areas have a long history of supplying young women for Indonesia's sex industry. This practice is said to have begun in the pre-colonial period. Extreme poverty and low education levels continue the practice today and it has resulted in chain migration within entire families with mothers, sisters and daughters all working in the sex industry. For further discussion see Sulistyaningsih (2002).

> room for housing estates, they decided to try their luck in the islands. Some came on their own, while others were invited to come to Batam or Tanjung Balai or Tanjung Batu or Tanjung Pinang by women already working here. That's generally the case. (Interview, December 2004)[11]

The sex industry in the islands relies heavily on Singaporean clients. According to a survey conducted by the NGO for which Irwan worked, almost half of all sex workers' clients were from Singapore.[12] Almost all of these men are over thirty years of age, and the majority are well over forty. Whereas Indonesian sex workers charge approximately S$50[13] per night, Singaporean prostitutes may charge the same amount for one hour (*The Straits Times* 2004). The islands are located a short distance away from Singapore by high-speed ferry, with journeys lasting between 45 and 105 minutes, depending on the destination. Singaporean passport holders can enter Indonesia without a visa and stay for up to 30 days on a tourist pass. These men also enjoy the added benefits of cheap food, gambling, shopping, and other forms of entertainment during their visits to the islands, but the main attraction for them is sex. As Irwan notes, the profile of the client base is broadly similar throughout the islands:

> The old men from Singapore – who we call *apek-apek Singapur* (old Singaporean Chinese men) – come to Batam, Tanjung Balai and Tanjung Pinang for gambling or for sex. There's nothing else that draws them here … there's no nature tourism like in Bali or Bandung, or other places in Indonesia like Lombok. The reality is that the only attraction Batam, Tanjung Balai and Tanjung Pinang has for Singaporeans is sex.[14]

Indonesia's national criminal code does not prohibit sex work. It is illegal, however, to participate in the trade of women or underage males, or to earn a profit from the prostitution of women (Sulistyaningsih 2002: 43-4).[15] Although the national criminal code is silent on the issue of sex work, Islamic laws on fornication (*zina*) could presumably be used against married prostitutes and clients, but the burden of evidence is usually too difficult in such cases to enable prosecution (Jones, Sulistyaningsih, and Hull 1995: 12).[16] In the absence of national criminal laws to prohibit commercial sex, provincial and sub-district governments have introduced a range of regulations aimed at monitoring and restricting the sale of sexual services. However, in many places, local authorities have stopped short of banning prostitution, choosing instead to implement a regime of semi-legal control and surveillance. This *de facto* regulation of prostitution has driven many sex

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[11] These observations have been corroborated by men and women working in the industry.

[12] In 2004 one newspaper reporter claimed that approximately 600 Singaporean men visited the island of Batam every Saturday (Tan 2004). This figure is extremely difficult to verify and we have not seen any comparable figures for Karimun. However, interviews with sex workers and NGO workers in Tanjung Balai support the findings of the Batam survey.

[13] In September 2006, S$10 was worth US$6.30.

[14] Although Singaporeans also clearly come for gambling and other activities as well as sex, this sentiment has been routinely reflected in the more than eighty general interviews conducted in the islands for our broader ARC project.

[15] Rebecca Surtees (2004: 2) notes that the draft criminal code then being circulated criminalised sex work only in the case of solicitation in public spaces (Article 434); and included articles about intermediaries who facilitate and profit from sex work (Article 432) and the trade in women for sex work (Article 460). According to a representative of Komnas Perempuan (Indonesia's National Commission on Violence Against Women), the draft should enter parliament for discussion in 2007 (Personal Communication, 31 October 2006).

[16] While Islam and Christianity both contain strong moral sanctions against sexual relations outside of marriage, attitudes towards pre-marital sex vary throughout different parts of Indonesia. Some Indonesians are more tolerant of sex outside of marriage than many others, and these differences are not always the result of religious beliefs. However, since *Reformasi* the sex sector has been targeted by Islamic leaders, who have succeeded in shutting down the operation of numerous nightclubs, massage parlours and brothel complexes in Indonesia, most notably Kramat Tunggak in Jakarta. Some local governments have also implemented new, stricter measures. For example the local government of Tangerang, in Greater Jakarta, has passed local bylaws that permit the 'the arrest of any person who displays the 'qualities' of a prostitute' (Warburton 2006: 42).

workers into brothel complexes (*lokalisasi*) where, according to Jones *et al*. (1995: 13), 'they are controlled by pimps, procurers and the local government and police, but generally tolerated by the society'. *Lokalisasi* began to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s throughout Indonesia. These centres were modelled on similar centres established by the Dutch colonial government (Sulistyaningsih 2002).[17] Formally described as Rehabilitation Centres for Immoral Women (*Panti Rehabilitasi Wanita Tuna Susila*), *lokalisasi* are usually established as gated or closed communities consisting of multiple brothels each run by a different pimp (*germo*) or madam (*mamasan* or *mami*).[18] Each brothel houses a number of women, who live full-time on the premises. In addition to the *lokalisasi*, sex work also occurs in unofficial brothels (*rumah bordel*), such as the one in which Lia worked before becoming a freelancer, which have less stringent rules and regulations governing the behaviour of workers and clients.

