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**PROSTITUTION IN ARGENTINA IN THE WAKE OF THE
ECONOMIC CRISIS**

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ABSTRACT

This essay is the result of a minor field study conducted in Buenos Aires, Argentina, between December 16th, 2003 and March 1st, 2004. The aim of the study was to investigate female prostitution and its connection to poverty, especially related to the economic crisis that struck the country in 2001. It is a descriptive case study, where the situation in Buenos Aires, Argentina with regard to prostitution is treated as a case of feminisation of poverty. The main research question is: *how can prostitution be understood as a survival strategy in the context of feminisation of poverty?*

The theoretical base for the essay is a presentation of different views represented in the contemporary prostitution discourse, which I then sum up in a discussion presenting my view of prostitution; that prostitution in a patriarchal society, that we live in today, is oppression of women. Several concepts relevant to the study, such as poverty, prostitution and survival strategy are also extensively elaborated on, as well as the concept of feminisation of poverty which deals with women's generally greater vulnerability to poverty compared to men.

After a long economic recession, Argentina's economy crashed completely in 2001. Unemployment and poverty rates rose sharply. Many women had to go out in the streets to sell their bodies in order to provide their families with an income. There are no official statistics on prostitution, but it has increased drastically. The study includes women who were already in prostitution before the economic crisis as well as women forced to enter due to the crisis. They all have in common stating poverty as their main reason for entering prostitution.

The situation for poor women in prostitution in Argentina is difficult, and the economic crisis has made it even harder. The number of clients has decreased, and the increase in women exercising prostitution has made the competition harder, which in turn has lowered the prices. It is therefore very difficult to make a sustainable living from prostitution. The women in my study want to leave prostitution, but most of them are uneducated and some come from poorer neighbouring countries, which adds racist discrimination to the obstacles hindering them. Prostitution is also devastating for the self-esteem and many women find it hard to gather the strength to try to change their life situations.

The difficult situation most poor women in prostitution are in makes it hard to see prostitution as an explicit strategy, especially considering that it is a situation they want to leave. I prefer to see it as a survival alternative, moreover very often the only alternative available. Although the essay focuses on prostitution and poverty, it is important to remember that poverty is not the cause for the existence of prostitution, it is merely a factor assuring a constant supply to meet the male demand for buying sexual access to women's bodies, which is the primary reason that prostitution exists.

SUMARIO

Esta tesina es el resultado de un estudio de campo menor, realizado en Buenos Aires, Argentina, entre el 16 de diciembre de 2003 y el 1 de marzo de 2004. El propósito del estudio fue investigar la prostitución femenina en Argentina y su conexión con la pobreza, especialmente en relación con la crisis económica que golpeó el país en 2001. Es un estudio descriptivo de un caso, en el cual la prostitución en Argentina es considerado como un caso de feminización de pobreza. La cuestión principal de la investigación es: *¿Cómo se puede entender la prostitución como una estrategia de supervivencia en un contexto de feminización de la pobreza?*

La base teórica de la tesina es una presentación de diferentes perspectivas representadas en el debate contemporáneo sobre prostitución, las cuales después resumo en una discusión presentando mi visión sobre la prostitución; que ésta en una sociedad patriarcal, como en la que vivimos ahora, es una opresión contra mujeres. Varios conceptos relevantes para el estudio, como pobreza, prostitución y estrategia de supervivencia también son extensivamente elaborados, así como el concepto de feminización de pobreza que trata de la vulnerabilidad ante la pobreza, generalmente más relevante para las mujeres en comparación con la de los hombres.

Después de una recesión económica larga, la economía de Argentina se quebró totalmente en 2001. Las tasas del desempleo y de la pobreza aumentaron fuertemente. Muchas mujeres tuvieron que salir a las calles para vender sus cuerpos a fin de proveer a sus familias con un ingreso. No hay estadísticas oficiales sobre prostitución, pero ha aumentado drásticamente. El estudio incluye tanto mujeres que ya ejercían la prostitución antes de la crisis económica como mujeres que se vieron obligadas a entrar debido a la crisis. Todas tienen en común que indican la pobreza como su razón primaria para entrar a la prostitución.

La situación para las mujeres pobres que ejercen la prostitución en Argentina es difícil, y la crisis económica la ha hecho más dura todavía. La cantidad de clientes ha disminuido, y el aumento de mujeres ejerciendo la prostitución ha hecho la competencia por los clientes más dura, provocando la bajada de los precios. Es entonces muy difícil ganarse un sueldo sostenible con la prostitución. Las mujeres en mi estudio quieren dejar la prostitución, pero la mayoría de ellas no tienen educación y algunas son de países vecinos, lo cual añade la discriminación racista a los obstáculos que las impiden. La prostitución también es devastadora para la autoestima y muchas de las mujeres encuentran difícil reunir el coraje para tratar de cambiar sus condiciones de vida.

La difícil situación en que se encuentran la mayoría de las mujeres pobres que ejercen la prostitución hace difícil concebir la prostitución como una estrategia explícita, especialmente considerando que es una situación que quieren dejar. Prefiero verla como una alternativa de supervivencia, además muchas veces la única de que disponen. Aunque la tesina se concentra en

la prostitución y la pobreza, es importante recordar que la pobreza no es la causa de la existencia de la prostitución, es solamente un factor, asegurando la provisión constante para satisfacer la demanda masculina de comprar acceso sexual a los cuerpos de mujeres, lo cual es la razón principal porque la prostitución existe.

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There are too many women selling their bodies in their daily struggle for survival within an unjust system. This essay is dedicated to them.

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Hay demasiadas mujeres vendiendo sus cuerpos en su lucha diaria por la sobrevivencia dentro de un sistema injusto. Esta tesina es dedicada a ellas.

1. INTRODUCTION

“There she is. A young 21-year old that once in a while has to sleep with an old man so that he gives her something to survive.” – Interview with Elena Reynaga, AMMAR Nacional on December 23, 2003

1.1 INTRODUCING THE CASE

In 2001, after a long economic recession, Argentina’s economy crashed completely. Many people lost their jobs, and poverty increased sharply, to include more than half of the country’s population. For many women, prostitution became a way of providing their families with an income. Although there are no official statistics on prostitution, it is obvious that it has increased drastically since the economic crisis. My readings and interviews point to the same situation, which can be illustrated by the following quote from the Chilean magazine *The Clinic*:

In the famous section 59 of the daily newspaper *Clarín*, until 1999 it was common to find around a hundred advertisements from women, men and transvestites offering their services. Now they don’t go under three hundred. The offers are many and show with clarity the situation: there are pregnant women, oral sex for 5 Argentinian pesos¹, models from television who accompany the client all day for 120 Argentinian pesos², and who end the day with sex without restrictions.³

Why is it that so many women ended up in prostitution? The aim of the study is to look at this situation and discuss how prostitution can be seen as a survival strategy within a context of poverty and economic crisis.

The theoretical point of departure is a presentation of different views of prostitution, which I sum up in a discussion presenting my view of prostitution, which then forms the basis for the analysis. An important concept for the study is the one of ‘feminisation of poverty’, which I have chosen to see the situation in Argentina as a case of. Thus, the analysis of the results of the study is made within this context.

1.2 PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH AND QUESTIONS EXAMINED

This essay is intended to be a descriptive case study of female prostitution in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The situation in Buenos Aires with regard to prostitution, especially since the economic crisis that struck the country in 2001, is treated as a case of feminisation of poverty, a concept that I will elaborate on further down. I have looked at the drastic increase of prostitution

¹ 5 Argentinian pesos are approximately 1.5 euro (June 2004).

² 120 Argentinian pesos are approximately 34 euro (June 2004).

³ Barrera, Evaristo; 2002; “Turismo sexual en Argentina” *The clinic*; page 9 (my translation)

as a symptom of the increasing poverty and investigated how life has changed, since the crisis, for women who have entered prostitution due to poverty. To do this, I have tried to find answers to questions such as in what way prostitution is connected to poverty for them, what drove them into prostitution and what motivates them to continue, what they were doing before and whether it was possible to continue with that or not, what other alternatives there were, if they had any kind of choice, if their view of prostitution has changed since the crisis, how they see the future in terms of whether prostitution is a viable survival strategy or not, and so on.

While conducting my study I have worked under the presumption that there is a causal connection between the increase in prostitution and the increasing poverty in the wake of the economic crisis. During my study I have tried to investigate this presumed causal relation. The essay therefore focuses on the economic causes, although these cannot be completely isolated from other contributing causes. My main research question, and what I try to illustrate in the essay, is: *how can prostitution be understood as a survival strategy in the context of feminisation of poverty?*

The essay is important and relevant since there is not much research on this specific situation and since prostitution is given very little attention by the Argentinian government.⁴ I also feel that it is especially important to point out the effect of economic crisis and poverty on women, since, as I will discuss further down, women are often affected harder than men.

1.3 PLAN OF THE ESSAY

Following this introduction where the purpose of the essay is stated, chapter two is dedicated to presenting the theoretical framework upon which the study is built. Thereafter the method used when carrying out the study is described in chapter three. Chapter four gives the reader some necessary background information on the Argentinian context, and in chapter five the situation regarding prostitution more specifically is presented. The sixth chapter treats and analyses the results from the field study, examining some of the questions presented in the introduction. It is followed by a concluding discussion in chapter seven.

⁴ RIMA, Red Informativa de Mujeres de Argentina; 2002; *Argentina: Shadow Report from ONGs to CEDAW Committee*

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As mentioned, I present the case of prostitution in Argentina as a case of feminisation of poverty. The concept of feminisation of poverty will be discussed in section 2.2 below. For the theoretical understanding of prostitution I look at feminist theories on the subject and through a discussion of these I shape a theoretical framework from which the results of my study can be interpreted and understood. A presentation of the literature used is found in section 3.3 about written materials.

2.1 DEFINITIONS AND TERMINOLOGY

Before moving on to the discussion of the concepts that lay the theoretical ground for this essay, some definitions are necessary. Thus, this section contains some concepts central to the study that I feel need to be elaborated on in order to avoid confusion.

2.1.1 DEVELOPMENT

The concept of development has been much debated, and questions such as ‘what is development?’, ‘development for whom?’ and ‘how are conditions for development created?’ have come up within the debate. Early discussions on development and women had a mainly ‘Women In Development’ (WID) focus, meaning that women were seen as a vulnerable group within the development process and not as changing agents of the same. Development aid projects were formed specifically for women and their ‘special needs’. Lately the focus has shifted from WID to GAD (Gender And Development), where gender aspects are applied on every aspect of the development process and all initiatives are examined from a gender perspective. This also has its point of departure in the view that both men and women are subjects that can and should participate in their own development process.⁵ Traditional measurements of development, such as GDP (Gross Domestic Product) have proved to be insufficient since they omit many important aspects of development, for example education, health and equality and focus exclusively on economic factors. Another problem has been that women have not been included specifically. Because of this, alternative development measurements have been evolved, such as the HDI (Human Development Index) and, for special focus on gender relations and development, Gender-related Development Index and Gender Empowerment Measure. These can be seen as resulting from the evolution of the development discourse, as the view on

⁵ de Vylder, Stefan; ”Jämställdhet och fattigdomsstrategier”; in Utrikesdepartementet; 2004; *Makt och privilegier – om könsdiskriminering och fattigdom. Delstudier*, page 91

development has changed. The most common measurements are still GDP and HDI, however, in neither of which women have been included specifically. Furthermore, women in developing countries, as will be discussed in section 2.2, are often found in the informal economic sectors, which are excluded from most measurements of economic development, such as GDP. This is problematic, since when women's contributions to development are overlooked, it easily leads to them being overlooked when shaping development policies as well. In this essay, I will relate to this problem by focusing on women in a developing economy, and more specifically, women in the informal sector of this economy, and their survival strategies. Argentina, although ranked among the countries with 'high human development' in the latest Human Development Report, is still classified as a developing country⁶ and this together with the impoverishment of the population that followed the economic crisis makes Argentina a case worth studying in this perspective.

