

Sex, power and colonialism: 'Marriages and sexuality were fundamental to colonial power'

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Flag of the Dutch West India Company. Credit: Wikipedia/ Public Domain

Sex and power are closely linked, and this was certainly true in the former Dutch colonies. Ph.D. student Sophie Rose has investigated how

sexual and love relationships influenced eighteenth-century power structures there. "You can see that there was constant fighting over who stood where in the social hierarchy."

When the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and Dutch West India Company (WIC) started traveling around the world in the seventeenth century, European [women](#) and families were initially sent along. They were supposed to form the basis of a new overseas empire that controlled all trade, but practice proved recalcitrant. "Especially in the VOC area (present-day Indonesia), they were not at all happy with the type of women who went there," says Rose.

"Too often they came from the lower strata of society. At the same time, you find that the presence of women on board ships was seen as a risk. It was not unheard of for rape to occur, so eventually the VOC banned most European women from traveling to the region."

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, in present-day Suriname, roughly the same thing happened, the difference being that European women there often decided themselves that this kind of life was not for them. "To some extent, the WIC continued to encourage women to come, but many Europeans were not happy with the climate there. They got sick, and mortality rates were high. Many people decided to leave again almost as soon as they arrived."

Temporary 'friends'

So for the first few centuries, there were few European women to be found in the colonies. Rose says, "It became policy to encourage or at least tolerate relationships with local women. Especially in Asia, these were initially mostly free women, who, for example, appreciated the benefits of a [relationship](#) with a man who had a large new trading network. Later, men would often buy an enslaved girl or woman. These

kinds of unequal and involuntary relationships were also common in the plantation economy in Suriname."

Voluntary or not, relationships outside the European framework never had the same status as those between two white Europeans. "Men who were married to Asian women, for example, couldn't simply return to Europe," Rose explains. "So they preferred a temporary girlfriend, who they could dump again if they wanted to leave the region."

Fighting for your place in the social hierarchy

It led to complicated relationships at a time when the prevailing European opinion was that sex only warranted a place within Christian marriage. "It was condoned but not really accepted for men to enter into those kinds of relationships and for children to be born from them. This created a whole new dynamic, where there was a constant fight over where people stood in the social hierarchy. The authorities always wanted Europeans to be at the top, but you might also see children of mixed descent and their parents sometimes climbing the ranks. That was a constant cause of tension."

Global role

Rose used such sources as court cases to reconstruct how colonial society was constantly having to find a new balance. "By comparing all kinds of different regions, you can see that developments were about more than local dynamics. Issues like marriage and sexuality played a fundamental role in the development of colonial power all over the world."

Provided by Leiden University

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