Lokalisasi are often regulated by local police and/or army officials, and the industry is managed by financial interests that involve members of the Indonesian military, local government, and local and foreign business. In contrast, unofficial brothels are often subject to police harassment and official clamp-downs (Sedyaningsih-Mamahit 1999: 1102).[19] In the islands, the local authorities and the military have been active players in all parts of the industry. As Ali, the former manager of a large karaoke bar financed by Singaporean interests in Tanjung Pinang, observed:

> In the Riau Islands, prostitution is considered *halal* but *haram*.[20] Prostitution is banned by the government under national law, but because we're close to the border, Singaporeans kept coming here looking for sex, and we made the best we could of the opportunity. As a result, the economy started growing, and taxi-drivers, the guides themselves and even the supermarkets prospered. But the government kept causing problems because there was no certainty in their approach. You'd think if prostitution really was beneficial then they'd work out the best way to deal with it, through a licensing system or whatever. But instead the prostitutes are persecuted, and every month the prostitution bosses have to pay off government officials…The industry is considered *haram*, but if we *mengantar upeti* (pay tribute) we become *halal*. For example when an official comes we have to provide women and money. If we don't want to be disturbed, we need to *mengantar upeti* every month to the police, the navy and the army, and to the local government. (Interview, December 2004)

The first *lokalisasi* on Karimun was established at Pelipit in the early 1960s.[21] The largest *lokalisasi* currently operating is called Payalabu. Although the location of Payalabu has shifted several times since it was established in 1977, it kept its name.[22] The sex industry underwent a number of changes in the 1990s, which resulted in a diversification of the venues and the increasing presence of karaoke bars and discotheques. By 1997, it had grown considerably, as demonstrated by the establishment of a number of hotels and entertainment premises in the town. The foreigner-dependent sector of the sex industry experienced a massive expansion after the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98, when the purchasing power of Singaporean and Malaysian sex tourists increased

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[17] Kamala Kempadoo (1999: 12) notes that similar official brothel complexes were established by the colonial government in the Dutch Caribbean.

[18] *Lokalisasi* were expanded during the Japanese Occupation (1941-45), primarily to serve Japanese soldiers (Jones *et al*. 1995), and this may be the origin of the use of the term *mamasan* to describe brothel madams.

[19] The term *lokalisasi* fell out of official favour during the Abdurrahman Wahid presidency (1999-2001) because it was seen as legitimating prostitution. However, it remains the most commonly-used term for areas from which sex workers can operate on a long-term basis in relative safety.

[20] *Halal* and *haram* are Islamic terms for 'that which is permitted' and 'that which is forbidden'.

[21] Our thanks to Rina Dwi Lestari of the NGO Kaseh Puan for providing information on the history of the sex industry in Tanjung Balai Karimun.

[22] Others in the regency include Batu Tujuh, which was established around the same time as the original Payalabu, and another on nearby Moro Island. There is also a small *lokalisasi*, comprised of just a few brothels, at Bukit Jepang.

by a factor of more than five.[23] As the number of tourists increased, a brothel complex of over fifty shop-houses developed in an area called Puakang in the middle of Tanjung Balai Karimun near the traditional market. Approximately 600 sex workers operated from Puakang, servicing a mixture of local and foreign clients.

In these early post-crisis years, sex came to define Tanjung Balai Karimun. Around the year 2000, Tanjung Balai Karimun experienced a sex-led construction boom, with some fifty new hotels being built. According to a major investor in the industry, hotels were fully booked for months on end, and many tourists had to resort to renting rooms in private homes instead (Confidential Interview, August 2006). Sex workers engaged by foreigners came and went freely in the large hotels, inhabiting not only guest rooms and the smoky corridors but also the public spaces of the lobby, restaurants and bars.[24] These sex workers were clearly distinguishable from other women by both their clothes and demeanour. They would appear in their lingerie in the restaurants at breakfast with wet hair,[25] and in their finery in the lounges and bars in the evenings. In the late afternoon sex workers wearing spaghetti-strap singlet tops and high heels, often smoking cigarettes, would sit on clients' knees, feeding them from their plates, in the open air night market and on the large open-air promenade of the Hotel Holiday, a multi-storey three-star hotel on the waterfront. As one sex worker in the town described it, 'in people's minds Balai became just a place for sex' (Interview, August 2006).

The main street of Tanjung Balai Karimun

[23] The cash rate for Rupiah fell from Rp. 1779 for S$1 at the beginning of August 1997 to a low of Rp. 9958 in mid June 1998, before stabilizing at around Rp. 5000 in late 1998.
[24] These observations are based on a fieldwork trip to Tanjung Balai Karimun in December 2004.
[25] As Muslims are required to bathe and wash their hair after having sex, wet hair – particularly in the morning – is often taken to suggest recent sexual activity.

The community in Tanjung Balai is divided over the presence of the industry. Many people recognise the economic benefit that sex tourism has brought not only to those directly involved in the industry, but to the community as a whole. However, interviews with a cross-section of people from Tanjung Balai conducted in 2006 suggest that many are offended by the presence of the sex workers, and the effects the industry has had on their community.[26] After regional autonomy was introduced in 1999, local lobby groups opposed to prostitution, drugs and gambling developed more leverage with elected officials and administrative policy-makers.[27] When the regent was elected at the end of 2001, sections of the community demanded that the problem of the 'sin industries' be addressed. A *Tim Operasi Penyakit Masyarakat* (Social Ills Operation Team) was formed, and the local government gave brothel operators in the Puakang district an ultimatum to clear their premises by 7 February 2002. In May, shop-houses in the Puakang complex were sealed by the police and the sex workers dispersed. About half of the sex workers relocated to an area known as 'Villa Garden' in an area that had previously housed karaoke businesses. Many others became freelancers, who live in the community and operate from hotels and bars.

