

## Family Girls: A Study about Juvenile Prostitution in the Indigenous areas in Northeast of Brazil

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### Abstract

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Within this article, we present a mapping of forms of juvenile prostitution, which were found in rural areas and in indigenous lands of Paraíba, Brazil, between the years of 2011 and 2013. In using this study as a tool, we intend to demystify stereotypical images and representations of both prostitutes and prostitution. Our main objectives were to capture these women's perspectives as well as to deem the activity of prostitution as an alternative to social and economic mobility. We openly reject reductionist and victimizing perspectives and prefer to believe that prostitution is one of the few possibilities for young women to gain their autonomy and their empowerment as well as to resist current norms and morality.

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**Keywords:** juvenile prostitution, indigenous area, feminist approach, Northeast Brazil

### 1. Introduction

Our reflection takes place in the field of feminist theory, as we understand the phenomenon of prostitution within a specific context that reveals contradictory sexual practices that oscillate between life paths marked by various forms of violence and constructions of life projects that include prostitution as a way, albeit precarious, social mobility.

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However, do not share the anti-feminist vision of authors, that when trying to build a discourse on post-feminism (PAGLIA, 1994), deny the importance of the whole feminist theory. Our intention here is to examine a multifaceted phenomenon in a specific context, besides problematizing feminist discussions of objectification of the female body, and to think about new political perspectives to feminist theories.

Through the use of different theoretical and methodological approaches and throughout a period of a year, we interviewed young and adult women, who were from different backgrounds and who began in prostitution when still in adolescence. In utilizing feminist methodology (BIBER & NAGY, 2007), we tried to broadly understand the different experiences, meanings and practices of the prostitution phenomenon in non-metropolitan localities, whose dynamics escapes urban space.

Our main research strategy was to make observations, recorded interviews and informal talks as well as to document photo images. Our methodological choice, ethnography and life stories highlighted these women's personal experience and aspects of daily lives. This allowed us to develop an interpretive understanding of prostitution, seeing these same women as protagonists of a social process and not as mere victims of such phenomenon.

In order to understand how the prostitution phenomenon happens outside urban centers it is necessary to observe rural women's life conditions and their implications in regards to opportunities and possible gender scripts.

A number of studies about women's life conditions in the countryside, in Brazil, unveil a scenario of inequality, lack of democracy within family relations as well as of narrow options and opportunities, which do not suffice the desires of new generations in the rural environment. The data collected about rural migration shows that there is growing travelling of these women due to either more work opportunities in urban centers or alternatives to a traditionally male sexist culture, which devalues females as whole individuals.

It is important to learn why the rural environment is less conducive to the proper living of these young women. Within the context of rural families, women live in a situation of explicit disadvantage. This rural culture presents itself with very rigid and hierarchical roles, attributions and values where who has control is the male head of the family.

Within this context, “family farming is structured on hierarchical relations between male and female, young and adult, where it is established that the father is the figure in charge of making decisions, and it gives place to a stage where intra-familial oppression is lived as a common and expected path.” (PORTELLA & SILVA, 2006, p. 132).

Within the model above, women’s participation in the public realm is very limited and isolation is a characteristic of the activities they engage in. Rural female condition is stressed by a lack of elementary rights and by having to live under the oversight of someone else. In most cases, these women need permission to exercise their rights of coming and going and of participating in meetings (GARCIA & NASCIMENTO, 2013). This scenario, which is highly unfavorable to overall changes in social practices and in ways of understanding the world, opens doors to migration in search of jobs and feeds the sexual market, which has the potential to lure by the promise of a different lifestyle.

Government programs for poverty alleviation have no significant impact on family relationships and much less in gender relations, despite the studies that attempt to demonstrate that the rent increase representing an increase in freedom of consumption, has a direct implication with the growth of “feminism” in rural areas (REGO, W. & PINZANI, A., 2013). The fact is that personal power is not distributed with income, because it belongs to another realm.

McMullen (1987) analyses the causes of juvenile prostitution having the relation between emotional and economic needs as a starting point: “an unresolved sense of personal power and a deep feeling of irrelevance towards someone or something” (MCMULLEN, 1987, p. 39). The author pinpoints the interconnection between the lack of personal power and the lack of economic power and explains them as triggering agents for the start of young women in prostitution. Both conditions have to be present and in process together to produce such a choice, since poverty alone does not explain these young women’s decision for prostitution.

We see poverty as attached to sociocultural conditions, which devalue and disqualify young women, thus, prostitution presents itself as a way of attaining social and economic mobility.

Moreover, prostitution grants fulfillment of non-conventional sexual and affective desires as well as resistance to the rural familial model.