2.1.2 GENDER AND PATRIARCHY

Although connected, gender is a wider concept than sex, which only takes into consideration the biological differentiation between men and women. 'Gender' includes differentiation between masculinity and femininity as constructed through, for example, socialisation and education.⁷ The concept of gender is closely linked to the concept of patriarchy, since gender for many is seen as constructed within a patriarchal society.⁸ Kuo defines patriarchy in the following way:

[...] the social organisation that systematically and unjustifiably assigns subordinate status and power to women, relative to their male counterparts.⁹

Patriarchy is a dualistic system, where men and women function as opposites. Further, the opposites are hierarchically ranked with men above women. This hierarchy within society is necessary for the patriarchal system to maintain its order.¹⁰

Within patriarchy, almost exclusively women become prostituted. The following analysis by Luis Pérez Aguirre provides a possible explanation:

It is clear that patriarchy is the social structure based on the property and possession of the woman, in which she acquires not rights, but concrete obligations and functions subordinated to the man. And it is clear as well that capitalism is a particular form of social

⁶ UNDP, United Nations Development Programme; 2003; *Human Development Report 2003*

⁷ Reddock, Rhonda; "Why gender? Why feminism?"; in Parpart, Jane L., etc; 2000; *Theoretical Perspectives on Gender and Development*

⁸ See for example introduction in Kuo, Leonore; 2002; *Prostitution Policy: Revolutionizing Practice through a Gendered Perspective*

⁹ Kuo 2002, page 5

¹⁰ Pérez Aguirre, Luis; 1995; *La condición femenina*, pages 18-19

organisation that has inherited, making them its own, all the pseudo values of the patriarchal culture, which it considers perfectly functional (for the man).¹¹

If women are seen as property within the patriarchal system, and capitalism with its commercialisation of nearly everything in society has taken over the patriarchal values, it is not strange that also women's bodies are seen as commodities to be bought, sold and used by men. Thus, the capitalist system and the patriarchal structures mutually reinforce each other – so much so that it is difficult to see them existing independently of one another – maintaining women in a situation of exploitation and discrimination.

The feminist discourse on development has increasingly called for including gender, and pointed out that both women and men must be lifted from poverty and contribute to and benefit from development efforts.¹² This has lately been given attention; through for example the different measurements focusing on women, but much of the relation between gender and development remains problematic since gender to a large extent is being overlooked.

This essay will focus primarily on gender and not the biological sex, since I feel that it is important to put the women's situation into a context of their roles and conditions within society. I have however made one biological distinction; between biologically born women and transvestites.¹³ It could be argued that the transvestites should be seen as women from a gender perspective, since they take on a very feminine gender role and see themselves as women. However, society in general does not look at them this way, they are seen as gays and commonly referred to as 'men dressed up as women', although it is something much deeper than purely a masquerade with clothing and make-up. Due to this fact, that the transvestites are not seen, nor treated as women, their situation is in many ways different from that of other prostituted women, and for that reason I have chosen not to include them in my study.

2.1.3 POVERTY

Poverty, seen as the state of shortage where basic needs are not satisfied although the possibilities may exist, has increasingly been acknowledged as the most important problem thought to be overcome by development. In the millennium declaration by the United Nations,

¹¹ Pérez Aguirre, Luis; 1995, page 21 (my translation)

¹² Reddock in Parpart 2000

¹³ There are quite a few man-to-woman transvestites/transsexuals/transgender in prostitution in Buenos Aires. Some only use female accessories, such as clothing and make-up, whereas some have gone through surgery to have female breasts, but keeping their male genitals. No matter their degree of physical transformation they are in the public discourse all referred to, and refer to themselves as transvestites.

eradicating extreme poverty and hunger stands as the first among the development goals.¹⁴ The concept has traditionally been defined as having less than one dollar per day to live on, the so-called poverty line.¹⁵ This is a rather static definition. Lately, this approach has been increasingly criticised, since being poor is so much more than a purely economic condition, and newer poverty definitions have been expanded to include such things as lack of dignity and autonomy. The UNDP concept of 'human poverty' refers to the denial of opportunities and choices for living a 'tolerable' life.¹⁶ Thus, the focus in poverty studies today has been widened to include not only resources and economy but also social and political dimensions.

In the poverty discourse, gender is often viewed as a 'special issue'. When gender aspects do exist, men are often seen as economic actors whereas women are portrayed as a vulnerable group, implicitly needing the support and protection of men.¹⁷ The strictly economic definition of poverty is problematic from a gender perspective, since the work traditionally allocated to women within a patriarchal system, such as housework and caring duties, to a large extent unpaid, is commonly depreciated and made invisible. In today's society, productivity is rewarded and the majority of women's work is seen as unproductive since it does not generate an income. This leads to the problem that in official statistics regarding women's economic activity it often seems as if women work about 40-50% of what men do, when in reality it is rather the opposite. Further, in income poverty analyses, the household is often used as the unit of measurement, with the implicit assumption that the combined income is divided equally within the members of the household. However, studies have shown that men in for example Latin America use between 30% and 50% of their income for their own consumption. The inequality in the division of resources becomes more evident the poorer the families are.¹⁸

Since this essay focuses on the economic crisis in Argentina and the situation for poor women in prostitution within it, I have chosen to use an economic definition of poverty. The poverty line can be useful when it comes to statistical data. In this study, however, it is necessary to be a bit more flexible, since the perception of being poor is very subjective. I have therefore not stuck strictly to the one dollar per day-definition, but rather defined poverty as not having sufficient economic resources to cover the living expenses or having just enough, but nothing for

¹⁴ UNDP 2003, page 1

¹⁵ UNDP 2003

¹⁶ Cagatay, Nilüfer, 1998; *Gender and Poverty*

¹⁷ Johnsson-Latham, Gerd; "Att förstå kvinnors och mäns fattigdom och utsatthet; definitioner, omfattning, orsaker och uppmärksamhet i fattigdomsstrategier"; in Utrikesdepartementet; 2004; *Makt och privilegier – om könsdiskriminering och fattigdom. Delstudier*, page 29

¹⁸ Ibid., pages 33-34

unforeseen expenses. To a large extent I have let the women in my study subjectively define whether they see themselves as poor or not. Although this essay focuses on economic poverty, the women in my study would all classify as poor even if I had used a wider definition including powerlessness and lack of opportunities and choices. Their condition of being economically poor in combination with being women in a patriarchal system and exercising prostitution, one of the most stigmatised activities in society, inevitably leads to this.

2.1.4 PROSTITUTION

The feminist debate on prostitution is wide and much divided. In the sections 2.3-2.4, the two main theoretical feminist traditions on prostitution, one more liberal and the other more restrictive, will be discussed. For the purpose of this essay I have chosen to define prostitution as having sex for money, given that 'sex' is defined in a wide way, including other kinds of sexual activities as well as intercourse. There is an ongoing discussion between different groups in Argentina about which term to use for the women in this activity. The ones arguing for the first position mentioned above commonly use the term 'sex worker', while the ones on the other side talk about 'women in a prostitution situation'. 'Sex work' is commonly used for advocating prostitution as a job like any other whereas 'women in a prostitution situation' implies that prostitution in no way is a job and neither is it a choice. Both these terms are very normative and therefore I have chosen to avoid using them. There is no completely neutral term, but in this essay I have chosen to use the terms 'woman in prostitution' or 'prostituted woman' and 'prostitution'. I will use the term 'exercise prostitution' for describing their activity, since I do not agree with the notion that prostitution can be seen as a job.

Distinctions are often made between different kinds of prostitution, for example male and female prostitution, child and adult prostitution, free and forced prostitution, brothel and street prostitution, and so on. The only distinction I have chosen to make for this essay is the one between male and female prostitution. Although I have only interviewed adult women in my study, some of them got into prostitution as children, i.e. before the age of 18. According to an article in the Argentinian publication *Brujas*, the average age for entering prostitution in Argentina is 12 or 13 years.¹⁹ It is difficult, if not almost impossible, for these girls when they become adults to get out of prostitution, due to threats from pimps, lack of employment opportunities and the obligation to economically maintain children and other relatives. The idea that a situation these girls have been in for years suddenly becomes something essentially different the day they turn

¹⁹ Fontenla, Marta; 2001b; "Amor de la calle": en el continuo de violencia" *Brujas*, page 102

18, although their activity and their life situation remains the same seems absurd. Therefore I feel the distinction between child and adult prostitution is rather difficult to make. With regard to free and forced prostitution, it can be doubted whether there is such a thing as a completely free choice when it comes to prostitution in a patriarchal society, although there are different degrees of coercion, with the most extreme being trafficking and when violence is used. Moreover, when it comes to the women in my study, where poverty is the main cause of their prostitution, the 'choice' is often between letting their children go hungry and prostituting themselves. With regard to brothel and street prostitution, the conditions the women work under differ between brothels and the street, but the basic activity remains the same, and it is common to have worked in both environments. Separating different forms of prostitution can also be a way of separating prostitution from the context of violence against women²⁰ and legitimising sexual exploitation, as it is made permissible and acceptable depending on whom it deals with.²¹

There are two main reasons for my choice to make the differentiation between male and female prostitution in this essay and focusing only on female prostitution. Firstly, that my approach is viewing the Argentinian situation as a case of feminisation of poverty and focusing on the impact of the crisis on women. The other reason is that the men in prostitution are relatively few. There are prostituted men, but the overwhelming majority of the people in prostitution are women, due to their subordinated position in patriarchy as discussed in 2.1.2 above, a position that also, I believe, makes the experience of prostitution partially different for women than for men.

2.1.5 SURVIVAL STRATEGY

The term 'survival strategy' refers to the multiple ways in which a household or another form of economic unit tries to obtain the basic necessities for survival. It does not only refer to different ways of generating income, although this is an important part, but also to such things as unpaid domestic labour, the use of extra-domestic networks, the negotiation of access to collective services and different ways of reducing costs. Survival strategies are closely related to poverty, since it is under financial pressures the strategies become necessary, to use the available labour and resources as fully as possible.²² Women form an important part of these strategies, both because they are overrepresented among the poor, as discussed in the next section and

²⁰ Prostitution as violence against women is further discussed in sections 2.3.2 and 2.4

²¹ Fontenla 2001b, page 103

²² Schmink, Marianne; 1984; "Household economic strategies: Review and research agenda"; *Latin American Research Review*, page 91

because they often have to take on multiple roles and responsibilities to ensure the reproduction and survival of the family.²³ The fact that the struggle for survival in poor sectors of society so extensively depends on and is realised at the cost of women has lead Saskia Sassen to talk about a ‘feminisation of survival’. In times of economic crisis, the increased unemployment of men as well as of women, combined with government cutbacks on social services, contributes to making the pressure on women to find new ways of assuring the survival of the household grow. Among other things, prostitution has grown as an option for survival.²⁴

The ‘survival strategy’-concept has been criticised since it implies the existence of a choice for the actors as well as conscious behaviour and high levels of rationality.²⁵ It can be argued, however, that even if the only options are starving and prostitution, to go into prostitution is still a choice, if not necessarily a free one. I see that point of view as, besides from being cynical, fairly pointless since it makes the notion of ‘choice’ so wide that it can be applied to almost anything. The criticism against the ‘survival strategy’-concept for implying conscious behaviour and high levels of rationality can be seen as reducing the people incorporated in the concept, as if they would not be able to behave rationally within the limits of their social context. When using the concept of ‘survival strategy’ it is important not to focus only on the individuals or the households as isolated entities, but to put them into a wider social and structural context. To do this enables a more overarching and generalising understanding of an individual survival strategy.