The industry began to decline in 2003 as a result of both these and other external pressures. The Singapore economy experienced a downturn in 2002 and there were significant job losses in many industries. The working class men who frequented the islands for sex found themselves with less disposable income. The SARS epidemic of 2003 also had a significant impact on their mobility in to and out of Singapore. There was an even more dramatic downturn in the sex industry in the second half of 2005 after Sutanto, the new Indonesian national Head of Police, issued an edict that gambling was no longer to be tolerated. The sex industry, which had been closely tied to gambling, was badly affected. Around the same time, the local authorities once again increased their surveillance of commercial sex activities outside the limits of the *lokalisasi* and began targeting the *simpanan* (lit. kept women) of foreign men.[28]

As a result of these developments, the number of sex workers active in the town began to shrink. According to NGO data, the number of women residents in Payalabu decreased from 242 in 2003 to fewer than 200 in 2004, and then to just 162 in mid-2006, while another 611 sex workers operated from Villa Garden or as freelancers living in the community.[29] As a consequence, although sex tourism was still a major industry in 2006, it was much less visible than it had been two years earlier. Life has become more difficult for the sex workers as the numbers of sex tourists have decreased. As Ani observed:

> It's not like it used to be. They have to take more clients every day, and they can't afford to pick and choose. When I was working, there were always plenty of clients. My friends tell me now that there's a lot fewer now. But the sex workers, they're stuck here. How can they go home when they've already signed a contract? Sometimes they have to accept locals – even though they only pay a pittance – just to earn enough to put food on the table.

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[26] Concerns most often cited included the effects of the visual presence of sex workers on children and public morality in general, and not wanting sex workers or former sex workers living in residential areas.

[27] This is true for Batam and Bintan as well, but regional autonomy has been particularly influential for Karimun. Until 1999, Karimun was a *kecamatan* (district), the second tier of local government under the *Kabupaten* (regency) of Kepulauan Riau, the administrative centre of which was located almost five hours away by boat in Tanjung Pinang on the island of Bintan. When the regional autonomy laws were introduced in 1999, Tanjung Balai became the administrative centre of a new *kabupaten* called Karimun with its own *bupati* (regent) and a local parliament (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah*, DPRD).

[28] This was not the first time there had been a centrally-initiated government crackdown. Every year the sex and gambling industries are subject to intense scrutiny around the Muslim fasting month of Ramadhan, when local governments force entertainment venues to close. In the past, sex workers would return and the gambling establishments would re-open not long after the Idul Fitri celebrations were over. In contrast, Sutanto's edict continued to be enforced.

[29] The sex industry continues to reinvent itself. From the middle of 2005, massage parlours offering the services of sex workers began to emerge in the Kota Kapling and Padi Mas areas.

The Organisation of Brothels

In Tanjung Balai Karimun, as in other parts of the Riau Islands, women operate in a range of different situations including brothel-based sex work, bar and hotel-based sex work, and longer-term arrangements with particular clients. There are two main types of sex workers in the town: those who work as freelancers and those who work in brothel complexes. Freelancers live in the community, in a rented room or a share house, or in a shop-house in a commercial district. They run their own businesses, and are not controlled by a madam or a pimp, and therefore pay no commission. They seek clients in the bars and hotel foyers most often frequented by foreigners. They may bring clients back to the premises, but are more likely to accompany them to a hotel room – or in some cases, such as Lia's – to travel to Singapore or elsewhere to meet them.

In contrast, brothel workers are managed by a madam. In Payalabu, the main *lokalisasi* on Karimun, there are two kinds of brothel workers: *anak sewa* (renters) and *anak potong* (profit-sharers). *Anak sewa* pay around Rp. 600,000[30] per month for a room, but their clients pay them directly and they manage their own costs. In contrast, *anak potong* pay a relatively low rent, but their fees are collected by their madam, and they buy everything they need from her on credit. Theoretically they are paid the balance at the end of their contract (which ranges from six months to one year), but often they find themselves in debt, and are forced to sign another contract. Women in Payalabu generally work at night, although regular local clients, such as civil servants, mine workers, labourers and motorcycle taxi drivers, tend to come during the day. Most of the women's nocturnal clients are sailors from local and visiting fishing fleets and from foreign cargo vessels.

Lokalisasi at Payalabu

[30] In September 2006, the value of Rp. 1,000,000 was US$110.

As many of the women in the *lokalisasi* live with their families, Payalabu is not very different from other semi-rural neighbourhoods during the day, except for the absence of early-morning bustle. When we visited Payalabu during fieldwork in 2004, we saw women out sweeping their front yards in *dastar* (smock dresses) just like those worn by women all over Indonesia. The area was tidy and well-maintained, and the only visible clue that the area was a *lokalisasi* was the local clinic, which displayed posters about reproductive health in its windows, and the illuminated Sutra condom advertisements outside some of the houses. But by 6 pm, the sex workers are dressed and waiting in their sitting rooms or on their verandas, hoping to attract customers. At 12 midnight, a local security officer rings a bell, and clients who wish to spend the night must enter a room, having paid Rp. 10,000 to the security officer to guarantee their safety. Sex workers in Payalabu earn between Rp. 50,000 and Rp. 70,000 for anything up to two hours' work (the sex workers themselves pay Rp. 35,000 each per month to the security officers). The local term for these short-term bookings is *curi ayam* (stealing a chicken). For Rp. 150,000, clients can spend the night in the *lokalisasi*, saving the cost of a hotel. Alternatively, clients can pay Rp. 350,000 and take their chosen sex worker to a hotel, leaving their identity card or licence behind as a guarantee that they will return. There is no fence around Payalabu, and no guards on the entrance during the day. However, the *lokalisasi* is isolated and it is difficult to find transport to Tanjung Balai Karimun, so the women have difficulty leaving the complex except in the company of a client.