## **2. Unveiling the Most Ancient Gender Prejudice**

"Prostitution is by no means the world's oldest profession. It does not derive from human nature, and it can't be traced in all cultures" (Ringdal, 2004).

Archeological evidence provide elements which allow us to claim that within nomad groups, some of oldest professions in the world were those of a collector, hunter, fire maker and instrument maker. However, sexist prejudice has created its own version of the most ancient profession in the world – prostitution. When incessantly repeated, and that is the way ideologies operate, it becomes a "historical truth." In fact, it is really a sexist version of a phenomenon, which is neither eternal nor natural and not even universal, but in fact, "a social construct from a specific period of time" (SWAIN, 2005, p. 3).

Ringdal (2004) indicate that prostitution was not developed automatically in all societies. The Anthropology of the 20th century reveals a great number of societies where prostitution is inexistent. In this sense, prostitution is defined as the bartering of sex for money or its equivalent. There is a difference on what colonizers understood as being "natural prostitution," which was associated with hospitality practices among natives and their corporality and sexuality models.

Since the Renaissance, Western cultures have understood "the oldest profession in the world" as being a universal and natural phenomenon. The idea of the oldest profession suggests a connection between the inexorable existence of prostitution, and women's biological fate either in the biblical notion of an "evil and vicious essence within all women" or in the materialized and generalized notion of women's inferior condition, "deprived of their own bodies and of their own subjectivity in the social and political realms" (SWAIN, 2005, p. 4).

Such alleged "fate" has permeated our social imaginary as a confirmation that, since the beginning of time, "women have always been dominated by men," following their inferiority and submission paths. Hence, it would be "natural" that the female body fulfilled its "fate" of being at men's service. Consequently, it would be "natural" to place sex at the dominant's disposal so he can suffice his desires.

Here, women's genitals are seen as an "object," as merchandise, since women themselves possess an incomplete condition as individuals.

Within the social imaginary, the female gender would always be available for the exercising of prostitution. This kind of ideology manages to affect all women, a fact which is supported by war rapes, invasions and catastrophes as consequences of natural disasters. The female gender exists to be used and abused.

To Butler (1993), those are bodies whose lives are not really considered "lives" and whose existence is seen as "non-important." Actually, social discourses live within and take charge of those mere bodies. In turn, such bodies incorporate those discourses as if they were part of their own blood.

Keeping gender identities at a stable state, besides maintaining the so-called heterosexual negotiation, implies marking differences between "respectable" women and other kinds of women. Although the questioning of norms referring to sexuality seems to be a powerful move, it does not obscure the fact that notions related to differences are constructed not only through gender identity but are also complemented by the insertion of categories like race, class, ethnicity, and of other kinds of marks. In the end, all differences are placed within a perverse hierarchical scale, which pervades an array of human relations.

Societies and cultural contexts where there is prostitution do not consider women as equals, for they are normally devalued, and seen as less important. In truth, the prostitution phenomenon is not a burden for societal values; much to the contrary, it is exactly due to those social values that prostitution exists. Devalued groups within a specific society find in prostitution either a form of survival or a way of turning their back to a society that only offers them unsatisfactory options.

## 2.1. Race prejudice or The Past Haunts the Present

After all, who wouldn't want to have sex with a native woman? (Tamatia).

The discovery of the New World unveils how the dynamic intersections between the ideas and ideals about sex/gender, race/ethnicity and social class reflect themselves in the systems of social identification, classification and discrimination forged during the colony consolidation.

At the same time, it highlights the consequences that sexual morality and gender stereotypes had in the lives of women with the arrival of the colonizer. Those intersections present a long-term structure that can still be found in the contemporary Brazil.

The conquest of the Iberian America meant the appropriation of indigenous lands, population slavery for forced labor in plantations or mines plus the colonization of the minds of indigenous women and their subjection through sexual abuse, "which had a high human and social cost." (STOLKE, 2006, p.87).

The indigenous peoples did not fit the Iberian cultural-religious classificatory structure. The slavery of indigenous groups was forbidden in the 16th century. The Portuguese racial persecution privileged the "Jewish, mulatos, blacks and Moors." In Brazil, the important workforce was being fed by the traffic of black people. A native had a secondary position in society. However, initially the Crown and the Church protected natives from slavery. When those natives became an obstacle to the expansion of the agricultural and livestock production, the natives were doomed to extinction.

