



Women in Prostitution and Social Responsibility

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Summary

The aim of the paper is to show how prostitution is embedded in historically changing gender relationships regulated by the state and part of each societies understanding of sexuality. An important role to improve the situation of women in prostitution is played by engaged social work, often linked to the womens movement on a local, national and an international level in spite of differing positions on the institution of prostitution. The authors argumentation is based on qualitative and quantitative empirical findings concerning shared experiences as well as differences between women in prostitution and findings on professional possibilities and limits of supporting the women. Important dimensions of heterogeneity amongst the women are legality versus illegality, decision making possibilities respectively dependencies und choice versus force, which also are the base of different political and professional positions taken by experts.

1 Introduction: Societal framework of prostitution

The institution of prostitution is part of the historically changing state regulated gender relationships in each society, varying in forms of legislation and institutionalisation, but always including the discrimination of women. That is why the international women's movement and engaged professionals in social work are fighting to improve the situation of women in prostitution for more than a hundred years (Schmackpfeffer 1989). This engagement includes different strands:

- First, the fight against discriminating laws and social practices and
- Second, concrete forms of help for women in need (places to stay, counselling, education);
- A third strand has more or less got lost during the second half of the 20th century, that is the public discourse on the culture of sexual relationships between men and women.

Prostitution does not only concern those directly involved: the female prostitutes, the male customers and the male service providers and traffickers, but all women and men, since prostitution has a direct influence on the social construction of love relationships and institutions like marriage and the family (Kontos 2006). That makes prostitution a topic affecting our own ways of sexual life and sexual experiences.

On the international level, on one hand you find NGO's pleading for normalizing prostitution and for improving the position of women in prostitution, while on the other hand there are those arguing in order to prohibit prostitution and improve the possibilities of leaving it. Both groups consider their position as being best for women in prostitution. Only a few professional prostitutes take part in this debate today, arguing for prostitution as a normal job,

for example in Germany and France (Carpenter 2000). The „Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women“, proposes a differentiation between voluntary and forced prostitution and supports measurements which protect women in voluntary prostitution, whereas the „Coalition against Trafficking in Women“ defines prostitution as an offence against human rights supporting the prohibition of prostitution (Raymond 1998). In countries like the Netherlands and Germany many activists support the first position (prostitution as a women’s job); the second position (prostitution as violence against women) is supported in countries like Sweden, in which from 1999 on prostitution is a criminal act for customers, not for prostitutes.

Since a new law in 2002, prostitution in Germany is a recognized job - still with several restraints. This law intends to improve the situation of women, that is ,women over 18 years with a legal status and a work permit (Mitrovic 2004; BMFSFJ 2007). The figures of women in prostitution range from 100.000 to 400.000 (Stallberg 1999), more than 50% are considered to be legal or illegal migrants mainly from outside the European Union (Latin America, South East Asia and since 1990, Eastern Europe) or from New Member States (such as Lithuania and Latvia), part of them come via trafficking (Geisler 2004). The numbers of male clients are estimated more than 1 million a day, making the sex business very profitable for its owners. Because of the considerable demand from male clients, female prostitution has become a form of migration for women from poor to wealthy states in search for a better life and to support their families.

Since prostitution is legal and women can make this choice, social work is seen as necessary only when women have specific problems. Most migrant women though are at least in conflict with certain laws, concerning their legal status (less since 2006) and work permits, and therefore look for ways of legalization (mostly by marriage). Women who were trafficked into Germany - sometimes forced, more often by their own will - usually are encumbered with enormous debts and find themselves - at least in the beginning - in various economic, social, physical and psychic dependencies of traffickers, pimps etc.. At the same time, they are offenders of German law, violating rules of migration as well as victims of human trafficking. Only recently their position as victims has been somewhat strengthened by the German state via protecting laws and social programs in Germany as well as in some home countries (Klempke 2006).

The following chapters of this paper are based on theoretical and empirical findings as well as on our own empirical study at the university of applied sciences Frankfurt/ Main Germany, including quantitative data from 72 women in prostitution (collected also in English, Spanish and Russian) and qualitative data from 20 prostitutes, men in the sex business, policemen, social and health workers. (Brückner and Oppenheimer 2006). The segment of prostitution we were interested in is the one closely related to social work, that is, a high proportion of prostitutes wanting to quit because of age and/or low earnings and/or changes in the sex business asking more sexual services, having no legal status, having been trafficked and been picked up by the police and women on drugs.