2.2 FEMINISATION OF POVERTY

A much discussed and widely used concept within Development Studies is that of ‘feminisation of poverty’. It is defined in the UNDP working paper *Gender and Poverty* in the following way:

It can mean either one or a combination of the following:

- a) Women compared to men have a higher *incidence* of poverty.
- b) Women’s poverty is more *severe* than men’s
- c) Over time, the incidence of poverty among women is *increasing* compared to men.²⁶

For a number of reasons, female-headed households are more likely to be poor. Thus, one of the ways of looking at and measuring feminisation of poverty has been by looking at the incidence of poverty among female-headed households in comparison to the male counterparts.

²³ Ginés, María Emilia; “Jerarquias de clase y género: aportes para la comprensión de las estrategias de subsistencia de las mujeres”; in Lipszyc, Cecilia, etc; 1996; *Desprivatizando lo privado: mujeres y trabajos*, pages 75-76

²⁴ Sassen, Saskia; 2002; “Las contrageografías de la globalización” *Cotidiano Mujer*, page 7

²⁵ Ginéz in Lipszyc, etc. 1996, page 88

²⁶ Cagatay 1998, page 4

The existence of poverty in female-headed households is not completely consistent, but for example in Latin America, these households tend to be over-represented among the poorer sectors of society.²⁷ That a household is headed by a female, means that the household has a woman as the main responsible for the household, which in turn often means that there is either no adult male in the household or that the male has little or no income. Thus, not only are the female heads of households disadvantaged on the labour market because they are women, but the other members of the household are also less likely to be working-age males.²⁸ The women are then faced with the double role of both being the breadwinner and at the same time taking care of the domestic responsibilities. This makes these households more vulnerable to poverty.²⁹ The women in the female-headed households are in Latin America disproportionately found in the informal sector.³⁰ A reason for this is that for the women to be able to combine these two roles, the employment opportunities are effectively narrowed down. The informal sector jobs have flexible hours on the one hand, but on the other hand lower income and less security.³¹

Economic crisis leads to fewer jobs being created in the formal sector, and with fewer formal sector jobs available, unemployed workers and new entrants in the labour force are often confined to informal sector jobs. In addition to this, many jobs within the formal sector are becoming 'informalised' as companies increasingly use subcontracting in the production process.³² It is often in times of economic crisis that women are compelled to enter the labour market, and thus frequently reduced to the informal sector. Thus, more and more women are incorporated into the least valued sectors of the economy, as a resource of cheap labour.³³

According to Wilson, the informal and the formal economic sectors are not two completely separate entities; rather the informal sector subsidises the formal. The unprotected nature of the workers in the informal sector and their direct and indirect use by capitalist firms make up their functionality for the capitalist system. The workers within this sector are an 'invisible' proletariat, of which women form a large part. They are subjected to a double exploitation, both as invisible proletarians and as the subordinated sex.³⁴

²⁷ Kabeer, Naila; 2003; *Gender Mainstreaming in Poverty Eradication and the Millennium Development Goals*, page 81

²⁸ Schmink 1984, page 92

²⁹ Birdsall, Nancy, etc; "Women, poverty and development"; in Buvinic, Mayra, etc; 1983; *Women and poverty in the third world*, page 9

³⁰ Wilson, Tamar Diana; 1998; "Approaches to understanding the position of women workers in the informal sector" *Latin American Perspectives*, page 105

³¹ Birdsall in Buvinic 1983, page 9

³² Connelly, Patricia M., etc; "Feminism and development: Theoretical perspectives"; in Parpart, Jane L., etc; 2000; *Theoretical Perspectives on Gender and Development*, pages 66-67

³³ Pérez Aguirre 1995, page 59

³⁴ Wilson 1998, pages 114-115

An option for many poor women, having to be able to combine income earning with household duties together with the limited number of options available for women, has proved to be entering into prostitution. As cited in Scambler:

Recruitment to the ranks of prostitute is not appropriately characterised as only concerning a small group of highly deviant women. It is secured by women's relative poverty still being such that for large numbers sex is their most saleable commodity.³⁵

Prostitution due to poverty, however, is far from always a desirable way out, not least since the social stigma caused by common perceptions of prostituted women, makes their experiences of poverty even worse than those of women earning their income in other ways.³⁶ Within the economies of so-called developing countries, where the feminisation of poverty can be most evidently observed, tourism is often promoted as a development strategy. Closely linked to the tourism industry is the entertainment industry, of which prostitution commonly forms an important part. Thus, the importance of the sex industry for any economy rises with the absence of other jobs, profits and revenues.³⁷ As Sassen presents it:

Not only are households, indeed whole communities, increasingly dependent on women for their survival, but so too are governments, along with enterprises that function on the margins of the legal economy.³⁸

2.3 WAYS OF VIEWING PROSTITUTION

To generalise the feminist discourse on prostitution, it can be said that there are two main ways of viewing prostitution. On the one hand, there are feminist theories with a liberal view on prostitution, that argue that it is everyone's free choice what they want to do with their lives, and that it is an opportunity for women to use the structures in society to their advantage. On the other hand, there are feminist theories with a restrictive view on prostitution, that argue that prostitution is a form of oppression of women and that it is a symptom of the patriarchal structures we have in society today.

In this section I will present these two theoretical traditions on prostitution and then sum up with a discussion about these two ways of viewing prostitution in order to present a theoretical framework that can be used to interpret the results of my study.

³⁵ O'Neill, Maggie; "Prostitute women now"; in Scambler, Graham, etc; 1997; *Rethinking Prostitution: Purchasing sex in the 1990s*, page 10

³⁶ Nencel, Lorraine; 2001; *Ethnography and Prostitution in Peru*, page 216

³⁷ Sassen, Saskia; "Global cities and survival circuits"; in Ehrenreich, Barbara and Russell Hochschild, Arlie; 2002; *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, page 265

2.3.1 PROSTITUTION AS EMPOWERMENT FOR WOMEN

The feminists whom I have chosen to call ‘prostitution liberal’ argue for a destigmatisation and decriminalisation of prostitution. They argue that prostitution is work, and therefore often use the terms ‘sex work’ and ‘sex worker’ instead of prostitution and prostitute, terms which they find stigmatising and with negative connotations. Ericsson argues in his article that there is intrinsically no difference in the kind of relationship that exists between a prostituted woman and her customer, and the relationships in most service professions. The difference we see is only caused by cultural blindness and sexual taboos. The argument that prostitution is work is also supported by the statement that the prostituted woman does not sell her body; she merely sells sexual services.³⁹ O’Neill goes even further in her argument and points out that sex work challenges the whole patriarchal structure by going against the stereotypes of women’s work as domestic, within the private sphere and with long hours and femininity as fragile, passive, nurturing and emotional. The women in prostitution challenge this when they go against it and bring into the public sphere the services that women are usually expected to perform in private and for one man only, and offer them to many men. This destabilises patriarchal power over women’s bodies, sexualities, images and representations.⁴⁰ The argument can be used to claim that prostitution empowers all women, as done by the English Collective of Prostitutes:

We argued that for some women to get paid for what all women are expected to do for free is a source of power for all women to refuse the sex they don’t want.⁴¹

Another strong argument from the liberal side is that of freedom of choice. Everyone should have the freedom to decide what they want to do with their lives, including if they want to prostitute themselves. There are women who choose to prostitute themselves, because of the rewards that come with the work, such as higher pay than most women get, foreign travel and unusual freedom, not to mention that there are women who like their work.⁴² Although it is admitted that the choice to go into prostitution often has economic causes, this cannot be used as an argument against prostitution according to Ericsson. He argues that the economic factor might have contributed to the prostituted woman’s choice of profession, but so did it most likely in the case of the lawyer as well.⁴³ Although the choice to go into prostitution is often made due

³⁹ Ericsson, Lars O.; 1980; “Charges against Prostitution: An Attempt at a Philosophical Assessment” *Ethics*, page 353

⁴⁰ O’Neill in Scambler 1997, page 4

⁴¹ English Collective of Prostitutes; “Campaigning for legal change”; in Scambler, Graham, etc; 1997; *Rethinking Prostitution: Purchasing sex in the 1990s*, page 83-84

⁴² Scambler, Graham; “Conspicuous and inconspicuous sex work: The neglect of the ordinary and mundane”; in Scambler, Graham, etc; 1997; *Rethinking Prostitution: Purchasing sex in the 1990s*, page 120

⁴³ Ericsson 1980, page 346

to lack of other choices, this does not change the fact that it is still regarded as a free choice, as O'Neill shows in her text:

Some women make independent lifestyle choices due to the realities of economic need in a climate of economic recession, inadequate benefits, unemployment and increasing debt.⁴⁴

Furthermore, feminists who hold a liberal view of prostitution often argue that women are not necessarily oppressed in prostitution. However, they do recognise patriarchal structures and that these can lead to oppression, as stated by Scambler:

And if much female sex work yet remains deeply symptomatic of patriarchy, this does not prevent many women from dominating most of their encounters with most of their clients. There is assertion and resistance to patriarchy even here.⁴⁵

Although this is recognised, they do not see it as an argument against prostitution, rather as an argument against how society is formed today

Ericsson also compares a moderately successful call girl and a typical middle-class housewife in suburbia and asks who is the more oppressed of these two; the housewife who is economically totally dependant on her husband, or the call girl who in that respect stands on her own two feet.⁴⁶ There is nothing in the prostitution contract per se that makes it oppressive; it is rather the economic circumstances and the social stigmatisation of prostituted women that oppress. Therefore, those are what should be abolished, not prostitution.

2.3.2 PROSTITUTION AS OPPRESSION OF WOMEN

On the other side of the argument are the feminists who hold that prostitution should be campaigned against as a human rights violation. According to them, prostitution cannot be justified, at least not in the society we live in today, because of the patriarchal structures that permeate everything in society and affect women's as well as men's lives and choices. It is these structures that make prostitution oppressive, or in Pateman's words:

The story of the sexual contract reveals that the patriarchal construction of the difference between masculinity and femininity is the political difference between freedom and subjection, and that sexual mastery is the major means through which men affirm their manhood.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ O'Neill in Scambler 1997, page 15

⁴⁵ Scambler in Scambler 1997, page 120

⁴⁶ Ericsson 1980, page 354

⁴⁷ Pateman, Carole; 1988; "What's wrong with prostitution?" *The Sexual Contract*, page 207

A factor contributing to prostituted women's subordinated position, apart from women's general subordination in patriarchy, is the vulnerable economic position women in prostitution very often find themselves in. The prostituted women's ability to impose limits on the kind of powers over her person she transfers to the clients through the prostitution contract is strongly affected by her economic situation. Thus, the more financially desperate she is, the less freedom does she have to dictate the exchange.⁴⁸ Pateman further explains the prostituted women's disadvantage in the relation:

For example, the prostitute is always at a singular disadvantage in the 'exchange'. The client makes direct use of the prostitute's body and there are no 'objective' criteria through which to judge whether the service has been satisfactorily performed.⁴⁹

The argument that prostitution is oppression of women is often drawn even further, that prostitution is not only oppression, but also slavery. In a citation in the book by Nencel, prostitution is closely linked with slavery:

[...] prostitution is defined as: sexual slavery of women desperately trying to survive, women with little or no education or workplace skills, women with a limited amount of self-esteem due to the status of women in our patriarchal society, a condition which has existed for centuries. It is not possible to call that which is slavery a profession.⁵⁰

The argument that prostitution is slavery is closely linked to the argument against prostitution as just another form of work. Pateman argues that it looks very much like slavery to have bodies for sale in the market. Even though the body never can be separated from any form of labour power, it is only in prostitution that the buyer obtains unilateral right of direct sexual use of a woman's body.⁵¹ The prostitution-restrictive feminists also hold forward other arguments why it is not possible to see prostitution as work, for example structures in society:

Rather, because [...] current sexual behaviour is constructed within and as a weapon of patriarchy and heterosexism, sex work cannot simply be another form of work in contemporary culture⁵²

Prostitution is also, as for example O'Connell points out, different from other forms of work because of the dangers attached to the job. Hardly any workers run such high risks of being assaulted, and furthermore, because of common views of women in prostitution, those who attack can rest fairly assured that there will be no or minimal consequences of their actions.⁵³

⁴⁸ O'Connell Davidson, Julia; 1998; *Prostitution, Power and Freedom*, page 65

⁴⁹ Pateman 1988, page 208

⁵⁰ Nencel 2001, page 46

⁵¹ Pateman 1988, pages 203-204

⁵² Kuo 2002, page 149

⁵³ O'Connell 1998, page 64

2.4 FRAMING PROSTITUTION

Prostitution is not an easy issue, and I find many of the arguments, both for and against, valid. I will, however, in this section try to discuss the arguments and through this discussion create a framework through which the results of the study can be interpreted and understood.