Stolke (2006) reveals that the inquisitors were not interested in investigating the natives' heresies, as natives were considered primitive, fragile, childish, and almost naïve. For this author, the colonial society social identification and classification system has marked gender relations and social conditions of women. There was this bond among social purity, race attributes and female virtue in order to ensure a blood non-contamination. Such virtue would have to be seriously controlled and the women divided into two groups: "on one side, women who had been sexually abused by man that would never marry them; on the other side, virtuous women who came from respectable families and whose sexuality had been severely controlled by men in the name of family and social purity." (STOLKE, 2006, p. 106).

Dias and Gambini (1999) reveal that, colonizers describe the lasciviousness of the native women and the laziness of the native men because, within the tribes, leisure and labor were lived without a defined demarcation. Labor was performed amid play and games, a collective pleasurable act, which challenged the bible call association among labor, sadness and bitterness.

Native women were seen as creatures of an erotic and adventurous nature who did not have a protagonist role in the building of the nation. Their role was minor. As Brazilian history was composed by the male individual, this native woman, wrapped in eroticism and wild sexuality, only participated in literature and in the writings of colonial commentators, those responsible for the forging of a native woman image, which was then molded into the nation's imaginary.

Bocayuva (2001) discusses Brazil as a country plentiful in natural scenery, which sets a suitable stage for an uncommitted romantic love where native women's sexuality is the most valuable good. While extracting images and ideas from the works of Gilberto Freyre, the sexual drive of Portuguese males, the lust of Barbarians, the weather action built the sexual spirit in the colony.

Gabriel S. Souza, in his *Descriptive Treaty of Brazil 1587*, states the following: "the Tupinambá natives are so lascivious that there is no sin of lust that they have not committed yet." (SOUZA, 1938, p. 372)

Within such imaginary that bounces between heaven and hell, gender relations were forged under the influence of patriarchy, latifundia, and slavery.

### **3. The Potiguara Indigenous Land**

Up to the present time, the Potiguara nation has resisted the effects of invasion and colonization. The municipality of Baía da Traição hosts most the thirty-two indigenous villages, which comprise the so-called Potiguara Indigenous Land. Such lands are under the protection of Fundação Nacional do Índio – FUNAI (National Indigenous Foundation).

Baía da Traição, in which 'traição' means treachery in Portuguese had its name given by navigator and explorer Amerigo Vespucci in 1501. Historiography states that a group of natives was spotted in this Baía de Acajutibiró (its original name). Those same natives welcomed the navigators at their arrival to land but later were taken into an ambush and brutally killed in the woods. This event changed the name of the place to Baía da Traição.

Likewise, Baía da Traição made place to a number of invasions by different national groups: French, Dutch, Portuguese and non-native Brazilians. From the 1950's on, the effects of those invasions were intensified by the real estate speculation and the subsequent development of the ethanol industry.

According to the Brazilian Institute for Geography and Statistics (IBGE) and its 2000 and 2010 Demographic Censuses, the population has grown in this municipality, moving from 6,456 to 8,012 inhabitants. Local economy is based on fishery and subsistence farming. Yet, the town revenue comes from a fund for the distribution of federal money to the municipalities, and from federal tax charged against individuals and companies who own private property and which is intended to provide revenue to municipalities.

As per poverty rates, the 2010 Demographic Census showed that the town holds 38.4 per cent of its population in extreme poverty and that 50.2 per cent of this range group live in rural areas. In 2010, the illiteracy rate among people aged 10 or more was 22.7 per cent. In urban areas, the rate was of 18.9 per cent and in rural areas, 25.4 per cent.

For their subsistence, the Potiguara people farm crops like corn, beans, cassava, potato and coconut. There is a small number of fishermen in their village. Besides those, some of the natives work with art crafts and in the flour houses located in the village. The tertiary sector is present with local business owners who come to settle small businesses like small grocery shops.

Other relevant factors to the local economy is the seasonal period for fish farming and the summer season, both of which bring people to town and causes some changes in its structuring. This region has already responded to the demands of tourism during summer season or festivities seasons, like Carnival, for example. Hence, some hotels and restaurants have been opened.

The owners of those businesses are, in most cases, foreigners – French and Argentinian people, for example – who settled in town.

There are four Catholic churches, five Protestant churches, and various places of “enchantment” or sacred places where Potiguara religious ceremonies take place.



As per indigenous religious rituals, Silva (2011) defines them as “what is practiced and transferred from generation to generation.” Their main representations are performed in the Toré (ritual dance) and in the Jurema worship.<sup>3</sup>

Outside de boundaries of the indigenous land and in the urban area of Baía da Traição we have identified one bar where there are women prostitutes available and where there are rooms for them to use during their sexual services.