The system is very different at Villa Garden, the successor to Puakang where Ani worked. Villa Garden, home to many sex workers relatively newly arrived from other parts of Indonesia, is not recognised as a *lokalisasi* by the local government. Villa Garden consists of about 50 townhouses crowded together in a walled community with just a single gate, approximately 700 metres from a major road only fifteen minutes from the centre of Tanjung Balai Karimun. It has a much less homely feel than Payalabu, and the movements of the sex workers who live there are much more restricted. Villa Garden does not have a collective security system as in Payalabu. Instead, every house has its own security guard, and residents are not permitted to visit their neighbours. There are no facilities for entertaining clients in the Villa Garden complex, so all business between the sex workers and their clients is transacted in hotels outside the complex itself.

Area outside waterfront hotel commonly used by sex workers and their clients

The sex workers in Villa Garden are generally much younger than those at Payalabu, and many are brought directly to the complex from other parts of Indonesia. Women who arrive by ship to Villa Garden are charged Rp. 500,000, and those who came by plane Rp. 2,500,000, for their transportation. They must work to pay off that debt before they receive any money. The hours of work are the opposite of those at Payalabu. The sex workers are dressed and ready by 8 am, and clients can make a selection any time between then and 4 pm, when they must leave the complex. Charges per night vary. Clients pay approximately Rp. 350,000 for a sex worker who has been in Tanjung Balai Karimun for some time. Prices go up sharply to Rp. 1,000,000 for those who have just arrived, and around Rp. 5,000,000 for a virgin.[31] Unlike Payalabu, locals seldom visit Villa Garden, where the clientele consists predominantly of working-class Singaporean men who have come to the islands specifically for sex.

Women's Experiences of Sex Work

In the Indonesian context, an array of terms is used to describe women who get paid for providing sexual services and are primarily employed as sex workers. These include terms with strong (negative) moral overtones such as *wanita tuna susila* or *WTS* (women without morals), and *pelacur* (prostitute). The more neutral terms *pekerja seks komersial* (commercial sex worker, PSK) or *pekerja seks* (sex worker) are used by women's groups and NGOs, and sometimes by the sex workers who access their services.[32] In the Riau Islands, sex workers are commonly referred to as *lontong*, after a dish consisting of rice cakes and vegetable curry (a play on the term *lonte* – a Javanese word for prostitute or 'loose' woman). They are also known as *ayam* (chickens), a term which is a commonly used in Indonesia for prostitutes, and is also favoured by Singaporeans visiting the islands. In Tanjung Balai Karimun sex workers are sometimes referred to as *ayam bersepatu* (chickens with shoes), because of the distinctive wedged-heeled sandals that they often wear. The sex workers themselves generally refer to themselves as *ayam* or *anak asuh* (foster child) – with reference to their *mami* (a term for a madam, but also widely used for 'mummy' in middle-class Indonesian families). As noted at the beginning of this paper, the women we interviewed invariably referred to their paid sexual activity as *pekerjaan*, or work, even when they were bemoaning their lot. In the words of one of our informants, 'I didn't want to do this kind of work, but then I thought, my children need food, I need a living. What else can I do? Why not? Perhaps it's fate.' (Interview, September 2006).

The experiences of sex workers in Tanjung Balai are as varied as the places in which they work, as the stories of two former sex workers show. In 1997, Ani, a 22 year old Javanese divorcée with one child from Lampung, was tricked into the sex trade by a neighbour who promised her lucrative work in Malaysia. On her arrival in the islands Ani's friend told her she was not going overseas, but was going to work in a local salon instead. When she arrived at the salon, Ani was dismayed to find that although some women were indeed cutting hair, most were waiting for a different kind of client. The salon was located in the Puakang complex described above. According to Ani, most of the madams in the complex were Chinese who had come from Medan. The women working there were mostly Javanese women from around Medan in North Sumatra and Sundanese women from Indramayu. Ani, who describes herself at the time as 'stupid and uneducated, just a naïve village girl', worked in the sex industry in Tanjung Balai Karimun for two years before a client bought her out of debt bondage in order to marry her. Her clients were mostly from Singapore and Malaysia, although she occasionally was asked to have sex with locals. The Singaporeans usually booked her out for at least a night and took her to a hotel. Many of her clients would pretend she was their girlfriend, or 'like a wife, only hired'. Sometimes they would invite her out to eat, or

[31] Prices quoted here are for 2006.

[32] Jones *et al*. (1995: 18) note that the latter term is rejected by the government, 'particularly those involved in the collection of labour force statistics, on the grounds that it implies the acceptance of prostitution as a valid category of employment, an option they would like to avoid'.

they would order food up to the room. Ani preferred that, because she did not like to be seen in public with her clients.

Some of Ani's clients were good to her. For example, there were times when a client, rather than cancelling his booking when she claimed she had a headache or was menstruating, would just keep her company and let her get some rest. These men, however, were relatively rare. In Ani's words, 'the nice ones were nice, but most of them were bastards':

> Sometimes they weren't satisfied with just one – they'd order two or three girls and want to make out like on the VCDs [pornographic video compact discs]. Or sometimes they'd call their friends after we got to the hotel and I'd have to have sex with three or four men. I really didn't like that. And sometimes they want anal sex. I've experienced that twice. Once with a Chinese – I was so ashamed. I told him that he couldn't treat me like that just because he paid for me. I'm a human being, not an animal. I told him I didn't care if my madam got angry, I was going to report him to the police.[33] That scared him – he went back to Singapore straight away. The other time, [the client] was an Indian.