2 Shared experiences of and differences between women in prostitution

2.1 Social characteristics of women in prostitution

In accordance with international studies (BMFSFJ 2004) our data point towards some general correlations between prostitution and life situation:

- Only about half are German citizens, the majority has at least a medium school certificate, more than half are living in a partnership, more than half have children, less than a third work with a pimp, who sometimes are their partners.
- The experience of physical and sexual violence in childhood and adult life is higher than in the general women's population (BMFSFJ 2004) although the prevalence of (ex)partner violence is the highest in adult life.
- The health status of legally working professional prostitutes - whether German or foreign - women report to be good, whereas the health of women is poor if they are on drugs or have no legal status.

Every individual woman working in the sex business behaves differently, but most of them want to earn much money in a short time and then quit, many of them lead a double life and do not want anybody to know, especially not their families. Many women feel the need to separate their work life and their private life either by locally separating work and private life (between different cities or different countries) or by finding other forms of separations, such as specific cleaning rituals as in the following interview passage (the names are fictional): Ms Finken worked in the sex business for many years, first on the street, then in brothels and apartments and finally as domina:

“And that was normal in former times: I ran home, changed my clothes also underwear, that would be taken off. That was ...now I go home and ...even the underwear, I would not have worn the same. Yes, it was always...it sounds crazy, even the underwear which I wore in the brothel, I did not wash together with my private underwear. Also the slip, I did not wash it with my private slip. That is ...I thought ‘may be he touched it, what he did’. No, then I had... yes, you wanted to separate it strictly. That is really true, yes” (Brückner and Oppenheimer 2006, 97).

2.2 Growing differences and their consequences for the women

There seems to be a rising heterogeneity which is deepening the segmentation in prostitution. These segmentations result from a. the growing proportion of migrant women and the change in countries they come from, b. the demands of customers for a growing variety and more extreme forms of sex services and c. new forms of commercialisation via handy and internet adding to its normality, making the business less controllable, since it becomes omnipresent and visible for everyone. To some degree women can shift from one segment to another during their time in prostitution (acquiring a legal status by various means, changing from more dangerous street prostitution to safer brothel or clubs, becoming a better paid domina with little or no physical contact to customers etc.).

These changes and segmentations include the following dimensions:

- legality versus illegality
- possibilities of decision-making concerning place, frequency and kind of sexual offers, respectively dependence on customer demands and the sex market,
- choice versus force.

All these changes come on a scale and affect the working conditions of women in prostitution. Competition has grown and former regulatory mechanisms - for example agreements among pimps - do not work any more. That means there are less chances to implement norms on working preconditions (such as safer sex) and prices and there is more pressure to agree to all sorts of sexual services including extreme ones tending to become normal. All sexual demands of customers seem more and more legitimate because of changing public views on sexuality and the modern model of 'anything goes as long as there is individual consent'. The following passages from interviews provide an idea of the consequences with respect to demands, offers and prices, even when the idealisation of earlier times is taken into account:

Ms Gera works in brothels, clubs, saunas and hotels for many years :

“Well, I did it for 30 years. That was much better, no comparison to today. It was easier. All women did the same and today each woman makes another far reaching offer – they don’t have any limits any more. That was not possible in earlier times, all practiced safer sex, only one service was possible. That, every woman was taught when she came: ‘Here you can only do this and that, otherwise you get kicked out’. And that was a good way of working, because all earned the same” (Brückner and Oppenheimer 2006, 80).

Under new market mechanisms, Ms. Gera sees herself on the losing side, because she did not want to follow all demands of customers. Individualisation makes it more important to be socially and psychologically able to set limits according to one’s own physical and psychic needs, that means to secure one’s own integrity, but this turns out to have its price. It becomes even more necessary to act as a business woman who is able to bargain concerning the offer and the price.

Ms Finken sums up her experiences in the following way: *„What these men dare to ask for and do these days is a catastrophe”* (Brückner and Oppenheimer 2007, 95).

This can be interpreted as a way to point out how unbearable the demands are and how difficult it has become to defend one’s own interests. The reason for this development in the perspective of the interviewed German women can be seen in global migration, bringing in many women who work for less money and therefore make sex work less profitable:

“In the beginning there came women from Thailand and we could influence them a bit in clubs and brothels so that they adjusted somewhat, also concerning money, concerning the prices. But when the women from the Eastern bloc came in, that was the end. Because they are so much under pressure...and they thought, well 50 Euro, on that they can live there for a whole month. They ruined our prices completely. And when they realized how expensive it is to live here, then it was too late” (Brückner and Oppenheimer 2007, 83).