We have identified three existing bars, which offer prostitution services in a very discreet manner. Except for one of them, when there is demand from clients, the female owners call some of the prostitutes. The women there prefer not to be a permanent worker at a bar and be able to move around. Thus, they opt for safeguarding their invisibility, freedom and protection. Many women schedule their encounters over the phone, time when they set the meeting location that can be anywhere – edge of a river, hidden routes in the woods, hotels, inns, and rooms in a bar located in the urban area of Baía da Traição.

In Baía da Traição, we had the opportunity to interview twenty-five women in the privacy of those rooms. We assign them names of birds in the region as pseudonyms. They shared snapshots of their life trajectories and, in doing that, they were able to feel important and be heard. We learned about a universe of seduction where they control clients, bodies and wallets.

### 3.1. On Indigenous Women: who they are and how do they Live

The description of a family varies quite a lot in Baía da Traição and its villages. However, one of the patterns shows big families with a higher number of siblings plus relatives all living in one same house. Some of the women were raised by their grandmothers. Others were raised by single mothers, stepfathers or stepmothers. Actually, we could not identify a single pattern but several models of family structure.

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<sup>3</sup> In order to be recognized as Indians, re-establish their identity reclaim the right to their land, they had to show a tradition. So, the Jurema Cult was brought back among the Indian tribes to re-establish their indigenous identity. With the gap in time, much knowledge was lost, as this tradition had never been documented. All the knowledge was passed on from father to son, and the Indians were always very secretive about the ritualistic use of their psychoactive brew.

It is recurrent to find women who have to take care of a younger sibling when they were very young, while their parents are at work. Besides taking care of a younger brother or sister, young girls and adolescents have to deal with other house chores—clothes washing, cooking as well as cleaning. Male siblings normally help with farming or with chores outside the house.

Moreover, some of them leave home early in order to get married. Most young women leave home during adolescence to get married and have kids. Sometimes they are expelled from home for having lost their virginity or for having become pregnant. It is during this phase that they most likely drop off school, most of the women have finished 4th grade. Very few go back to school after their kids are older. Those ones who live with their parents and in some cases are going to high school, they might decide for finishing technical high school so they can become instructors in different projects.

In most life trajectories, we are able to observe a correlation, especially in adolescence, between school dropping off and pregnancy followed by marriage or not.

"No, because I couldn't handle going to school and having a family at an early age. (...) I became a mother, my life was pretty bad and my marriage didn't work."  
(Galega)

Pregnancy is motive number one for school drop off because apparently there are only two ways of handling abortion. The prevailing view among those women is the one that is against abortion.

"No, I might be in debt with God... but this burden I don't want to carry."  
(Galega)

Few of them had or tried to have an abortion. Some of those did not show remorse or resentment in talking about the issue. Others are against such practice and say they would not do it again. Besides that, they advise younger women on not doing it. Methods to induce abortion vary from teas and self-medication to staying in illegal clinics, given that abortion is illegal in Brazil.

“I tried to do it when I was pregnant of my son. My sister had cancer and I had access to her cancer medication. Then I had a silly thought: ‘so it will finish with the child I’m expecting.’ I took it and nothing happened. The boy was born overweight because of this medication.” (Tamatiá)

As they get pregnant, they raise their kids or let them with their mothers while they go to work in a different town. Normally, they send money home to cover the child’s expenses. Some women give away their babies to their fathers and later constitute another family with a different husband. When they give away their babies, they usually give it to a family member.

### 3.2 Entering Prostitution

Among the women we interviewed, most of them refer their beginning in prostitution to adolescence. Moreover, they describe the time when they started with accepting gifts and, then, later the transition to receiving money. Others start in prostitution after separation, abandonment or death of a husband who was the breadwinner of the house. We noticed that most women come and go out of prostitution, depending on her marital status. When they get married, they get out prostitution. When they separate, they go back.

However, if married, some women regret the fact that they do not have the option of continuing in prostitution, that they have lost their autonomy and that they are not able to make their own money anymore. On the other hand, there are those women who secretly continue with their occupation. They manage to hide it from their husbands and, therefore, have to lead a double life: the one of a wife and the one of a prostitute.

“I liked it because I could travel to where I wanted; I would visit new places in order to meet the men... when it was time to go back, I brought new clothes and shoes to my daughters... I had real cash in my purse, real and dollar... Once he told me, “you seem to miss the life you used to have...,” I said, “it is not that I miss it... it is because of the life you offer me... sometimes I wish I were single.” (Pé Encarnado)

Arribaça tells us about the many times her husband humiliated her, saying that she was able to eat because he brought food home.

Nevertheless, she would hide from him the fact that she had continued working. To her, one of the hazards of her occupation "has to go to bed with a man you do not have feelings for." The positive aspect, though, was the money she made. The majority of the women we interviewed state that prostitution has positive and negative aspects. Many of these women enjoy going out, having fun, drinking and dancing. Prostitution allows them to live all that.

