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PROSTITUTION: THE BALANCE BETWEEN PROTECTION AND EMPOWERMENT

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EDITORIAL

PROSTITUTION: THE BALANCE BETWEEN PROTECTION AND EMPOWERMENT

Gender stereotypes play a role as ideology in affecting the behavior of both men and women. Traditionally, Latin American women are imprisoned in the stereotype of being curvy, provocative and sexual objects, rather than subjects with decision-making power and rights. The vast presence of prostitution in the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region has for long been interpreted as the ultimate proof of the long-existing Latin-American women stereotypes. What often remains unmentioned is that sex workers in LAC have been organizing for recognition and labor rights for a while.

Prostitution is a highly debated topic all around the world. Everyone agrees that today, without the phenomenon of prostitution, the Cuban economy would be much worse. Legalizing it, regulating it and even presenting it as a job as honest as any other, would be the solution to prevent its increase or the appearance of the crimes associated with the activity. Although the experiences in other countries with legalization and regularization indicate the existence of other problems that go beyond prostitution, this perspective sheds light on areas such as safety, health and rights

of prostitutes and they have more and more defenders among Cubans, particularly among younger people.

In a country where the sale of one's own body for sexual purposes is a valid economic alternative to a regular job, it is imperative to provide sex workers with working conditions that meet their needs as right holders. It is important to note that these professionals constitute a heterogeneous group of people who face diverse problems and experiences be they women, men or transsexuals. In this way, authentic and legal consent has become one of the few features that is common to all of them. But what are these variables?

The way forward must be something that finds the balance between protection and empowerment. This edition of Rewriting Cuba offers space to deepen our understanding of the problems connected to prostitution from the perspective of those who live close to this reality on the island.

Laura Rossi

A TRUE STORY

SIMONNE MARTHEY

A girl who was only 14 years old, who should be studying and sketching out her future dreams

When she asked me for a lighter without so much as an excuse me, much less wishing me a good afternoon, I looked her over trying to decipher her age, without even daring to think that this girl might be seventeen years old, if even that. I attempted to connect with her while making a smile that looked more like a grimace of pain and asking her - where do you go to school? And it was at that moment when she eventually looked at me with a firm and rebellious look in her eyes disguised with some cheap Maybelline. I was surprised again by her childish voice when she answered sharply - I don't study, I work - while lighting her last cigarette.

I offered her the rest of a pack I had that was already open since I was already intending to quit anyway. In return I received the best of smiles and the unique feature of getting an education in the midst of a quite sincere 'thank you.' From that moment I knew she was coming and going from the Hotel Telegraph with her clients: she paid a fee of 10CUC to the doorman and another 10CUC to the girl at the reception desk and they let her stay all night turning tricks in a room where there could be, hopefully, an Italian, a German or an American, who were according to her the ones who pay the best. If by mistake she reeled in a Spaniard, well, then she would have to settle for only 30 or 40 of the expected 100CUC - but money is money—she said. She proceeded to show me her new dress and explained that she was not wearing a new dress to simply show off, but that it was an investment, since the prettiest and best dressed girls are the ones that get the guys who pay the best.

I also came to know that she was only 14 years old and that she hadn't been able to enjoy having lunch for more than a week, since according to her, "she didn't have time for that." I could see her anxiety when a man in his fifties with a German face passed by. I only managed to write my phone number and tell her in a shout - Call me! - before I saw her running away in some shoes that seemed to be large, with her hair falling on the back of her tiny body. Behind her, a thick voice was calling to her— run you whore, you're letting the Yuma get away! This to a girl who was only 14 years old, who should be studying and sketching out her future dreams.

I got up slowly and looked up and down the high street. I saw the silhouette of this girl everywhere, her figure replicated and faces like hers smeared with so much makeup, I looked at my watch and realized it was almost time for my daughters to return from school, so I ran home.

Her name was Janet. She called me a week later with a desire to talk and we met again on the same high street. Since that day, she has become the youngest friend I have. Although she graduated from the "university of hard knocks," today she doesn't only talk about the Yumas or the prices. Now we talk about art, music, events, politics, everything. I still haven't been able to get her out of the world of the "greenbacks," as she calls dollars, but our organization has been there for her, and although her stories keep crushing our hearts, we also know that pain shared, hurts less.



Visual Poem by Cubaraw



THE SITUATION IN HOLGUÍN



Zuleidys Perez

The Cuban patriarchal and macho system still makes them victims

In the Province of Holguin, there are several communities where its population has very poor means and there is no possibility of gaining access to sources of technical or financial assistance. The worst conditions are found, in the north of the province in the Alcides Pinos neighborhood, known as La Chomba, and the other in the south of the province located in the Harlem neighborhood, known as La Fornet.

All of the above has created negative effects on the population, the consequences of which are expressed in a number

of areas: an ignorance of civic values and of what constitutes the basis and content of a civil society, poor command of the concepts, values and fundamentals of citizenship, especially in women. All this is caused by the existence of a government that closes off the possibilities and capabilities of women, restricting their well-being and not meeting their needs.