First of all, I think it is necessary to take the discussion at two levels. At the structural level I agree with the restrictive feminists that prostitution, at least in the context of the patriarchally structured society we live in today can only be seen as a form of oppression of women. In Pateman's words:

Prostitution is the use of a woman's body by a man for his own satisfaction.⁵⁴

There is nothing empowering in that. At the individual level, on the other hand, I realise that prostitution may be the outcome of a rational choice made by economic necessity and the best alternative due to lack of other good alternatives.

I see prostitution in two ways as a consequence of the patriarchal society and women's subordination within it. Firstly, as a direct consequence of men's superior position to women, where women are often seen as objects that are there for the pleasure of men and therefore become saleable as any other objects. Secondly, indirectly through the discriminating gender roles and the limited income opportunities for women, which lead to poverty, as discussed in the section about feminisation of poverty above. Poverty and economic desperation, in turn, often lead up to prostitution.

Although I am aware that poverty is far from the only factor leading to prostitution, it is what I am concerned with in this essay, and I will therefore limit the discussion mainly to prostitution and poverty. In an economically desperate situation, prostitution might very well be a viable survival strategy with many 'advantages' compared to the other alternatives available. For example, prostitution sometimes generates a higher income than many other jobs, it is often independent, and has a great deal of flexibility. However, these 'advantages', or rather differences between prostitution and other alternatives generally available for women from the poorer sectors of society, only become a necessity because of the structures and norms in society putting the main responsibility for the family and the household on the women. Thus, the 'advantages' help forcing the women into prostitution, as it is an activity they can combine with their other duties, something which is not possible with many other income alternatives that almost always require long working hours, an impossibility for women with small children and nobody else to

⁵⁴ Pateman 1988, page 198

take care of them. Although it can be somebody's choice to go into prostitution, I do not regard the choice in this context as a free one. The 'choice' is made because there is virtually nothing else to choose. The freedom to choose is narrowed by the societal structures.

A common argument by the liberal feminists is that prostitution is no worse than other jobs available to women in a certain situation. Although this might be true, it is not an argument that can be used for legitimising the institution of prostitution. Just because there are other ways of getting an income that are just as bad as prostitution, does that mean prostitution should be accepted?

Prostitution in the context of poverty leads to powerlessness. When prostitution increases due to increasing poverty, as in the case of Argentina, the 'competition' for clients hardens. This leads to weaker possibilities for the individual prostituted women to impose limitations on their clients, which places them in an even more subordinated and oppressed situation.

To conclude, I see prostitution for individuals as in some cases a not impossible alternative in a context of poverty. However, prostitution as an institution is extremely oppressive, both due to patriarchal structures, where men's supremacy over women is consolidated through prostitution, and also due to economic structures which place women in particular in a very vulnerable situation.

3. METHOD

In this chapter the methods used when conducting the study are described. I also go through its limitations.

3.1 QUALITATIVE METHOD

The studies and analyses in this essay are mainly based on a qualitative method, concentrating on a deeper understanding of the case, through interviews and literature, rather than focusing on statistics and more quantitative information. When necessary for complementary information and when available, quantitative statistics are used. Furthermore, this is a qualitative case study, where prostitution in Argentina is seen as a case of feminisation of poverty. The aim, as mentioned earlier, is to illustrate how prostitution can be understood as a survival strategy in a context of feminisation of poverty. There is no clear dividing line between qualitative and quantitative methods, but my choice of using a more qualitative type of method for carrying out my study has implications on the results and conclusions possible to arrive at. Having an in-debt focus, rather than making use of vast amounts of data, makes generalisations of the results more difficult. I therefore suggest that the results of the study be seen as an example showing how prostitution in a certain context can be understood.⁵⁵

3.2 THE FIELD STUDY

The field study was made in Buenos Aires, Argentina, during two and a half months, between December 16th 2003 and March 1st 2004. During my stay, I conducted interviews with people connected to prostitution as well as women in prostitution. I also used my time in Argentina to look for more information and documentation on the issue and participating in meetings and seminars of interest. Furthermore I conducted participatory observation at a workshop for prostituted women.

3.2.1 INTERVIEWS

I interviewed in total twelve persons, who are listed in alphabetical order in the list of references. Five of the interviews were with women currently in prostitution and seven with other people in some way related to prostitution, such as representatives of prostituted women's organisations, members of feminist organisations working with the prostitution theme and

⁵⁵ For a further discussion on qualitative and quantitative methods, see chapter four in Assarson and Svensson; 1996; *Att fråga och svara. En introduktion till statsvetenskaplig metod*

members of orders of Catholic nuns working with women in prostitution. The women in prostitution were contacted through *AMMAR Nacional* and *Asociación AMMAR Capital*, two organisations in Buenos Aires for women in prostitution.⁵⁶ I also tried to contact prostituted women in other ways, such as calling on ads in the newspaper *Clarín*, but those attempts were unfruitful. I did not contact any women directly on the streets, due to security reasons, since the prostitution areas are generally seen as rather dangerous neighbourhoods, and especially for an alone, foreign-looking woman. Thus, the women in prostitution I interviewed were not chosen because they were statistically representative, but rather because they were willing to share their experiences with me. This of course affects the information given to me; however I do feel that these women can be considered as roughly representative for the poor women in prostitution in Buenos Aires. They were key informants, just as the people connected to prostitution that I interviewed. The latter were people involved in different organisations, some of which I looked up and contacted myself and some that I was referred to.

When interviewing people connected to prostitution, I had fairly pre-determined questions, whereas the interviews with women in prostitution were more semi-structured, leaving more space for the interviewees to elaborate on the answers. Some key questions were almost always used, however, like the ones presented in section 1.2 about the purpose of the study.

In this essay, when referring to the women in prostitution I interviewed, I have in some cases changed the name of the interviewee and omitted some revealing details. This is done at the request of the interviewee to keep her anonymity. Whether I am using a changed name or not is indicated in section 6.1.1 when presenting the women I interviewed as well as in the list of references.

3.2.2 PARTICIPATORY OBSERVATIONS

I participated at least once or twice a week in a sewing workshop for women in prostitution at *Asociación AMMAR Capital*, taking part in their ordinary activities, listening to discussions and taking notes. Apart from my five interviews with women currently in prostitution, I was through the contacts with the women in this workshop able to widen my understanding of the issue, and some of my conclusions are based on information from these contacts. It was also arranged for me to accompany one of the prostituted women I was in contact with to the street when she

⁵⁶ AMMAR stands for Asociación de Mujeres Meretrices de la Argentina, which means Association for Women Prostitutes of Argentina. For a further description of the organisations, see section 5.5.

exercised prostitution to get an insight in the daily life of prostituted women, but this unfortunately never happened due to circumstances I could not control.

3.3 WRITTEN MATERIAL

For the theoretical part of the essay I have mainly used books as references. For the definitions and the part on feminisation of poverty, I consulted literature from the United Nations Development Programme, research articles published in different magazines and books on the different issues. When it comes to prostitution, I have used books and research articles regarding gender issues and more specifically prostitution. Most of these are written by women. Since there is a vast body of literature on prostitution, I have not been able to cover it all. I have therefore chosen to focus on the literature concerning Latin America and connecting prostitution and poverty. For other parts, as for example information about the current situation in Argentina, I have also used articles and different internet sources. The reason is that there are very few books on this, since the situation is so recent. Some of the information in the essay also comes from unpublished sources that I got from different organisations in Argentina.

Some of the written material I collected at libraries in Uppsala and Stockholm, whereas some was acquired during the field study in Argentina. I have some materials in Swedish, but most is in either English or Spanish, the majority being in Spanish.

3.4 LIMITATIONS

The essay does not give an overall picture of how the situation for Argentinian women in general has changed since the crisis. Since it is about prostitution, and women forced to enter prostitution due to poverty, it naturally focuses on women who were already before the crisis on the margins of society. I am aware that poverty never is the only reason why someone chooses to enter into prostitution, and that it does not at all explain the demand, which of course is one of the main reasons for the existence of prostitution. I only give a brief historical overview; the main focus is limited to the time around the crisis until today. The study is also geographically limited to Buenos Aires, the reason for that being that most organisations working with these issues and most documentation centres are located in Buenos Aires. Many women from other parts of the country as well as from abroad also exercise prostitution in Buenos Aires. As mentioned earlier I have not interviewed any prostituted woman under 18 years of age, nor any woman currently prostituted at a brothel. It has not been a conscious choice of mine to exclude these groups; it is merely due to the difficulty of access. Almost all women in prostitution under 18 years of age are under the control of a pimp, and since both pimping and brothels are illegal, it is virtually

impossible in such a short time and without the necessary connections to come into contact with anyone in these situations for the purpose of making a study. However, these categories have not been completely excluded from the study, since some of the women I interviewed started in prostitution before the age of 18 and have previously worked in brothels. As explained, I have also chosen to exclude transvestites in prostitution from my study, although they see themselves as women. The reasons for making this exclusion were discussed more extensively in section 2.1.2, but basically it is because their situation is so different from that of other women in prostitution.

4. THE SITUATION IN ARGENTINA

In this chapter some issues important as background knowledge for the understanding of the essay are presented within the national context of Argentina. The situation for women in Argentina is described in general terms, and also the economic crisis causing the current situation as well as its implications for women.

4.1 DISCRIMINATION OF WOMEN IN ARGENTINA

Argentina is a strongly patriarchal society and women are structurally discriminated at all levels. The problem does not mainly lie in legal obstacles, as they hardly exist; women are formally allowed equal rights and participation at almost all levels in society. It can rather be related to cultural conceptions of the place and value of men and women in society and a system based on the man as the norm.