Juriti, the daughter of Pé Encarnado negotiated her virginity when she was fourteen years old. Since then she has been working as a prostitute because she is curious about the whole thing and because that is what she enjoys doing.

"I always liked going out with men on a date, having fun, going to nightclubs and bars. I always liked meeting foreign men, so I was always involved in those kinds of things." (Juriti)

About the reasons that made them join this kind of life, they mention lack of formal education or a degree as well as the opportunity of having a job. Besides that, there is the need to support themselves and their children. Some other women had had other kinds of job before becoming a prostitute. Being a house cleaner was the most common occupation among them. Most of the times, they made their decision after weighing the pros and cons of such occupation.

"That was my life, without a school degree there is no job, but even if you finish school, there is no job. The only thing that a single woman can do is exactly this." (Galega)

### 3.3. Getting out of prostitution

Despite all the peculiarities and singularities, we found in the women of the Indigenous Land and of Baía da Traição, there is a common thread in their life trajectories, which is leading a life that is constantly threatening them with tension and violence:

“Once I had to take a slap, a punch from a client with whom I had been with twice.” (...) (Psipsi).

Each one of these women has experienced different kinds of violence at home, on the streets, within family relations, within marriage or with clients.

Tamatiá was hit on her forehead with a broken bottle because she refused to dance with a man during a ball. The glass pieces entered her skin and she can still feel them after many years.

Some have endured suffering from violent fathers or brothers and had to flee to the streets in order to dodge violence. Once in the streets, they have to face other kinds of violence, but, at least, they can make some money out of prostitution.

“my brother used to be at me up all the time (...) because he found out that I was involved with it... but he never bought me any food... he never gave anything to my mother either... I was the one having to support my mother.” (Sete cores).

Today, Sete Cores sells handcraft and cooks for other people. She decided to leave prostitution because she got older and that made it difficult for her to find clients. Her working spot used to be the bus depot in the state capital. There was a time when she had to sleep on the street having a piece of cardboard paper as a mattress and being kicked by passers-by.

Various factors lead women to abandon the sex market: fear of being stigmatized plus fear of gossip from neighbors. After all, they live in small places where everybody knows about everybody else. Besides that, gossiping can be very influential in these women's daily lives. Some women even decide for moving to another town so they can work as prostitutes.

Likewise, we also found women who did not give much importance to what others in town were talking about them. However, those were an exception to the rule for being talked about is extremely bothersome to most of women prostitutes.

Some women leave the life of prostitution when they manage to get married and constitute a family. Most likely, they see the husband, the man who "gave them a way out," as a true savior.

"Of course I want to get married. For sure! Do I want to grow old working at Brega<sup>4</sup>? What I want is to get married and be happy!" (Venvem)

Very few manage to maintain their marriage for they suffer violence from their partners. Most disagreements and quarrels bring about their "prostitute condition" and end up in physical abuse. Many husbands constantly remind women of their condition and blame them for having had such past experiences in life. Coming in and going out of prostitution is commonplace especially due to domestic violence.

In regards to violence, those women's narratives show that it is within daily relationships with family and husbands that they particularly suffer physical and psychological violence. In this case, violence within the domestic realm seems to be more striking than the physical or moral abuse that they have to go through during their working hours as prostitutes. Many episodes and kinds of violence are lived from childhood to adult life. Rape can be the most dramatic episode during adolescence.

"That is because I don't even like to talk about my first experience with sex. (...) I was forced to do it. (...) I was 13 or 14, I felt sick to my stomach by that man (...) I don't even like to tell this story, he covered my mouth and tied my hands. When my mother found out about it she beat me up." (Jaçana)

"I don't remember exactly how it happened, but he started fondling with my legs... I said no...he insisted. For the next three days I was not able to sit or urinate without feeling a lot of pain." (...) (Sete cores)

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<sup>4</sup>Cabaret or whorehouse

"I lost my virginity at 12. When I was 13 this guy abused me. (...) He was a doctor. I worked at his house taking care of his little girl. He touched and abused me. I woke up and there was blood all over me. I thought it was my period but it wasn't because, when I got up to shower, my parts hurt. First I was really angry. Later he told me to be quiet and not to tell anybody... and not to tell his wife. He threatened me and I was afraid to tell. I left the job in fear. I didn't report him; nothing would be done against a doctor... I couldn't bad mouth a doctor... I was poor and he was rich. I started crying thinking about what I wanted for my future... getting a degree and getting married.