Lia, the widowed daughter of Javanese transmigrants in Deli Serdang, had a very different experience of sex work. Unlike Ani, who had been no further than Jakarta before she was brought to the Riau Islands, Lia had spent a short time in Singapore as a foreign domestic worker.[34] After returning to her village, a friend suggested that she come and work in Tanjung Balai Karimun to earn money to support her two children. At first she was employed by a local Malay woman married to a man from Flores who ran a small independent brothel. But Lia resented having to share her takings with the madam, who deducted large amounts of money for food and lodging on top of her 50 per cent cut, and decided to run away. It was easy enough for Lia to establish a freelance operation, because she had kept a file containing the contact details of clients she had liked when working in the brothel. In addition to meeting clients in hotels in the islands, Lia made herself available for visits to Singapore. After receiving a phone call from a client she would make the short trip to Singapore by ferry, and stay for anything from one night to a week. Lia's 'house visits' were mostly to Chinese and Indian men she had met while working in the brothel, but she also made new contacts on the ferry. The arrangements were mutually beneficial. All Lia's costs were covered, and she went home with S$200 per day in hand – four times the going rate for an overnight booking in Tanjung Balai Karimun at the time. Her clients had the convenience of not having to travel to the islands and or to pay for a hotel, and received 24 hours' service for the price of a short term visit to a sex worker in Geylang, one of Singapore's red light districts.

Ani's and Lia's day-to-day experiences of sex work were intimately connected to the nationality of their clients as well as the working conditions in a particular brothel/workplace. Most of Lia's and Ani's clients were Singaporeans and Malaysians, because local men could not afford the Rp. 250,000 for an overnight booking, let alone the tips the sex workers expected from their overseas clients. Ani claims that she sometimes got tips of up to Rp. 100,000 but commented that not all foreign clients like to tip: 'The tight ones are just that – tight. They never hand over anything. The best thing is to get regular customers. They give the best tips.' Local clients in Tanjung Balai Karimun can generally only afford to pay for a short-term booking or at most one or two days. They seldom take the sex workers off the premises. In contrast, foreign clients, although working-class in their home countries, can afford to pay much more because of the favourable exchange rate.[35] Most foreigners dislike the atmosphere of the *lokalisasi*, and prefer to take sex

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[33] There is a strong cultural objection against heterosexual anal intercourse in Indonesia. In November 2006 a Swedish national was arrested in Batam for demanding anal sex from a prostitute (TVRI National News, 14 November 2006).

[34] Lia worked for a wealthy Chinese family in the Hua Guan district. She decided to break her contract and come home once her six-month bonded period was up she because she could not stand the work and was not allowed to leave the house.

[35] In 2006 the going rates for locals were between Rp. 50,000 (short-term) to Rp. 350,000 (all-night booking), and for foreigners between Rp. 150,000 (short-term) and Rp. 1,000,000 ('deluxe' all-night booking).

workers to a hotel. In addition to generally tipping well, they often buy the sex workers good food and clothing.

However, according to Ani and Lia, not all foreigners are the same. On the whole, Ani had the least trouble with her Singaporean Chinese clients, who were clean – not like the local Chinese – and least likely to be violent. Malays were generally okay, but Ani really did not like Indians:[36]

> The Indians are very rough. They think they can do whatever they like because they've paid for us. I hated going with them because I know what they are like. Once I tried to refuse, but my madam got really angry and threatened to fine me a million rupiah, so I had to go.[37] Those Indians are awful. Once I screamed so much the security officer came up to the room. They're bastards you know. They think they can do anything. Then in the morning when it was time to leave, he only gave me two thousand rupiah to get home. That's not enough even to get an *ojek* (motorcycle taxi)! Even an *ojek* costs ten thousand!

Like Ani, Lia's experiences of sex work depended not only on the vagaries of the individual client, but on their ethnicity:

> They have very different characteristics. The Indians are really rough. They drink too much and they're dirty, and they like to have anal sex. They also like to come in groups and all have sex with the same girl. The Chinese are really clean, but they're always complaining. The Malays are a bit naughty – maybe they think that because we're from the same ethnic group they can make lots of demands.[38]

However, both women felt that despite their ethnic differences, their Singaporean clients had a lot in common, in particular a sense of national superiority in their interactions with Indonesians. Although not personally wealthy, the men felt superior to the women in a way that local and Malaysian clients did not. As Lia put it:

> Singaporeans really look down on Indonesian women. They think that because they have money they can do whatever they like. That's my experience. They think because they have money they can do whatever takes their fancy. In the middle of the night, when they're drunk, they get angry, and sometimes they hit you. And the Indonesian [sex worker] has no way to escape. She just has to keep her mouth shut and accept it.

As these accounts demonstrate, class, ethnicity and nationality intersect in complex ways to shape the experiences of sex workers in Karimun. Working-class Singaporean men travel to the

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[36] The terms 'Chinese', 'Malay' and 'Indian' refer here to the ethnicity of the clients, not their nationality. The majority of foreigners who travel to Karimun for sex are from Singapore and Malaysia. Both countries classify their populations into official 'racial' categories based on historical country of origin, and thus the term 'Indian' here may refer to Singaporean or Malaysian men of South Asian ethnicity. A significant number of South Asian seamen who are docked in Singapore also visit the Riau islands so it is also possible that some of the men Ani and Lia describe are Indian nationals; however, most seamen use the *lokalisasi* at Payalabu rather than the urban brothel complexes.

[37] At that time Ani earned Rp. 125,000 per night – half of what the client was charged.

[38] Although both Ani and Lia are Javanese rather than Malay, they identify broadly with Malays (as opposed to Chinese and Indians), and would be perceived by their customers as Malay. Ali, the former karaoke operator from Tanjung Pinang, has his own theories about the ethnic differences amongst Singaporeans. He claims that Malay men are simply looking for pretty girls with whom they can have lots of sex. In contrast, Indians and Chinese don't care if the girl is pretty – they're more interested in 'quality of service'. Chinese men like to get massages, while Indian men want girls who will get drunk and 'play the fool'. He says, 'They [Indians] like girls who are funny – pretty girls won't do things like go swimming when they're drunk, so they prefer the plainer ones. The difference between the Chinese and the Indians is that the Indians are arrogant … downright rude. They see a girl and just grab her – they don't ask whether she is interested or not. The Chinese are different. They sit down with a girl first and ask her if she wants to go with them, and don't take offence if she isn't interested.'