Globalisation definitely is one of the reasons for the erosion of prices and in offers the sex market and because the pressure for migration leads to enormous competition. But there are other reasons such as the erosion of traditional sexual norms in Western countries and the new norm of a sexuality of negotiation, with the problem of suggesting that women and men inside and outside of prostitution disposing over the same individual negotiating powers. Especially in more traditional circumstances women have less chances than men to develop their own interests and to act according to them as their rights – being brought up to serve their husbands and their families. In prostitution this means that especially trafficked women often feel obliged to subordinate under the rules and regulations of traffickers and pimps, because of debts, of having been brought to Germany (or elsewhere) or because of feeling attracted to one of these men, who tend to be young, not rarely attractive, and partly suggesting a love relationship that is pretending to love the woman (the Romeo effect; Thoma 2005). Especially love and admiration tend to imply the submission of women, since that is the traditional expectation of women in love. This means these women behave quite “normal” when they accept to work in prostitution and having to do things they do not want to do and to hand over most of their earned money, especially if there seems no better alternative (FIM 2006). This often makes it quite difficult to reach trafficked women, especially when motivation for change is lacking.

- A counsellor of an NGO sums up her experience with many victims of trafficking, who seem to come to the conclusion: *“They beat me and they only give me 30% of my wage, but this is better than nothing. When I leave, I have no chance to come back to Germany”* (Cyrus 2006, 18).
- And a policewoman, specialized in this field says: *“They say: Yes of course I only got this little bit of money, but he did not hit me and he brought me to the doctor. Especially when they worked already for a longer time for a group of perpetrators, they talk themselves into seeing their own situation and their own lack of freedom as a good situation. Also their free time on sundays and two hours in the afternoons they talk themselves into being good”* (FIM 2006, 50).

This means that open violence and fake stories often are not necessary in the trafficking business and seem to occur less often today. In order to make women remain in prostitution it seems sufficient that they feel that there is no other choice, feel threatened (“Stockholm syndrome”), need the money and keep up hope for a coming better life in the West.

3 Women in prostitution and the helping professions

In our study the vast majority of women said that they at least once had been in a situation, where they would have needed help, quite a number of them did not look for help mainly because of fear and shame, and part of them did not know where to go. Altogether this means there is necessity of better information on social and health institutions in different languages, of taking into account that some women need more support in order to use existing agencies and to provide sufficient safety.

3.1 Women in prostitution who are reached by social work

In our study we asked experts in NGO’s about their professional work with women in prostitution. We differentiated – along institutional purposes and specialisations - between offers for a. long term professional German women (sometimes with a migrant background), a. legal or illegal migrant women and c. women on drugs. Professional German women having worked predominantly in clubs and apartments are reached mainly in a situation when

they have become older and want to leave prostitution, which is very difficult for them, since they are socially embedded in the milieu, are used to quite a lot of money and often have a high self esteem as independent women. So they need long term professional counselling and economic help.

Independent migrant women also tend to be a bit older. Sometimes they have a lot of self esteem, sometimes they suffer from leading a double life, mostly they work in brothels. Often they got a legal status by marriage or by having born a German child (that is a child whose father has a right of residence, then the child is entitled to obtain a German passport and the mother can stay in the country). Some of them then leave prostitution but still they are in need of help with every day life because of language problems and/ or psychic problems, because of suffering from having been a prostitute. Trafficked, often illegal women are mainly reached when they have been picked up by the police and then needing means of survival (such as a hidden place to stay) and counselling (e.g. whether taking part in a victim's program and becoming a witness or not). Most of these women are young, often they have children in their home countries to support, mostly they knew what kind of job they were supposed to do, but not the conditions of it; they mainly worked in brothels, apartments, clubs and call-girl rings. Some were in a position to send money home and to rise their standard of living after a time. Most of them try to stay and bring their children here, also by marriage or having a German child. A few succeed somehow, once they agree to a victim's program and thereby achieve the right to stay for the time of the trial. Some then leave prostitution, some remain in prostitution so far. The situation of those who get deported right away is more or less unknown.

Women on drugs who are reached – including a rising number of migrants - mostly work in the streets, in cars or cheap hotels, their health status and living situation often is very bad. Only legal women are entitled to places to stay which also offer different means of support, whereas cafes etc. can also be used by the rising number of women without a legal status. Social workers find it often difficult to reach these women other than fulfilling their mere needs to survive, which helps at least to keep their health standards and which gives them a safe place for the time being.