An important part of the discrimination of women is in relation to work. There are two basic characteristics of this work discrimination; salary discrimination and occupational segregation. Although women generally have higher levels of education, they earn between 25% and 50% less than men under otherwise equal conditions,⁵⁷ with the disproportion increasing with the level of education and with age.⁵⁸ The fact that 28.8% of the households in Argentina are headed by females worsens this salary discrimination even more, since not only the women themselves suffer from it, but also close to a third of the Argentinian families become directly affected.⁵⁹ Apart from being among the lowest paid on the labour market, women also perform the majority of the unpaid work within the homes. Women work on average 7 hours outside the homes and then within their home 4 hours per day. This means that they on average have a workday of around 11 hours, of which only 7 are remunerated and moreover, those hours are among the worst paid in the labour system.⁶⁰ Women in Argentina made up 41% of the workforce in 2002, but their presence on the labour market is far from evenly distributed over the different professions. They are found in the traditionally female jobs, mainly the service sector where especially the category 'domestic services' stands out with 92% of the employees being women. These jobs are among the lowest paid in Argentina.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Lypszyc, Cecilia; "Discriminación de género en la Argentina contemporánea. Breve diagnóstico"; in UNICEF, United Nations Children's Fund; 2003; *Discriminación de género y educación en la Argentina contemporánea*, pages 103-104

⁵⁸ RIMA 2002

⁵⁹ Lipzyc in UNICEF 2003, pages 105-106

⁶⁰ Ibid., pages 107-108

⁶¹ Ibid., pages 100-102

The situation regarding sexual and reproductive health is also a clear indicator of the situation for Argentinian women. Maternal mortality rates are high in relation to other health indicators in the country as well as in relation to other countries in the region; it is 39 per 100,000 children born alive. Although sexual education is formally a part of the national curriculum, very few schools provide any, and as a direct consequence, only just over half of all sexually active women between 15 and 49 years of age use any form of contraception, and the rates lower with the socioeconomic level. Neither the emergency contraception pill nor the intrauterine device are usually provided in public health services as they are considered abortive. Voluntary sterilisation is prohibited as well as abortion in most cases. Abortion is in the penal code considered a 'crime against the life of people' except in cases of danger of the mother's life and health, rape and incest. However, not even legally allowed abortions are always performed in time and in many cases legal authorisation is asked for by the doctors even though such a procedure is not necessary. Although it is illegal, estimations say that around 40% of the pregnancies end up in abortion and complications from clandestine abortions is the first cause of hospitalisation in gynaecological services. Adolescent pregnancies are common; 15.5% of the children born alive have mothers less than 20 years of age.⁶² This lack of adequate sexual and reproductive health laws and services strikes hardest on women. They are the ones having to take the direct consequences when being hospitalised for abortion or dying giving birth. Due to cultural patterns that consider the women as the only ones responsible for childbearing they also have the weight of the responsibility and the condemnations from society, as especially young women who have children without being married or in a stable relationship often are considered 'loose'. Any equivalence for young men having children maybe even with many different partners does not exist.

Argentinian men and women are in most cases formally equal before the law and Argentina has ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, but even in the legal sphere some exceptions exist, especially when it comes to the laws concerning marriage. For example, if the origin of goods is not determined or the evidence is doubtful, the administration and disposal of these goods during marriage accrue to the husband. The legal age of marriage also differs between the sexes, being 16 for women and 18 for men, corresponding to patriarchal ideas about marriage and the role of women within it, as it allows men to have a greater amount of years of preparation, education and experience to fulfil the role

⁶² RIMA 2002

of 'supplier'. Rape within marriage is not mentioned in the law.⁶³ In some cases the law does establish affirmative action to promote the advancement of women. For example, it is mandatory for political parties to have at least 30% women on their lists for elected posts. In practice, however, the 30% quota has become a maximum instead of a minimum. All heavy posts are still held by men; the directive board in the chamber of deputies is composed of ten members and the one for the senate by nine, all of which are men.⁶⁴ Argentina has never had a female president or a female governor in any province, except in San Luis when a woman assumed the position due to the resignation of the male governor who took the presidency of the nation in December 2001.⁶⁵

4.2 THE ECONOMIC CRISIS IN ARGENTINA

To find the roots of the economic crisis in Argentina, the politics of the 1980's and 1990's must be analysed. The country returned to a democratic system in 1983, after seven years of military dictatorship. The military junta left a country heavily indebted and with the economy in ruins. The president that took over power, Raúl Alfonsín, who pursued a politics of privatisations and market liberalisations, did not manage to get the economy back in order and at the end of his presidential period Argentina found itself in economic crisis, with no possibility to pay the foreign debt and with huge inflation. Carlos Menem came to power in 1991, and he continued the economic politics with even greater intensity. Most state companies were sold, public services and social security were privatised and the Argentinian peso was tied to the American dollar. A false image of stability was created and it seemed like the economy was going better. But at the end of Menem's period in power, a large portion of the Argentinians was impoverished and discontent with the economic policy and the country saw its greatest concentration of economic power in its history. This led to a loss for Menem in the 1999 election, but the same economic policy as before was continued after the election and new loans were taken to pay off old ones.⁶⁶

The crisis deepened in 2000 and 2001, as the economic recession increased the capital flight. The possibility that the dollar exchange rate would soon change led to a systematic flow towards more stable financial positions, such as the American dollar. The impossibility for the financial sector to return deposits in the original currency in face of an eventual change of exchange type,

⁶³ RIMA 2002

⁶⁴ Lipzyc in UNICEF 2003, pages 122-123

⁶⁵ RIMA 2002

⁶⁶ Berezán, Eduardo; 2001a; "Argentina på gränsen till nervsammanbrott: Om finansiell kris och vardagsvänder" *Världspolitikens dagsfrågor* 4, 2001 and Lubertino, Maria José; 2002a; *Economic crisis in Argentina: A weaker federation and hopes for 'global federalism'*

led to a massive withdrawal of deposits in the local financial sector, and the last way out to impede a total breakdown became the ‘corralito’,⁶⁷ when the government decided to freeze people’s bank accounts. From one day to the next, on the 4th of December 2001, people found their bank accounts inaccessible, except for a withdrawal limit of 250 pesos or dollars per week. A political crisis followed and between December 20th 2001 when Fernando De la Rúa resigned and January 1st 2002 when Eduardo Duhalde entered office, Argentina had no less than five different presidents. In January of 2002, the convertibility law was abandoned and the peso devaluated. A dollar today costs three pesos instead of one. As of December 2002 the Central Bank had lost more than 20 billion dollars of its reserves and the financial sector a sum close to 35 billion dollars in deposits.⁶⁸

All this had of course a strong impact on the population. Popular protests against the situation in the country grew, and when the bank accounts were frozen the protests culminated into large demonstrations all over the country on the 19th and 20th of December 2001 as people went out on the streets, banging on pots and pans to make their voices heard.⁶⁹ The popular rebellion had on the 20th two results; 32 people killed by the police repression and the renunciation of president De la Rúa, who had to flee the government building, surrounded by the protesting masses, in a helicopter.⁷⁰ Poverty in Argentina had by October 2002 risen to 57.5%,⁷¹ with the numbers for Great Buenos Aires being a bit lower; 54.3%, a number that can be compared to the poverty rate in that area only two years earlier, which then was 28.9%⁷². The unemployment rate rose to 24% and the real wages decreased by over 40%.⁷³ Between December 2001 and March 2003, the prices of staple food – which can be seen as most representative for the poor households’ consumption – rose much faster than those of provisions in general, the latter increased with about 64%, while the staple food prices increased by more than 78%.⁷⁴

Another change that the crisis, including the economic recession prior to the crash, brought was a change in values among the population, often mentioned in literature and by my interviewees. This is hard, if not impossible, to measure statistically and is therefore a side effect of the economic crisis that is more difficult to affirm with certainty. Argentina is often described

⁶⁷ ‘Corralito’ means play-pen.

⁶⁸ Del Carmen Feijóo, María; 2003; *Nuevo país, nueva pobreza*; Second amplified edition, chapters 11 and 12

⁶⁹ Geijer, Herman; 2003; *Taking Democracy Back: A field study of Asambleas Populares and the effects of the rebellion of the 19th and 20th of December 2001 in Buenos Aires, Argentina*, pages 23-24

⁷⁰ Del Carmen Feijóo 2003, pages 117-118

⁷¹ Ibid., pages 101-102

⁷² Ibid., page 152

⁷³ Lindroth, Johan; 2003a; *Utrikesanalys nr 17 2003: Peronist väntas bli Argentinas nye president*

⁷⁴ Del Carmen Feijóo 2003, page 123

as having been a democratic, pluralistic, inclusive society where education had an important position, all values that have now diminished.

It's brutal, because all the values were destroyed; I'm not saying the traditional ones – mom, dad and the children – no, no, all the values that made up life in society. Everything was destroyed.⁷⁵

Work was important in the Argentinian society, workers generally took pride in what they did and the possibility of social mobility thanks to working hard was not utopic. Now, the poor are not only the ones who are unemployed, but there is poverty even among the workers, their salary is not enough to support their households. This is a different kind of poverty, since it is much more invisible. It is hidden within the households and is only detectable through the multiple individual strategies directed at overcoming it. Poverty today in Argentina is also much more flexible, it is not a static condition, but more of a rotation around the poverty line, one week above it, and the next week below it.⁷⁶

Argentina has lately been slowly recovering, although the situation in the country is still grave. The GDP is increasing again, as well as the industrial activity in the country.⁷⁷ The unemployment rate was in the first quarter of 2004 down to just over 14%. However, another 15% are under-occupied, and not even 40% of the population is formally employed. The poverty rate, however, has hardly decreased at all and in May 2003, over half of the population, 54.7%, was still under the poverty line.⁷⁸

4.3 THE IMPACT OF ARGENTINA'S ECONOMIC CRISIS ON WOMEN

The economic crisis in Argentina has affected the Argentinian women disproportionately hard and it is possible to use the concept of feminisation of poverty for describing the situation in the country. Of the female population, 56% are below the poverty line,⁷⁹ and the female-headed households have increased by more than seven percentage units during ten years to now represent 28.8% of the total numbers of households in the country.⁸⁰ The structural adjustment programs with the state retiring more and more from its social responsibilities, and the rising poverty, has increased the responsibilities for women, since it has given them a heavier workload

⁷⁵ Del Carmen Feijoó 2003

⁷⁶ Ibid., chapters 1, 4 and introduction

⁷⁷ Ibid., pages 146-147

⁷⁸ INDEC, Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos; 2004; "Tasas de empleo y desempleo por regiones: Primer Trimestre 2004"; "Porcentaje de hogares y personas bajo las líneas de pobreza e indigencia en los aglomerados urbanos EPH y regiones estadísticas, desde mayo 2001 en adelante"; *Encuesta Permanente de Hogares*

⁷⁹ ISPM, Instituto Social y Político de la Mujer, etc; 2003; *Análisis del mercado laboral en Argentina desde una perspectiva de género*, page 13

⁸⁰ Lipzyc in UNICEF 2003, pages 105-106

in the domestic sphere at the same time as they have been forced to increase their working hours outside the home to economically maintain their families.⁸¹ Studies have shown that after the crisis, women have abandoned working on their own in favour of salaried employment, whereas the tendency among men is in general going in the other direction.⁸² However, more than half of the female employments are found within the informal sector, and, as already mentioned, women moreover tend to have the lowest paid jobs within this sector.⁸³

In the wake of the economic crisis, as mentioned in the introduction, prostitution has increased sharply. In section 6.3, its impact on poor women in prostitution will be discussed. However, it is not only the prostitution among poor women that has increased, but also the sexual tourism, which mainly affects a group of women not included in my study. As a consequence of the economic crisis and the devaluation of the peso, Argentina has become a very cheap country for foreigners. The Buenos Aires local government estimates that the increase in international tourist arrivals to the city 2003-2004 will be between 35% and 50%. According to statistics from the World Tourism Organisation, 20% of all tourists look for sex. Since foreign businessmen are willing to pay between 100 and 1500 dollars per day for an 'escort', it has become an alternative for young, well-educated women to earn sums that for the hard Argentinian labour market are incomparable.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Lipzyc in UNICEF 2003, page 95

⁸² ISPM, etc. 2003, page 20

⁸³ Ibid., page 10

⁸⁴ Delgado, Daniel; 2004; "Los turistas buscan sexo en Buenos Aires. Qué ciudad acogedora" *TXT*, pages 61-65

5. PROSTITUTION IN THE ARGENTINIAN CONTEXT:

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

In this chapter, I aim to present the Argentinian situation regarding prostitution more thoroughly. The facts presented in this chapter are based on books and articles and other information dealing with the issues presented as well as on information gathered through my interviews.