Riau Islands in search of both sexual gratification and intimacy. In their interactions with Indonesian sex workers they find a space to momentarily escape from their marginalised position in Singapore's developed economy. The favourable exchange rate between the Singapore dollar and Indonesian rupiah means that, as Lia says, 'they have money [so] they can do whatever they like'. But, Indonesian women's attractiveness lies not only in their comparative cost, but also in the nature of the experience that the client's money can buy. As Ani says, the men can pretend that the women are their girlfriends, 'like a wife, only hired'.

AIDS prevention brochure in hotel bin

Working-class Singaporean men have found that their marginal economic position has made it difficult for them to find marriage partners in Singapore, or where they are married that their wives' access to education and paid employment begins to challenge traditional views of women's sex roles (AWARE 2004). According to popular wisdom in Singapore, they come to Karimun to fulfil their fantasies, to 'live like Kings' (Arshad 2003) surrounded by submissive (traditional) women.[39] Women like Ani and Lia play their part in these fantasies by playing the part of attentive 'girlfriends', and poke fun at the Singaporeans behind their backs.[40] As much as their clients may pretend that they are rich men, Karimun's residents know that it is simply an act; that they only have money to spend because of the favourable exchange rate. In Lia's words, 'there's nothing special about them'. Working-class Singaporean men's power in the political economy of Karimun's reflects Indonesia's unequal position in its relationship with Singapore. Ultimately these

[39] This expression is commonly used in the islands to describe Singaporean men's objectives in coming to the islands.
[40] During fieldwork, on a number of occasions we witnessed women sitting with foreign clients, fulfilling their every whim, while simultaneously engaging in a desultory running commentary with their friends. While some foreigners speak enough Malay/Indonesian to transact sex services they clearly had no idea what the women were saying about them.

inequalities are played out on the bodies of Tanjung Balai's sex workers. As Ani and Lia argue, sex workers' experiences with their clients are mediated by ethnicity and the women construct a hierarchy of preferred customers based on ethnic stereotypes, but risks remain regardless of nationality. Apart from violence, the women are also at risk of contracting a range of sexually transmitted diseases. In 2002, Riau Province recorded the fourth highest rate of HIV/AIDS infection after Jakarta, Papua and East Java (Darwin et al. 2003: 27).[41] Ani constantly worried about the impact of her work on her physical health: 'Even most of the foreigners don't want to use condoms. They say it's not comfortable. They don't realise the risk they run of getting one of those diseases. I was lucky. I never got one because I had an injection of antibiotics every week'.[42]

It would be a mistake, however, to understand Ani and Lia's stories simply in terms of oppression. While not all women are able to exercise the same degree of autonomy as Lia has in running her freelance business, neither are all women placed in extreme conditions of exploitation and coercion. Our research supports Sedyaningsih-Mamahit's (1999) study of the Kramat Tunggak *lokalisasi* in Jakarta which uses a nuanced understanding of 'choice' to describe four types of women who work in the brothel: 1) women 'forced' into sex work by personal circumstances; 2) women who joined the brothel through friends or sisters; 3) women who were abused or tricked into prostitution; and 4) women who choose sex work as a rational economic business decision. Ani and Lia fit the third and fourth typologies respectively. Women also experience different trajectories after they enter the sex industry. For some women it may be a short-term episode as they move from one stage of life to another. For other women, sex work becomes a way of life. They get stuck in the system through a range of circumstances, including, for example, the need to support local boyfriends with their earnings from sex work. These non-work identities loom large in the stories that many women tell about entering sex work – women are tricked or forced into prostitution by boyfriends, they choose sex work because their husbands/boyfriends can't find work or have abandoned them; and/or they work to provide for their children (Sedyaningsih-Mamahit 1999). When boyfriends or husbands are also pimps, or when the women fall pregnant to their clients, it becomes even more difficult to separate out the different aspects of their working and non-working lives. For women who live and work within a *lokalisasi*, particularly those whose children live with them, the markers that exist in many other occupations between the 'workplace' and 'homelife' are rarely present. This experience is not unique to sex workers,[43] but when it is combined with strong moral sanctions against prostitution that effectively separate sex workers and the 'moral community', this close meshing of work and home is strengthened for women in the *lokalisasi*. However, as is shown in the following section, the work-family divide is significantly stronger for women like Lia and Ani, who lived apart from their children while engaged in sex work.

Moving into the Lower Middle Class

The stories that Ani and Lia tell about their entry into the sex industry and their experiences of sex work are part of a mobility narrative that is shared by all migrants to the Riau Islands. It is a story of young women and men who *merantau*, or travel far away from their villages in order to make their fortune. While many find the reality of life in the islands vastly different to how they

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[41] Since reporting began, 272 full-blown AIDS cases have been reported in Mainland and Insular Riau, 162 of which were in the Riau Islands. In the second quarter of 2006 alone, 16 AIDS cases in the Riau Islands were reported to the Ministry of Health (2006).

[42] Since the mid-1990s there has been an increasing interest amongst public health scholars in examining the link between prostitution and the spread of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases in Indonesia. This has given rise to a number of studies of *lokalisasi* in Jakarta and Surabaya, looking at condom use by sex workers and their clients (Jones, Sulistyaningsih, and Hull 1995; Thorpe et al. 1997; Sedyaningsih-Mamahit 1999; Wolffers et al. 1999; Ford et al. 2000; Sulistyaningsih 2002). These studies show that condom use by sex workers is very low, and that this reflects general social attitudes towards condom use.