I thought about my future, I drank, I smoked, I started going out with different men; I was lost. A man would want to date me and possibly marry me but I was ashamed of telling him that I was not longer sealed." (Galega)

It seems obvious that, for some of the women, rape was taken into consideration when it came the time to decide for prostitution. In many aspects, virginity is still highly valued among them and the environment where they live.

In regards to whether violence exists during working hours, a lot of the women state that clients are nice to them most of the time. There is some violence, though, but it happens less frequently than what people think.

Within a prostitute's life, they gain more power to define service boundaries, to negotiate encounters as well as to establish prices.

"A prostitute does her job, earns her money and that's it, game over. But then the client wanted to do it again but I didn't... my job was done. In this case, you are with me in the room, has sex with me, satisfies your desires, has an orgasm and all and that's it, it is over. Then, the guy wants it again... No, no way." (Jaçana)

There are those men who think that they have all the right to curse, hit or humiliate if a woman does not do what they want them to. Nonetheless, women do not take humiliation and react to clients' language or acts. It's not up to the client to decide.

What matters is what women want and so they use various mechanisms to overcome moments of violence.

### 3.4. Dreams and Sense of Importance

These women's life experience makes it hard to combine dreams and reality. Those ones who want to leave prostitution claim that they do not have opportunities outside this kind of life. However, some manage to do it somehow.

In the end, prostitution takes place as a cyclical process. Therefore, women get out temporarily but might come back to it because of financial needs, deception, abusive husbands, desire to enjoy life, need of freedom and the like.

Their narratives unveil the desire to study and have a socially accepted profession. Yet, in order to go to school they need money that they do not have.

In order to work they have to leave their homes and search for a job in a neighboring town, since the job opportunities within indigenous lands are limited to fish farming, agriculture and handcrafting during summer. Those are not work options to these women. Some of them, though, manage to get a job at a family home or in small hotels during summer if they agree to work as maids or cooks.

"Look, if I found a job, I would get out for sure... I would leave everything behind because it is not worth it. We try, and try, but there is no future...some men are married, some are single...there are those who use drugs, there are those who stink...and we have to do it anyway." (Psipsi)

Our study reveals that there is not a particular trigger that leads women to choose prostitution. What happens is the occurrence of a combination of factors which set risk conditions and situations that flow into prostitution. (CHESNEY-LIND & SHELDON, 1992).

We inquired if anyone had ever made them feel important. At first, some of the women showed some difficulty in understanding the concept of "importance." Others translated it into their own views, such as: "someone called me hottie once" or "he said he liked me." In truth, such event was very rare in their lives, except when the display came from a relative, a partner or their own children.



Self-esteem and sense of importance are not present in the discourse of prostitutes. The most common response to the question we posed was: "no, never."

The majority of them state that they do not like what they do. Nonetheless, we met some women who liked their occupation and who felt very powerful and in control when they had the opportunity to be on stage dancing, strip teasing and feeling desired.

In fact, this feeling of being in control exists; however, it is transient and ephemeral. It does not restore or mitigate the exploitation under which women live.

Moreover, it is part of an imbalance, which is inherent in totally asymmetrical power relations existing in prostitution.

#### **4. Views about Prostitution**

"The prostitute is not, as feminists claim, the victim of men, but rather their conqueror, an outlaw, who controls the sexual channels between nature and culture" (PAGLIA, 1992, p.18).

The prostitute is not a Being placed between nature and culture, on the contrary to what Paglia suggests; she is essentially a product of the culture. Furthermore, this universal prostitute, an entity as she described, does not exist. The interviews reveal data that prevent us from generalizing about the phenomenon of prostitution; it is a multifaceted activity that does not allow assessing any generalizations about the motivations, stays or abandonment of prostitution. We found women who feel like victims, repudiate what they do and even have disgust for themselves, but we also find that women that empower themselves in prostitution, or who gets pleasure in the role of seducing and conquering. Most women did not choose prostitution as a prime choice, but was taken by the events and circumstances, such as cultural, economic conditions and life histories, family and personal relationships, however chose to remain, although 75% of them claim that they intend to leave prostitution.

Therefore, nothing allows us to treat the prostitute from the perspective proposed by Paglia. She is a product of culture and supposedly breaks with sexual cultural patterns, although her very existence provides feedback, reinforcing the standards.

If prostitution was a liberation for some, it doesn't allow us to understand the prostitute as an agent of cultural change, but an outsiders placed within the logic of the market economy, laying women's bodies as a commodity.

Our study sketched a profile for the opportunities and life stories of rural and poor young women in the Northeast of Brazil. Within this context, prostitution comes about as one of the few alternatives to make a living. In some cases, it seems to be part of a young woman's fate.

Their cultural environment perpetuates the view of a woman as always submissive and whose value as a person is restricted to maternity.