5.1 PROSTITUTION HISTORICALLY

“When many people say that the oldest profession of the world is that of the prostitute, I think the oldest profession of the world is that of the pimp.” – Interview with Sara Torres, sexual educator and feminist activist on December 21, 2003

Traditionally, Catholic countries have tended to view prostitution as a necessary evil in accordance with the theories of Saint Thomas Aquinas⁸⁵, whereas Protestant or Islamic countries have generally had stronger tendencies towards prohibiting prostitution. In Argentina, a Catholic country, prostitution was legalised and regulated by the state between 1875 and 1936, by a law that was among the first kinds of labour legislation in Argentina.⁸⁶ Prostitution was very common at the time, and Argentina and especially Buenos Aires had the reputation of being the centre of trafficking of white women and legalised prostitution. In 1869, according to a census, almost 5% of the adult female population of Buenos Aires was prostituted. These high numbers lead to the legalisation in 1875 of regulated brothels where women in prostitution lived, were registered and had to undergo supervised medical examinations.⁸⁷ Argentina was an immigrant country and many of the immigrants coming were men, creating a male surplus whose demands for women led to the high numbers of women in prostitution and the organised trade and trafficking of white European women, from Great Britain, France, Poland, Russia and other countries.⁸⁸ Nowadays, foreign women in prostitution in Argentina mostly come from the poorer neighbouring countries Paraguay, Bolivia and Peru and also in quite significant numbers from the Dominican Republic. It has also become increasingly common for Argentinian women to end up in prostitution in Europe, mainly in Spain.

⁸⁵ Saint Thomas Aquinas was a philosopher and a theologian who lived in the 1200's and whose theological writings became regulative of the Catholic Church. His theories can be interpreted to defend prostitution, since he claimed that men have irresistible sexual urges that cannot always be satisfied within the matrimony and therefore prostitution is necessary in order for men to satisfy their needs without committing adultery and breaking the holy institution of matrimony.

⁸⁶ Juliano, Dolores; 2002; *La prostitución: el espejo oscuro*, pages 129-130

⁸⁷ Guy, Donna; 1994; *El sexo peligroso. La prostitución legal en Buenos Aires 1875-1955*, chapter 2

⁸⁸ Interview with Sara Torres, December 21, 2003

5.2 LEGAL FRAMEWORK

“You cannot legalise what is not illegal” – Interview with Elena Reynaga, AMMAR Nacional on December 23, 2003

Argentina maintains an abolitionist tradition with regard to prostitution since 1937, when the prophylaxis law came into effect, prohibiting brothels but not street prostitution. In 1949, the UN Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others was ratified. In accordance with this, the ones exercising prostitution cannot be punished since they are considered to be the victims of this institution. In the penal code it is not illegal for an individual to exercise prostitution, but it is illegal to profit from the prostitution of another person, which implies that pimps and brothels are illegal. It is also illegal to force anyone into prostitution. The penal code was reformed in 1999, and prostitution, among other crimes, is regulated under the title ‘crimes against sexual integrity’, which before the reform was called ‘crimes against decency’. The law states for example different degrees of punishment depending on the age of the victim – the younger the victim, the worse the crime is considered to be and thus the harder the punishment. If the person in prostitution is older than 18 years old, the pimp or the trafficker can only be punished if it can be proven that deception, violence, threats, intimidation, etc. have been used to force the person into prostitution.⁸⁹ However, these laws are often not applied due to local, provincial or municipal laws, such as the codes of offences or misdemeanours.

In Buenos Aires, arbitrary arrests of women in prostitution were very common until the first half of the 1990’s, since the provincial laws allowed the police to detain persons on very vague grounds, such as ‘a suspicious attitude’ or ‘deviant behaviour’.⁹⁰ When the constitution of Buenos Aires was to be written in the mid 1990’s,⁹¹ feminist organisations and women in prostitution among others mobilised to put an end to the police force’s right to arbitrary detentions. This goal was reached in 1996, but only two years later, due to lobbying from other groups in the city, mainly neighbourhood organisations who did not want prostitution around their homes, the law was modified with the article 71 which again made the offer and the demand for sex on the streets an offence, only that this time the women are not arrested; when taken by the police, the

⁸⁹ Fontenla, Marta; 2001a; “La prostitución y el tráfico de mujeres en la reforma al código penal” *Brujas*, pages 104-105

⁹⁰ Lipszyc, Cecilia; 1999; “¿Qué pasa con el ejercicio de la prostitución en la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires?” *Feminaria*, page 47, and interview with Elena Reynaga, December 23, 2003

⁹¹ In 1994 the Argentinian constitution was reformed and the city of Buenos Aires became an autonomous city. The autonomous city of Buenos Aires has since 1996, when its constitution was approved, its own government and like the other provinces of the republic its own representatives in the federal parliament. Thus, the suburbs in Greater Buenos Aires belong to the Buenos Aires Province, but the autonomous city of Buenos Aires does not.

latter file a criminal offence act on the women who then end up in the police register.⁹² In July 2004, a much-debated new law proposal was, despite strong popular protests, approved in Buenos Aires where among other things the ‘offer of sexual commerce’, or prostitution, is penalised with immediate arrest of up to 20 days if a fine cannot be paid. With the new law the police are again able to arrest people for ‘suspicious attitudes’, which lays the ground for arbitrary arrests. Argentina is a society with widespread corruption, among politicians as well as within the police force. Therefore it is common with connections between the police and brothel owners and politicians and with some bribes the brothel owners often go free from prosecution. Thus, the women in prostitution are often practically without legal protection since the police are often found on the same side as the brothel owners and the pimps. Many women in prostitution also testify to regularly being forced to pay bribes to the local police in order not to be arrested.

5.3 VIOLENCE AND OTHER RISKS

“[...] they live in situations of constant violence, not only the violence in their homes, or from their partners, but also the violence they receive from society for being the persons they are.” – Interview with Verónica Sereno, Puerta Abierta Recreando centre on February 19, 2004

The women in prostitution are always exposed to the risk of different kinds of violence and arbitrary police detentions. Many of the women in the sewing workshop I visited (further described in section 5.5) had many experiences to share of when they had been attacked by clients and the police or been jailed and some of them could even show scars from injuries they got while in detention. The arbitrary arrests ceased in Buenos Aires in 1996, however with the new law (as explained in 5.2), they will again be a reality. They are still common in other cities throughout Argentina. Even the women who have not been exposed to any violence themselves always have friends who have been robbed or raped and they are well aware of the risks:

You are always subjected to all kinds of things. Because you don’t know. Except if it is someone you’ve known for a long time. In the street it is mostly dangerous because you don’t know whose car you’re getting into or with whom you’re going. You don’t know him.⁹³

Many of the women in prostitution also experience violence in their everyday lives, most of them who have boyfriends or husbands are physically abused at home and one of my interviewees testified to how she had been sexually abused as a child.

⁹² Interviews with Magui Bellotti, February 25, 2004, Elena Reynaga, December 23, 2003, Sonia Sanchez, January 6, 2004 and Sara Torres, December 21, 2003.

⁹³ Interview with Olga, January 8, 2004

Prostitution is very tough psychologically, and the women in prostitution I came to know testified to having like a ‘cold shield’ around them to be able to survive mentally the daily risking of life and health and selling their body to unknown men:

Because what prostitution does in this person is to take away your identity, it robs you of your identity. That is, you stop being a subject with rights to become an object of use. Then you turn into a money machine I say. They give you money and you don’t have feelings, you don’t have anything.⁹⁴

They laughed often but almost never showed any feelings that could be interpreted as signs of weakness, such as crying, being sad or insecure. I also found them more aggressive than the average person, which they also commented on to me; in order to live in an environment where they can never really trust anyone they have to be constantly prepared to fight. One of my interviewees, Claudia, has a woman she pays a little bit of money to protect her from the other prostituted women. When she first began in prostitution, many of the women in the area fought with her and told her to go back to her own country. Since she has started to pay this woman, nobody has dared to touch her, and now she has also made some friends among the prostituted women in the area.

Two crimes against prostituted women have received much attention in Argentina; the murders in Mar del Plata and the murder of Sandra Cabrera in the city of Rosario. I will briefly bring them up here.

Since 1996, several women in prostitution have been murdered in the city of Mar del Plata. The exact number is uncertain since only some of the bodies have been found, whereas others have simply disappeared, and it has not been possible to prove murder in all cases, but it is somewhere between 27 and 42 women. At first, the police put forward that the guilty of the crimes was a ‘madman’ killing prostituted women. However, pressures from different feminist organisation, mainly the Mar del Plata organisation *CAMM* (Casa de la Mujer Maltratada, or House of the Abused Woman) forced through further investigations which led to the prosecution of ten police officers and one federal prosecutor for concealment and false testimony. These women were killed because they knew too much of the prostitution-related corruption among officials.⁹⁵

The 27th of January 2004, the prostituted woman Sandra Cabrera was shot and killed close to the bus terminal of Rosario where she exercised prostitution. Sandra was the secretary general of

⁹⁴ Interview with Sonia Sanchez, January 6, 2004

⁹⁵ Fontenla 2001b, page 102, Tessa, Sonia; 2004a; “Ni una más”; *Suplemento Las 12 in Página 12*, page 15 and interviews with Magui Bellotti, February 25, 2004 and Elena Reynaga, December 23, 2003

AMMAR's Rosario section⁹⁶ and had for a long time fought against the police for the rights of women in prostitution. She had reported the heads of the Public Morality Division of the provincial police for harassing the women in street prostitution in order to protect the brothels, which led to the replacement of the persons in charge. She had also reported several police officers for forcing women in prostitution to pay them bribes for not arresting them according to the provincial code of offences prohibiting 'public and scandalous offers of sex'. Her nine-year-old daughter had been threatened to life and therefore the two of them were under police protection. It was hardly efficient, however, since Sandra had received several death threats while under protection and at one occasion she had been beaten up in her own home while the guards were outside. At the time of the murder her daughter was away at a camp and Sandra was therefore temporarily not under protection. The connections between the police of Rosario and the brothel owners are well known. Commonly the brothel owners pay a monthly quota to the police, which includes protection for their illegal activities as well as keeping the competition from the street prostitution under control. It is a very lucrative business to which Sandra Cabrera posed a threat. The murder has still not been resolved, but most suspect that the police have some connection to the crime. Only days after the murder, the Public Morality Division of the provincial police, created in the 1920's to fight prostitution, was dissolved. The national secretary of human rights as well as some politicians from the provincial government stated in newspapers that they were convinced that the police was involved in the crime.⁹⁷

Another constant risk that the women in prostitution are exposed to is contracting sexually transmitted infections, especially HIV/AIDS. Although the number of AIDS patients in Argentina is relatively low; 21.251 in 2001, out of which 22.6% were women, according to the Ministry of Health, the women in prostitution constitute an especially vulnerable category. The HIV/AIDS ratio is also higher in the city of Buenos Aires than in the rest of the country.⁹⁸ Both *Asociación AMMAR Capital* and *AMMAR Nacional* work with HIV/AIDS prevention to teach the women how to protect themselves.⁹⁹ However, it has become increasingly common since the economic crisis that clients offer to pay more if they can have sex without using a condom. Even knowing the risks, there are sometimes women who simply cannot afford to say no.