Even though all NGO's in the study see themselves as working with a 'accepting' approach towards prostitution, especially those which lay the main focus on opening up possibilities to leave prostitution have to fight for acceptance in the milieu and from active prostitutes. Especially NGO's specialized on helping migrant women or women on drugs need to work together with the police, what makes their position even more difficult (this specialized police works with women as victims and as long as they do, they do not treat them as perpetrators). If the focus of the NGO is on immediate, unconditional support - especially helping women with their legal status and lobbying for the rights of prostitution - these NGO's are generally well accepted in the milieu, that is, by active prostitutes, brothel owners and other men in the sex business, because these forms of support are good for the business. So the NGO's find themselves somewhat between one evil and another evil. And depending on which side they lean to, they do not share the same convictions. But all of them have to find their professional position balancing the interests of women in prostitution, allowing for sufficient contact to the milieu, respectively to the police in order to get in touch with women in need, paying attention to the law and keeping in mind their professional tasks and the goals of the employer, respectively, the donor.

4 Political positions of professionals towards prostitution

According to our findings it is tentatively possible to differentiate three different positions among social work professionals towards the institution of prostitution.

The first position clearly supports the professionalisation of prostitution and its definition as a normal job. The idea is, that a societal acceptance makes it possible for the women to acquire a professional identity, enabling them to formulate standards of work that spare them discrimination and exploitation.

Ms Arnold: *„I would wish for my clients that they can establish a professional identity because I believe that this protects them against violent attacks. That makes offers in this direction necessary. Also it helps the acceptance for their job. There a many women who say, ‘you know what I do’, showing they find sex work immoral. And I believe, if prostitution becomes normal, then the women also will find it normal to work there and the working conditions would also improve. Prostitution is not bad in itself, if someone can do it, it is good. I could not do it, but I also could not slaughter a pig. But the work conditions need to change”* (Brückner and Oppenheimer 2006, 236).

The second position also regards it important to end discrimination and to have unconditional possibilities to work as a prostitute, especially in order to spare women being forced to live a double life. But on the other hand the institution of prostitution is seen critically and sex work is not considered to be a job like any other. Instead prostitution is seen as an unreasonable demand on women.

Ms Christ: *“For ten years I reflect the question whether it is a job just as any other and I am very ambivalent. Sometimes I think it is politically right to formulate it like this and on the other hand, if I ask myself, I could never imagine it. Then others say, could you imagine to sit at the counter of a cheap supermarket (...). But I could not imagine to have someone penetrate me. In that sense I think, it is different from any other job. The movement of whores never became a mass movement, that were always only a couple of women, who were very important in the sense to fight for certain things and to regard the women differently. Even though it is unimaginable for oneself, it is important to develop a position to accept the decision, which each woman makes for herself. But still you have to remain open for women, who suffer very much from it (...). You have to remain open in all directions. It remains ambivalent, for me it will remain ambivalent till my last working day in this field, where I do counselling and where I have partly very intensive encounters. And yet I commit myself to the same rights for prostitutes”* (Brückner and Oppenheimer 2006, 251).

A third position mainly based on experiences with illegal, often trafficked women is convinced that these women do not want to be prostitutes and do not see it as just another job and that most of them experienced forms of violence. That is why alternative possibilities for living and income need to be established.

Ms Dietz: *“Most of the women feel ashamed. Their self esteem often is zero. One woman said, ‘I feel completely worthless”. That happens again and again, that they really feel very inferior because they did this step. They often say, if I could get home, I would never do it again. There are some, who don’t have that problem, but may be they just don’t talk about it”* (Brückner and Oppenheimer 2006, 256).

Which one of these positions – if any - is shared by the majority of women in prostitution is rather unclear, often they are not interested in prostitution as an institution, often they share common morality and just want to get by.

5 Final remarks on social responsibility towards women in prostitution

Prostitution is a question of:

- the cultural understanding of sexuality of men and women and of their relationship,
- poverty, respectively missing adequate chances on the labour market for women,
- laws and social institutions with respect to the balance of treating women as victims or as perpetrators,
- moral standards as well as neo-liberal ideas of sexual services as a gender neutral individual choice,
- Recognition of and respect for girls in families and women in partnerships and the politics on the female body.

Theoretically, prostitution cannot be understood without discussing the gender system and without analysing male hegemoniality and practically, women in prostitution can only be dealt with adequately when the specific context is taken into account which leaves us with the open question about what is the best form of support.

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