The use and the abuse are recurrent in their lives due to their condition of being "poor" and "weaker". Such condition places them at the disposal of male sexual needs. Those males allegedly have the right to take control of a female dependent body.

Those women have also grown up in settings where relatives, from their nuclear or extended families, think they have the right to exploit female bodies, of course, profiting from these use and abuse.

If we were to put the interviewees in specific categories, we could place them in the four groups below:

- **The resolved ones** – they have been into prostitution for years and, therefore, have no more problems with their choice. In fact, they are members of APROS (a prostitute association), fight for their rights and are politically and socially active within their communities.
- **The occasional ones** – they have other occupations and do not call themselves prostitutes. However, when they need extra money to make ends meet they resort to prostitution.

- **The temporary ones** – they see prostitution as the only solution. In general, they participate in prostitution after a separation in a relationship or abandonment at home. They do not call themselves prostitutes and do not intend to keep at the job for long.
- **The predestined ones** – they join prostitution at a very early age as well as have a very violent and difficult affective or familial history. They have no hope for a different kind of future plus they do not even try to find new opportunities. Some of them believe they are victims of prostitution itself. One example is this woman who claims she was born in a brothel in the port of Cabedelo.

We also found different kinds of prostitution: from those who were victims of complex situations to those who looked for an existing agency. There was no report of forced prostitution. In some cases, prostitution was a suggestion from friends or partners.

Except for the first group of women listed above, the other groups share a feeling of rejection towards prostitution and incorporate the social stigma of this occupation.

Participating in sexual encounters as an occupation seems to be wrapped in negative elements. One positive aspect of it, though, is the opportunity to have more freedom.

“Nowadays, it is worth something, but not quite (...) it is not totally worth. It is something we want to make worthwhile, but that is actually not that worth. You get out on the streets and people say, “There goes the whore, there goes the call girl, there goes this... there goes that.” Nobody ever says “the professional,” right? They choose the worst names. So there is never any kind of praise towards us.” (Sericóia)

## 5. Final Considerations

All life stories here were marked by violence: in the family, in relationships or in bars with clients. Even though the general rule is “every kind of person is a client,” they operate a kind of selection. Overall, they despise kissing and anal sex, but practice oral sex – the “blow job” performed beyond the trivial vaginal sex.

Strategies are clear-cut. There is an upfront negotiation with clients determining what is allowed and what the limits are. Only two of the interviewees said that, after having paid, the client is entitled to do anything he wants. The rest of the interviewees stated that they do not do what they do not want to. Or else, they establish new prices for practices they consider beyond "normal."

In choosing prostitution, they acquire a higher level of autonomy and control, at least in what refers to their own body. They are the ones who establish what and how the client will do things during an encounter and who set limits, prices and options.

While selling sexual services, prostitutes gain empowerment – an appropriation of her own body, which she did not possess within marriage or within family.

In regards to motivation to join prostitution, every aspects of it are related to family and affective relations. The expected roles of the family, which would be nurturing, raising and protecting, in many cases, turn out to be neglect, abandonment or violence and abuse. Many women started in prostitution at an early age or as adolescents in order to escape being abused at home, by family members or friends, especially step-fathers and neighbors.

When it is time for them to constitute a family, they have children whose father is absent most of the time and does not contribute to pay for family expenses. Therefore, supporting the family is a responsibility of these women.

Yet, early marriages plus dropping off school has deprived them from having a profession. Consequently, they find few job opportunities and an income compatible with the needs of a head of a family. Prostitution is the alternative for women under these circumstances.

Family is the key element in the understanding of the prostitution phenomenon. Those women are normally poor, come from a single-parent homes where there has been abandonment, most likely performed by the father. Circumstances, which help, trigger an even bigger impoverishment process. The fact that they come from a single parent home indicates that they are poorer but does not give us means to infer that it would be a motivational factor leading to prostitution.

Unlike conservative sectors, which see the family as a societal aggregative institution and whose dissolution would be the reason for having young women resort to drugs, crimes and prostitution, we meet a number of prostitutes who came from well-structured families. Those families followed a traditional model where authority is centered over the father figure and where there is a strict gender role division. Again, such families reproduce a cultural model in which girls and young women are not valued. Therefore, during their growing-up those young women did not learn values that would raise their sense of self-importance and self-respect.

Active sexuality and maternity during adolescence hinder education in addition to bringing new responsibilities and all the house chores to young women, married ones or single ones living with family.

Sexual initiation takes place very early. Their narratives on their first sexual experience in most cases describe this first experience as an act of violence: "horrific, terrible, I don't even like to remember it."