⁹⁶ AMMAR is an organisation for prostituted women in Argentina, further described in section 5.5

⁹⁷ Abaca, Fernando; 2004; "Disuelven la division Moralidad de la Policia" *Clarín*, Tessa 2004a and 2004b; "Explotadores y explotadas"; *Suplemento Las 12* in *Página 12*

⁹⁸ RIMA 2002

⁹⁹ See section 5.5 for a further description of the work of AMMAR

5.4 RESPONSES FROM SOCIETY

“But it is not worked with, there is no political will, from the government there is nothing.” – Interview with Sonia Sanchez, Asociación AMMAR Capital on January 6, 2004

The Argentinian federal government has no programs specifically for prostituted women, and it does not even have statistics on prostitution. Some provincial governments give financial aid to organisations working with prostitution issues; the government of Buenos Aires has for example given money to some of *AMMAR’s*¹⁰⁰ projects. When asking about the official discussion on prostitution I always got the answer that such a discussion does not exist:

The politicians don’t touch that theme. There are themes that in Argentina, this hypocritical thing of a country, are not touched. Here abortion is not talked about, here prostitution is not talked about, it doesn’t matter to anyone. [...] To whom does it matter in this country that poor women die? To nobody. Well, the same thing happens with the theme of prostitution. To whom does it matter that the only path they have is that of prostitution?¹⁰¹

Some feminist organisations work on issues regarding prostitution, however, they all work on the theoretical level; none of them have any field work. Social work in the field, among prostituted women is in Buenos Aires performed mainly by two orders of Catholic nuns; by the centre for *las Hermanas Adoratrices* and by *las Oblatas* who run the *Puerta Abierta Recreando* centre. *Las Hermanas Adoratrices* work exclusively with women in prostitution whereas *Puerta Abierta Recreando* work with women alone or with children who are in a situation of prostitution, mendicancy or other forms of exclusion.

At the *Hermanas Adoratrices* centre, 150 women come once a week to pick up a bag of staple food. Around 70 women also participate in free workshops organised at the centre, where they can learn basic computer skills, reading and writing and some skills that hopefully can help them to an additional income on the side of prostitution such as sewing or handcrafting. Apart from the nuns and the teachers, the centre also has a psychologist and a social worker to help the women and their children. Even if the centre most of the time is unable to provide the women with a change in their life circumstances; they provide them with a change from the inside, where they are strengthened and learn that they are persons with dignity and rights.¹⁰²

The *Puerta Abierta Recreando* centre works with a more individualistic approach. Like the former they have some workshops for the women to participate in, but apart from that they work

¹⁰⁰ An organisation for prostituted women, described in section 5.5

¹⁰¹ Interview with Cecilia Lipszyc, February 6, 2004

¹⁰² Interview with Paula Barrionuevo, February 27, 2004

to find individual strategies based on the needs of each woman. They also educate the women about their rights and how to use the resources provided by the state, such as health centres. Some women only come once to the centre whereas some keep coming for years. Last year they were in contact with just over 350 women.¹⁰³

5.5 AMMAR¹⁰⁴

“We, what we say is this: That we don’t have to stay quiet any longer, what we preach is that we are persons, that we are citizens and that we have rights. [...] That we are persons and we deserve another chance.” – Interview with Elena Reynaga, AMMAR Nacional on December 23, 2003

AMMAR stands for *Asociación de Mujeres Meretrices de la Argentina*, which means Association for Women Prostitutes of Argentina. The organisation was formed in Buenos Aires when organising women in prostitution to fight for an eradication of the arbitrary detentions when the new constitution of Buenos Aires was to be written. It officially became *AMMAR* in 1995 and is affiliated with the largest workers’ union in Argentina, *CTA – Central de Trabajadores Argentinos*. The members of *AMMAR* call themselves ‘sex workers’ and the organisation is a union for sex workers. Since the start in 1995 in Buenos Aires, *AMMAR* has grown and is now represented in several Argentinian provinces with its national office in Buenos Aires. Earlier, *AMMAR* only had one office in Buenos Aires, but as the organisation grew larger a local Buenos Aires office was needed apart from the national office. This was created in 2002. During this time the women making up *AMMAR Capital*, as the local section was called, began to question the relation with the *CTA* and the sex work discourse, which finally lead to a rupture between *AMMAR Capital* and *AMMAR Nacional*, the national organisation. The women making up the direction of *AMMAR Capital* then formed *Asociación AMMAR Capital*, an organisation that dissociates itself from the unionising of women in prostitution and that chooses to denominate themselves ‘women in a prostitution situation’. *AMMAR Nacional* has 1750 members all over the country whereas *Asociación AMMAR Capital* has around 400 in Buenos Aires.

Both organisations work with similar issues. They work toward politicians and other organisations for them to help improving the reality the women in prostitution live in and they also do extensive work in HIV/AIDS-prevention; teaching the women how to protect themselves and handing out free preservatives. Both organisations organise various workshops

¹⁰³ Interview with Verónica Sereno, February 19, 2004

¹⁰⁴ The information in this section is based on my interviews with Elena Reynaga, December 23, 2003, and Sonia Sanchez, January 6, 2004 and the article by Santoro, Sonia; 2003; “Prostitución, no trabajo”; *Suplemento Las 12* in *Página 12*

for strengthening the women, teaching them about their rights and giving them different skills. *AMMAR Nacional* also has schools with primary education in some cities. When interviewing Elena Reynaga and Sonia Sanchez, the secretary generals of *AMMAR Nacional* and *Asociación AMMAR Capital* respectively, it seemed to me they had many things in common, apart from the issue of what to call prostitution and the women in it. Both want their organisations to help women find alternatives so that they can get away from the streets. They also find prostitution difficult and traumatising. Elena Reynaga of *AMMAR Nacional* said that their utopia was that no woman would have to go and stand in a street corner for surviving, that if somebody does it, it should not be for necessity, but because they really want to. I then asked her whether there really are women in prostitution because they want to and she answered no:

Maybe when you don't have the consciousness of many things you think you're working because you want to, but when you get organised and start to work on your self esteem, and you start to raise your self esteem you realise the harm you did to yourself in the street corner.

I found this position a bit contradictory, as well as the whole idea of organising prostituted women in a union, fighting for it to be recognised as any other job, when at the same time admitting that it is a traumatising activity which nobody really wants to be in and working to help people get out of it. However, I do see the idea itself of organising prostituted women, as well as any other marginalised or oppressed group in society, as very good. For women in prostitution it is necessary to organise to strengthen themselves as dignified human beings and fight together for their human rights to be respected and for putting an end to the exploitation that prostitution means. But to unionise and fight for their rights as workers seems to me as contra productive as it means in the case of *AMMAR Nacional* fighting for prostitution to be valued as a profession like any other and in that way even firmer establish it as a part of society and at the same time fighting for it to be eradicated. What can be seen as positive in the 'sex work'-ideology of *AMMAR Nacional* is that it avoids victimisation of the women, it emphasises them as acting subjects more than the terminology of 'women in a prostitution situation' does. This can itself work as strengthening, not always having to see oneself as a victim. However, the term 'sex worker' labels the woman with a more or less permanent identity, whereas 'woman in a prostitution situation' never labels the woman as a prostitute but rather as no more than a woman who for the moment finds herself in a situation of prostitution, which also signals that change is possible.

Asociación AMMAR Capital has a sewing workshop in which 24 prostituted women participate and that I visited at least once or twice a week during my field study. The women come there every morning, Monday through Thursday, and learn how to sew. For participating in the

workshop they receive 200 pesos¹⁰⁵ per month. The workshop, which is a six month long project, is funded by the government of Buenos Aires. The idea of the workshop is that the women can learn sewing and through that skill find an alternative income to prostitution by sewing clothes to sell. However, I am doubtful to whether it really reaches its aims. The teacher only comes once or sometimes twice a week and there are only two sewing machines and one overlock machine for 24 persons. Very often the women come and just wait for the time to pass, since they could not afford to buy fabrics to sew something from¹⁰⁶ or they could not get access to one of the sewing machine. Despite this I found the workshop very valuable since it gives the women a refuge where they are all in the same situation and do not need to feel ashamed before each other. In addition, it gives them a possibility to get away from the streets for a little while. Many of the women commented to me that they found it relieving to come there, since there they could just socialise and did not have to think about soon having to go and stand on a street corner again.

¹⁰⁵ 200 Argentinian pesos are approximately 60 euro (June 2004)

¹⁰⁶ The government of Buenos Aires is supposed to reimburse the women for the money they spend on fabrics, but during the time of my field study they had still not done that.

6. THE PROSTITUTED WOMEN:

AN ANALYSIS BASED ON THE STUDY

In this chapter I aim to describe and analyse the situation of the women in prostitution, using the discussion in the theoretical framework as a point of departure and focusing on their economic reality and prostitution as a survival strategy.

6.1 WHO ARE THE PROSTITUTED WOMEN?

“First of all are we women. We are mothers, grandmothers, lovers, and after all that, as last, are we women in prostitution.”— Interview with Sonia Sanchez, Asociación AMMAR Capital on January 6, 2004

The prostituted women in focus in this essay are poor women. They are not necessarily below the poverty line, at least not constantly, but they all have in common having just enough to cover their needs and not much more. The poverty line is difficult to apply in the case of women in prostitution since their income is so insecure. Sometimes they can stand hours or even days on their street corner without making a single peso, whereas on occasions they can make up to 100 pesos¹⁰⁷ in a day. Most of them come from poor backgrounds and have very little education and therefore small possibilities of finding a job. Many of them also come from the poorer neighbouring countries, such as Paraguay, Bolivia and Peru, countries in which many, especially from the poorer sectors of society, are of Indian descent or mestizas, which adds racial discrimination to the obstacles hindering them from entering the labour market. Among the poor women in prostitution in Argentina, women of all ages are represented. Very many are young girls, often working in brothels or for a pimp if they are in the street. On the other end of the scale there are women up to 70 years old, even if it is not so common, in prostitution in the streets.

6.1.1 THE WOMEN IN MY MATERIAL

In total I interviewed five women currently in prostitution, and in addition to that two formerly prostituted women, whom I interviewed primarily as representatives for *AMMAR Nacional* and *Asociación AMMAR Capital*.¹⁰⁸ In this section I will shortly present the five women currently in prostitution. They all exercise prostitution in the neighbourhoods of *Flores* and *Constitución*. These two together with the neighbourhood *Once* are the ones most known in Buenos Aires for being poor neighbourhoods with a lot of prostitution. All women except

¹⁰⁷ 100 Argentinian pesos are approximately 30 euro (June 2004)

¹⁰⁸ These two women are Elena Reynaga and Sonia Sanchez, respectively.

Delia/Anita participate in *Asociación AMMAR Capital's* sewing workshop described in section 5.5. In all cases except Olga and Delia/Anita I use invented names, on the request of the interviewee to protect their anonymity.