The harm to women caused by the ignorance of their rights, in a setting of poverty and economic dissatisfaction, as well as within such a sexist culture, has led to high incidence rates of prostitution and

sexually transmitted diseases, especially among young mothers between 16 and 30 years old. However, the tentative openings in Cuba have made it possible to identify the source of the deficiencies in the State and in its policies, such as the absence of appropriate channels to fulfill the needs and address the concerns of these women, who are also simultaneously missing out on a range of basic social services in terms of education and health.

This has opened up the possibility for those of us from independent civil society for empowering women so that they could be taken care of, by seeking out those in a state of social abandonment due to the dominant ideology that might be limited by the knowledge of all their rights as women. We have taken as an initiative the realization of workshops for the empowerment of women, especially the women from those communities, giving greater attention to young women who have worked as prostitutes or who because of their living conditions are at greater risk of entering into it. This involves trying to influence their forms of self-employment in pursuit of economic independence or in lodging complaints and demands to the institutions so that they might address the particular problems of these women by targeting those who are already following this path and simultaneously preventing others from falling into it. Our task is also to show them how prostitution can negatively affect the physical, mental, sexual and reproductive health of women, and in some settings, for example, increase the risk of contracting HIV.

There are also the high demands from younger women with young children, those that are pregnant and single, rendered defenseless by the government, living in subhuman conditions in these communities. The absence of freedom and along with the state of economic need leads them inevitably to practice prostitution with all the consequences that this entails.

The Cuban patriarchal and macho system, in which the stereotype that women are housewives meant to care for children and the elderly and for doing domestic work, still makes them victims of discrimination by a large segment of society, as well as of physical, verbal and sometimes even sexual violence.

Because of the work and research we have done with this group of women, we have been able to make comparisons and self-analyses in the working group. As for the pressure exerted by the State and society on these women, we were able to see that the violence that is having the greatest impact on them is psychological, since they are confronted by it in their daily lives - the burden of maintaining a home and the care of their children, the rejection from family and neighbors. Finally, there are also the repression, humiliation and cruel treatment to which they are subjected to by the police if they are arrested, which can also mean being subjected to large fines or prison sentences for performing these activities.

PROSTITUTION IN CUBA, A LEGAL PERSPECTIVE



Madelyn Rodríguez

**Every society marked by
prostitution creates its own
justification for not having to face
it**

Prostitution is the performance of sexual acts for profit. In legal terms, the word prostitute refers only to the person who participates in an economic transaction based on sex, usually in exchange for an agreed upon amount of remuneration.

In Cuba, prostitution has always generated an internal debate that has resisted going beyond public policies. Already it has come to be believed that the government is responsible for the fact that many tourists come to Cuba seeking sex, since being a woman Cuban means being the cheapest woman in the world. The gover-

nement in Havana has never recognized prostitution as a serious problem, argues that it is a voluntary occupation and has even always rejected the notion that the island is viewed as a sexual paradise. Furthermore, it maintains the idea that prostitution has no structural causes here since, all of these were eliminated after the triumph of the revolution. At the beginning of the 70s, the country suffered a serious economic crisis and under such circumstances some centers of prostitution resurfaced accompanied by a parallel phenomenon, pimping. Prostitution spread with the massive influx of tourists, because young women and girls took up prostitution as their trade due to the economic needs of the island. Taking into consideration what this activity entails, it is not referred to within Cuban laws as a crime. But given that pimping and human trafficking are activities that are closely linked if they are punishable by law, and, in the case of prostitution, the criminal charge that is applied is about dangerous conditions and not the act of prostitution. Under this assumption prostitution is addressed in the criminal code as antisocial behavior, a situation that goes back to the doctrine of social dangerousness widely surpassed by this law. These people can be assured that they will be given a sentence of internment of 1 to 4 years through pre-criminal measures. However, these behaviors should not be criminalized or associated with criminal justice. On the contrary, the central axis of change consists in dealing with them as far from the criminal justice system as possible.

Pimping and human trafficking were established in the Cuban Criminal Code in article 302.1-5 of Law No. 62. For these purposes, anyone who uses prostitution for profit is considered a pimp, which includes everyone who induces, cooperates with prostitution or carnal commerce, as well as those who manage or have an establishment or premises dedicated to that exercise. The punishment can be 4 to 10 years in prison, but it can potentially be raised to ranges of greater than 20 years, if those who carry out this activity have positions that are meant to protect health, public order, education, tourism, youth or the fight against prostitution, or if threats, blackmailing, coercion or abuse of authority are involved, or if the victim is incapacitated and under the care of the guilty party.

Every society marked by prostitution creates its own justification for not having to face it, so the Cuban government denies at all costs that prostitution even exists in this country. As a result, it is not addressed by Cuban laws to make sure that Cuba's image is not tarnished on the international level, which also means that it does not have to take part in international organizations on the subject since it is an issue that affects many countries. And, of course, once again the government can boast that this does not happen on the island.

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