Raphael & Shapiro (2002) concluded that an early sexual initiation, before the age of fifteen, is a significant variable regarding the population that is active in the sex market. Likewise, child abuse in the form of neglect, violence or incest, in fact, is part of the biography of some of the women.

Some of the women were victims of rape coming from first grade relatives, stepfathers, neighbors, boyfriends, most of them pedophilia cases. However, that fact does not allow us to generalize or establish connections between abuse experience and prostitution entrance (WEITZER, 2007, p. 29).

A woman has disclosed that they had lost their virginity before they had had their first period. If the rape causes pregnancy, they still ignore their right of having an abortion and refuse to take this option. Here in Brazil, an abortion is legal when pregnancy threatens the mother's life, when it was a rape case and in cases of fetus anencephaly. Episodes of violence are not reported due to lack of knowledge about laws, disbelief in public mechanisms and lack of access to judicial services.

The interviews we performed showed that violence is recurrent and is present during a life cycle. It tends to happen within families, premature sexual life, affective relationships and prostitution practice. Curiously enough, we found out that violence is highly frequent within affective relationships.

In many cases, prostitution presents itself into a young woman's life as a response to violence, fear, abuse or lack of personal power within situations where they have no control or influence. For sure, the route to the profession requires connections with people involved in the area. Consequently, the social environment might then be an influential factor after all.

Besides having been subjected to violence, some of the women themselves have already committed acts of violence. Three of the statements referred to being in jail. The arrests had to do with fights, stabbing followed by death and drug trafficking.

One other supposition is that their cultural environment perpetuates the view of a woman as always submissive and whose value as a person is restricted to maternity.

The use and the abuse are recurrent in their lives due to their condition of being "poor" and "weaker". Such condition places them at the disposal of male sexual needs. Those males allegedly have the right to take control of a female dependent body.

The young women who are prostitutes in rural and coastal areas in Paraíba have dealt with sexual exploitation for years and, therefore, have built resistance or acceptance mechanisms in order to be able to endure situations in which violence and body objectification are present on a daily basis.

Besides social class, racial discrimination and a cultural context that devalues those women, there is an emotionally abusive family dynamics. Those are elements, which produce a sense of less value and low self-esteem in those women. Such elements also create vulnerabilities in relation to predators as well as favor a start in sexual bartering.

In regards to abortion, most women hold a conservative and religious perspective on the issue, which means that they are against such practice. Yet, very few of them live with their children. Among them, it is common to leave children on a relative, parents or caretaker's supervision. They believe that abortion is a sin, a crime that they would never even think of, but many of them do not commit to maternity or to their own child's care.

Giving up a child to adoption can be a choice or not. One of the interviewees gave away the six children she had had. Some of the women themselves were given to adoption. That fact confers a cyclical characteristic to the practice of given away one's own children.

Sexmarket exploiters know exactly what these young girls' weak spots are. They also know how to manipulate their feelings through the display of affection, attention and protection mirroring the behavior of a "boyfriend," "godmother," or "godfather."

In doing so, these people nurture a fake sense of belonging which soothes broken self-esteem coming from a long-term history of abuse.

With a certain frequency, we were faced with talks about broken family ties and that were transferred to figures like Seriema, the 'godmother'. They took the role of protectors even when they made use of violence and exploitation. Therefore, our interpretation is that there is association, originated in past experiences, among protection, care and violent practices.

In a socioeconomic scenario marked by lack of job opportunities, there are plenty of reasons for someone to choose prostitution. Moreover, when tasks are so rigidly established by a division of work based on gender, the few job options available exclude professions, which are considered "male-like" and are not even thought of as an option for women. In a context with very few options of work and income, women do not envisage the possibility of working as a brick layer, driver or fisherwoman. Those alternatives are inconceivable.

*Moreover, if you had been born a boy? Would your life be different?*

"Yes, it would. Because I would be a mechanic or... would an inventor of something." (Caracacá)

Those women are very explicit in saying that if they were men they would have more job opportunities even in a place where economy is slow and there are fewer job opportunities.

Those who have a dream – not all of them are able to express a dream – or any expectation to get out of prostitution, hope to be "rescued" by a man or imagine themselves working as a nurse, teacher, maid as well as a physician or judge.

Still talking about hopes and dreams, to these women, family takes a central position. Their other wishes are: buying their own houses, paying for a child's education or buying goods for their family. For some of the women, a recurrent dream is marrying a man who could take them out of "this kind of life." Others claim that a man is only good for having a date and some fun, so getting married and living too close together is not a wish they have. Women in this group seem to believe that having a man around is not always needed. Based on those statements, we were led to believe that prostitution brought financial independence to these women.



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