[43] Many home-based workers face the same issue, as do foreign domestic workers who live in their employers' homes and are expected to be available 24 hours, 7 days a week.

imagined it, they end up staying for a variety of reasons. In his study of prostitution in Batam, Johan Lindquist (2004) argues that the experience of *malu* (shame) is a significant force that keeps the migrants from other parts of Indonesia in the islands – the shame of returning home with nothing is stronger than the shame of engaging in illicit or immoral activities. Our research shows, however, that while being 'ashamed' plays an important role in how women like Ani and Lia negotiate the boundaries between their working and non-working lives, they choose to stay in Karimun precisely because it provides them with greater opportunities for social, cultural and physical mobility. Just as the sex industry is 'set apart' from moral society in Indonesia, the Riau Islands are set apart from life 'back home'. The physical distance that separates Karimun's sex workers from their villages and families, means that they have less to lose – they are unlikely to meet members of their home communities in Tanjung Balai and do not fear that they will be 'found out'. At the same time, a strong sense of shame and fear of what their families will think shapes the way they manage the intersection between work and family.

Both Ani and Lia have kept the nature of their employment a secret from their parents. Despite her pragmatic attitude to her involvement in the sex industry, Lia told her parents that she was working in a supermarket: 'How could I have told them? It would have broken their hearts'. She went to great lengths to keep her secret from them:

> I was careful not to start smoking, because it's a difficult habit to break. I also didn't bleach my hair. So when I went to the village, I looked normal – my hair was black, I wore ordinary clothes, and I didn't smoke. I just looked normal. I had a child, and I wanted to protect my parents. There was no way I was going back to the village with bleached hair, smoking! Absolutely no way! So my parents never got suspicious.[44]

Ani is continually worried that her parents will discover that she has been employed as a sex worker. Ani did not have the opportunity to visit her parents while she was working in the brothel because of her debt bondage to her madam. However, even if she could have travelled, she says she would not have risked returning to the village for fear that her secret would be revealed.

Both women are able to maintain the fiction of their 'good jobs' in the islands because their parents have taken on the responsibility of caring for their children. Through their financial remittances, Ani and Lia are able to present themselves as 'good mothers and dutiful daughters' while at the same time effectively separating their working lives from their family lives. This separation comes at an enormous emotional cost, a cost that Lia reconciles through her ability to support her family.[45] In contrast, not even the ability to provide for her parents and child resolves Ani's feelings about her job as a sex worker. Her overwhelming emotional response is indeed one of shame. She describes how completely mortified she was, as a girl who had never worn a skirt that showed her knees, the first time a client told her to undress:

> If I remember my past, I'm ashamed of myself. If my child ever found out, or my relatives, I'd be even more ashamed. I hate thinking about my past, because when I remember it I feel really sick. That kind of work is shameful. It is disgusting.

Ani's shame was intensified by the reactions of many people in the local community, who made no attempt to hide their own disgust, and who would sometimes throw things at passing sex workers.

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[44] In his study of sex workers in Batam, Lindquist (2004: 499) also notes that the process of returning home involves a transformation in which the identity of the prostitute is masked and the process of becoming a moral person (particularly through dress, non-smoking, etc) is emphasised.

[45] The emotional cost of separation from children is a problem faced by migrant workers in many cultures (see Constable 1997), including Indonesia. However, there is a significant tradition of Indonesian women leaving their children for work (or sometimes in the case of middle-class women, for study) that appears much more established than in modern Western societies. This may at least partly explain why although Ani's son now lives with her, Lia has not attempted to bring her children to Tanjung Balai Karimun since leaving the sex industry.

'That's what made me bitter. They treat sex workers like rubbish. They keep their distance because they think sex workers are disgusting. What they don't know is that sex workers still have a sense of their own worth. They still have feelings, and normal thoughts.' Ani points to the contradictions inherent when sex becomes work. While she acknowledges the sentiments of the wider community and agrees with their assertion that 'this kind of work is disgusting', Ani refuses to allow her job to define her as a person – what she does is not 'who she is'. Even sex workers, she argues, 'have feelings'. But more importantly, they are also women of worth. For Ani and Lia, this worthiness is expressed in their abilities to support their families and provide for their children. Their sense of worth, however, is threatened when work and family intersect and for this reason they ensure that these two parts of their lives are kept far apart.

Ultimately, the most effective means to bring work life and family life into alignment for those sex workers who do not live in a *lokalisasi* is to leave the industry. Marriage to foreign men has provided Lia and Ani with a means to stop working in the sex industry without returning to their former, impoverished, lives. Ani met her husband, a 57 year old Chinese client – a widower – in 1999. He paid S$2,000[46] to her madam to release her debt with the brothel, and after marrying her, bought a two-bedroom house in Tanjung Balai where Ani lives with her child. Ani's husband provides her with Rp. 4,000,000 housekeeping money per month, but also pays for other expenses when he visits. Ani's husband used to come once a month when he was still working full-time, but now he spends more time in Tanjung Balai. Ani also has the chance to travel abroad to Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand, but more importantly, she feels safe and secure with her husband. Marriage provided her with a break from her old life. She made sure they bought their house a long way from the area where she used to work, and she adjusted her lifestyle to suit the neighbourhood, copying the way her neighbours dressed and talked. Marriage has also allowed her to re-engage with her family and become reunited with her child. Ani says that although her husband is old and not very good-looking, she would not swap him for the most handsome man in the world because he loves her, her child and her family. She cannot believe how different he is to her first husband, who beat her and cheated on her when she was pregnant.

Lia, too, married a former client, a Malaysian man who had a wife who could not bear children, who offered to make her his legal second wife – an offer that she accepted after considering her options. Lia's husband sends her 1500 Malaysian Ringgit[47] per month to cover her living costs. He comes to visit once a month, usually for three to four days, but sometimes up to a week. If her husband is too busy to come to the islands, she sometimes goes to Malaysia, where they meet in a hotel. For Lia, becoming a housewife in the Riau Islands is not about reconstructing an idealised nuclear family with the children from her previous marriage, who have remained with their grandparents in Deli Serdang. Lia's husband's first wife knows he has married again, but the two wives have never met. Lia acknowledges that her position is tenuous. She wants to have a child but worries that her husband might abandon her and the baby. If that were to happen, she matter-of-factly asserts that she would go back to sex work to support her children. Life in Karimun affords her this possibility because she can slip in and out of her life as a sex worker without her family knowing, and thus still maintain her strong sense of herself as a dutiful mother and daughter. As long as she is careful not to bring traces of her work life with her when she visits her family, Lia is able to maintain the fiction that even supermarket checkout operators can attain the dream of middle-class domesticity in the Riau Islands.[48]

Sex workers in the Riau Islands have opportunities for social and economic mobility not available to prostitutes in most other parts of Indonesia. The heterogeneity of the community and

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[46] In 1999, the value of S$2,000 was approximately US$1,135.

[47] In September 2006, the value of MY$ 1000 was US$274.

[48] Ani and Lia's marriage choices also point to the difficulties in drawing clear boundaries between sex work and 'normal' marital sex, and highlight the ways in which material exchanges underwrite other forms of sexual relations (Red Thread Women's Development Programme 1999: 273). For further discussion of marriage between foreigners and sex workers in the Riau Islands see Lyons and Ford (in press).

the rapidity with which migrants come and go mean that it is relatively easy for women to reinvent themselves after leaving the sex industry. Interviews with residents in middle-class neighbourhoods where 'Batam wives' like Lia and Ani set up house in Tanjung Balai Karimun and Tanjung Pinang suggest that communities are not eager to embrace ex-sex workers who cling on to their former lives. However, the relatively diffuse social structures of these communities mean that women can reinvent themselves and avoid the stigma of their past. Ani has successfully made that transition. She 'made a point' of buying a house a long way from where she lived before, and no longer associates with her former friends. Reflecting on these decisions, she observed:

> I wanted a different way of life. I wanted to be like…like…I don't know – the sort of people whose way of life you aspire to. You know, they're respectable. I learnt that from them. I learnt a lot from those kinds of people. The way they dress, they way they talk – I followed their example.

Lia has used similar strategies, also to great success. She has also started wearing a *jilbab*, or Islamic headscarf, in an attempt to further distance herself from her past. For Ani and Lia, at least, the social fluidity of Tanjung Balai Karimun, combined with their new-found economic resources, has allowed them to move from sex work into the lower middle class.

Conclusion

We do not want to suggest that all women working in Tanjung Balai's sex industry have been able to exercise the same degree of autonomy as Ani and Lia. Not all women have the same opportunities, whether because of personal circumstances, the nature of the workplace, or their conditions of work. Similarly, not all women are able to take advantage of opportunities to leave the sex industry, although many in the islands do. Ani and Lia's stories remind us that to understand the meaning of sex as work we need to pay particular attention not only to the specificities of women's lives but also to the culturally embedded meanings associated with sex work, sex roles, and family. Sex work in the Riau islands is not a morally neutral occupation. As elsewhere in Indonesia sex workers are subject to a pathologizing discourse that sets them apart from the 'moral community'. This discourse is expressed in the language used to describe women who provide paid sexual services (immoral or wanton women) and in the assertion that women who enter the sex industry are duped and/or depraved. Karimun's sex workers acknowledge that 'this kind of work' (*pekerjaan macam ini*) is heavily laden with moral proscriptions not found in many other jobs; it is shameful work and thus sets them apart. For Ani and Lia, it is the discursive construction of sex workers as *wanita tuna susila* that constrains and structures their lives. Morality, rather than whether their entry into sex work was voluntary or coerced, is perhaps the most significant factor in their management of work life, home life and family.

Our informants assert that, regardless of how they ended up in the brothel-based sex industry, what they do is 'work'. They do not pretend that sex work is not difficult work fraught with risks of violence and ill-health, and neither professes to have enjoyed their time as sex workers. Indeed, Ani's response to it was one of overwhelming shame and disgust. At the same time, however, they claim that it has provided them with opportunities not available in the other types of dangerous and dirty jobs that poor, uneducated Indonesian women typically perform. For Lia, who worked for a short time as a domestic worker in Singapore, in particular, freelance sex work was not only less physically demanding, but also allowed her to exercise greater personal autonomy. Most importantly, it has given both women a chance to support their parents and children. For this reason, despite negative community attitudes, both women assert that sex work in fact allows them to be 'worthy women', 'good mothers' and 'dutiful daughters'.

In their claim that what they do is not who they are, Ani and Lia argue for a separation between their sense of self and their work. They acknowledge that such a separation is difficult to

achieve and for this reason they spend considerable time policing the boundaries between their working and family lives. In many ways, the story of Lia and Ani is also the story of the Riau Islands. Ani's and Lia's experiences of sex work and their ability to keep work and family separate are the product of the particular spatiality of the sex industry in the islands. The geographical distance between their home villages and Karimun facilitates this boundary maintenance in ways that would not be possible if they worked closer to home. Located far away from their families and friends, they are able to manage the personal shame of sex work by portraying themselves as migrants who have 'made good'. Moreover, Karimun's geographical proximity to Singapore and Malaysia not only provides the conditions for a large sex industry to emerge but also presents the conditions for women like Ani and Lia to leave their jobs as sex workers. Marriage to foreigners has offered both women the chance to become 'respectable housewives' and overcome the self-imposed separation between their family lives and their lives in the Riau Islands.

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