Olga, 41 years old. Olga came to Buenos Aires from the Misiones province in the northeast of Argentina in 1984 to work. She worked mainly as a maid in private homes, until 1986, when she went into prostitution for the first time. She had become unemployed and was unable to find another job. Her situation was urgent, due to the fact that she had an asthmatic son for whom she needed to buy medicines. She stayed in prostitution for a year and a half, until she met a man and formed a relation. Living with him, she had the possibility to look for jobs, and during many years she left the world of prostitution behind. In the year 2000, her partner died, and she became unemployed. Because she was unable to pay the rent, she returned to Misiones where she has a house, to open a hairdressing salon, since she is a trained hairdresser. But then the devaluation of the peso came and due to having very little money and no products to work with she decided to go to Buenos Aires again to find a live-in job as a maid in a private home. She lived three months with her brother trying to find a job, feeling very uncomfortable for having to live off somebody else, before she gave up and returned to the streets. In Olga's case there are alternatives, she says she could work in a hairdressing salon, but that pays very badly, it would not even be sufficient to pay her rent and even less her other living expenses. Since her children now have moved out and she only has herself to support, she is able to put away a little bit of money each month and her goal is to open her own hairdressing salon. She wants to stay maximum one more year in the streets.

*Fernanda, 28 years old.*¹⁰⁹ Fernanda is from a poorer South American country and came to Buenos Aires twelve years ago to look for work. At first, she worked as a cleaner in a clinic. Soon, the owner of the clinic asked her to arrange her papers, in order to be able to stay and work legally in the country. To receive a visa, she had to have an employment contract, which she did not have, and was not able to get without the legal papers. Since she had to send money for her two children who had stayed in her home country, she started working in a 'sauna'¹¹⁰. There she stayed until the sauna was forced to close down after police raids, and many of the girls there who could not find other jobs began with prostitution in the streets, including Fernanda. She maintains herself and her three children, who now live with her. It is very difficult economically

¹⁰⁹ The name has been changed and some revealing facts in this story have been disclosed, at the request of the interviewee, to keep her anonymity.

¹¹⁰ Brothels in Argentina are frequently disguised 'saunas' or 'massage parlours', as the activities that can be supposed to take place in such a place are not illegal, whereas brothel prostitution is.

and she also tries to do other things, like selling things in the streets to add to her income. When she first came to Argentina, she could have gotten another job if only she had had the legal documentation. Now, when she is legally documented in Argentina, it is almost impossible to find a job although she is educated, due to the high unemployment, her lack of working experience, and also the structural racism discriminating Peruvians, Bolivians, Paraguayans, Indians and dark-skinned people in general.

*Carla, 28 years old.*¹¹¹ Carla has a life history of poverty and exploitation. She grew up with her grandmother in the countryside in a poor Argentinian province and after having been taken away by her mother to live in Buenos Aires for a while she was sent back to her province to live with her father whom she hardly knew. There she was sexually abused and finally raped by the father's wife's brother who lived in the house. From the rape she became pregnant. An abortion was impossible both due to the late discovery of the pregnancy and the poor economic conditions of the family¹¹² and at 13 years of age she gave birth to a son. Her grandmother found out what had happened and made sure the rapist was imprisoned (for one year) and took care of her son until Carla turned 21, while she went back to Buenos Aires to live with her mother. She had some jobs in cleaning and as a helper in a sewing workshop and a few years later she had another baby. When the baby was still young and Carla was 17 years old, her mother kicked her out of their home and that was when Carla was introduced to prostitution. She hardly had money to feed her baby, so her older sister took her to the sauna where she exercised prostitution. When she found out what she had to do for the money she cried and refused, but was forced by the man who had paid for using her. Although she was very young and very afraid she says that she slowly got used to being there. After a while it got too difficult working in the sauna because of various police raids and Carla, among other girls, began prostituting herself on the streets. When her boyfriend and also father of her second and third children found out she was in prostitution he got angry and took their children and returned to his neighbouring home country. She has not had any contact with her children for over three years. She now lives with her oldest son who does not know anything of neither who his father was nor what his mother does for a living. She wants to get out of prostitution as soon as possible:

After this year I am leaving it. Even if I am dying of hunger in my house I will leave it.

¹¹¹ The name and some revealing facts in this story have been changed, at the request of the interviewee, to keep her anonymity.

¹¹² Although, as mentioned in section 4.1, abortion is legal in Argentina in the cases of danger for the woman's life and health, rape and incest, it is generally difficult to get a legal abortion and usually fairly expensive. In the case of Carla, having a legal abortion was not an issue since she did not dare to tell her father that she had been raped and by whom.

Not so much for economic reasons, although economically she is barely able to stay above the surface, as for saving her mental health.

Delia/Anita, 40 years old. Delia works under the name Anita, and she asked me to use both these names in the essay. Delia/Anita has been in prostitution since the economic crisis, when she lost her jobs and was unable to find other ones. Since 10 years ago she is separated from her husband and takes care alone of their three children. They all study, so without her working it was impossible to maintain them. She then got to know a woman who was in street prostitution and started finding out more about it until Delia/Anita finally begun herself. She says that it was difficult at first to be exposed before society and she chose to tell her children right away. Delia/Anita is very active in a left-wing political party and also in *AMMAR Nacional* and she vindicates herself as a sex worker. She says that at the time she had no alternative to prostitution, since she was on the edge of ruin, but since then other alternatives have turned up and staying in prostitution is now her own choice. Since she begun in prostitution her economic life conditions have changed for the better. Her three children are still in school and she is studying social psychology at the university. She wants to finish her studies and then start working in that profession, leaving prostitution behind.

*Claudia, 52 years old.*¹¹³ Claudia is from a poorer neighbouring country and came to Argentina almost 20 years ago. She came with her new husband (her first husband and father of her children had died) to work and send money back to her three children so they would be able to study in their home country. She had various jobs during the years, and the last one she had was as a kitchen assistant. But the other girl who worked with her brought her 18 year-old cousin who demanded less salary than Claudia and so she lost her job. Due to age-discrimination and probably also racial discrimination it was impossible for her to find another job. She knew a woman already in prostitution and so she started accompanying her observing and learning until after three months she went with her first client. She has now been in prostitution for a year and is constantly looking for a job since she wants to get out of it. Neither her husband nor her children know what she does; to her husband she says she works in a workshop. She and her husband live on the money he makes and she saves 10 pesos¹¹⁴ every day for buying a ticket to her country and the rest she sends back to her youngest child who is still studying. Her dream is to go back to her country to be with her children and take care of her grandchildren.

¹¹³ The name and some revealing facts in this story have been changed, at the request of the interviewee, to keep her anonymity.

¹¹⁴ 10 Argentinian pesos are approximately 3 euro (June 2004)

6.2 WHY PROSTITUTION?

“Are you going to die from hunger? No, you have to go out. If you rob you go to prison. Alright, so then you do this.” – Interview with Sonia Sanchez, Asociación AMMAR Capital on January 6, 2004

When finding prostituted women to interview, one of the most important criteria was that one of their main reasons for entering prostitution should be economic necessity, since the focus of this essay is on the connection between prostitution and poverty. What they also all have in common is some kind of obstacle for them to enter the labour market, whether it be age, ethnicity or lack of education, which made them feel that there were no other alternatives left for them but prostitution:

The only resort to pay all my debts is the street. I have to be in the street.¹¹⁵
But poverty is only one contributing reason for women to end up in prostitution, as the feminist activist Magui Bellotti pointed out in my interview with her:

Well, but I think that in general you could say that the situations of poverty, although they are not the cause of prostitution, they do nourish it, without doubt, as there is a lack of jobs or when there are situations of misery, when there are very bad jobs, the possibility of selling your body is always a possibility for the women.

If poverty then is only a contributing factor but not the direct cause of prostitution, the question remains why these women are in prostitution, and more specifically, why they are in prostitution when there are many other just as poor women who are not? The sociologist Cecilia Lipszyc expressed her hypothesis to me, one that can also sometimes be found in literature on prostitution; that all women in prostitution have been victims of sexual abuse. Not all victims of sexual abuse become prostituted women, but the other way around, yes. This hypothesis is very difficult to prove since large quantitative studies would be needed. I have no way to confirm whether it is true or not, since I do not have enough empirical material and since it was not something I asked the interviewees about. One of my interviewees, Carla, told me in the interview without me asking about it that she had been sexually abused and raped as a child. Many of the other women come from abusive families with much violence in their homes and I definitely hold it for very possible that sexually abused women are at least overrepresented among women in prostitution. Having a history of sexual abuse and violation of the personal integrity could mean getting used to viewing one’s body as an object of use for others and being valued as a body and not as a person. That might make the step to prostitution shorter, or at least the

¹¹⁵ Interview with Carla, January 20, 2004

thought of it less alien. Although actually entering into prostitution is probably just as difficult for everybody. Carla told me about the first time a man paid to have sex with her:

And well, he took off my panties and then what had to occur occurred, but for me it was horrible. For me it was horrible. Like that no... It was the worst thing that... I felt really bad, very dirty, very... I felt like a very dirty woman.

All the other women I interviewed confirmed that the beginning was very difficult until they got used to it and learned to ‘turn off’.

Important to keep in mind, however, when analysing why these women have entered prostitution is that no matter what the reason for these women to be in prostitution, the fact remains that they would not be there if it were not for the existence of a male demand for buying sexual access to women’s bodies. No matter how much poverty there is in society, nobody would enter prostitution if there were no men seeing it as their right to satisfy themselves sexually at the cost of some women. Therefore I see demand as the most direct cause of prostitution, whereas poverty is only a factor assuring the supply to meet the demand.

In many ways the women in my study are victims of an oppressive system and a very unfair lot in life. However, I feel that it is important not to victimise them too much since that turns them into objects. Just as anybody else, they are acting subjects within their own lives, only with much more scarce possibilities to change their situation. Prostitution is not an activity anyone of them would like to be in if they had all the choices of the world, but seen from where they stand in life, prostitution might become a rational choice made from economic desperation. Another factor contributing to the fact that they, and not some other poor women, got into prostitution is, I think, mere coincidence. In addition to the economic necessity factor and that of having a background of abuse, discussed above, it seems many ‘just happened to’ end up in prostitution, very often through knowing another woman already exercising prostitution, and through her learning about it. However, irrespective of how coincidental their entrance in prostitution may have been, the coincidence happens within a structure which is very unfavourable for them. Had their life situation been another, it would most likely not have led to them entering prostitution.

6.3 THE IMPACT OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

“And besides, before you worked maybe six, seven hours and you left with good money. Today the women are standing for twelve hours. Standing and standing... and maybe they come there content and they leave with a great sadness. Because it is many hours.” – Interview with Elena Reynaga, AMMAR Nacional on December 23, 2003

As mentioned before, in Argentina there do not exist any statistics on prostitution. It is therefore impossible to give any numbers on how much prostitution has increased since the

economic crisis. What is possible, on the other hand, is to say that it has increased. My readings and my interviewees affirm the same fact; no statistics are needed to see with the naked eye that there are many more women in the streets exercising prostitution now than a couple of years ago. Another important change that the economic crisis has brought with it, which many of my interviewees pointed out, is that not only are there more women in prostitution but the age spectrum has also widened. In particular there are more and younger girls now than before, but it has also widened a bit in the other direction – middle aged women or even some up to 60 or 70 years old who have never prostituted themselves before have now been forced to go into the streets to sell their bodies.

Economically, it has also become more difficult since the economic crisis. Before, prostitution could be used as a way to improve the economic living conditions:

No, with the economic crisis this is to survive. It's not to improve anything. [...] In the year '95, '94, you said all right, you worked and you dedicated yourself and you could buy your house, I always lived very well, very well with my work.¹¹⁶

Exercising prostitution in a brothel used to give much better money than the streets, especially for young girls who are more attractive to the clients, like Carla who was 17 years old when she begun. Now, it is miserable:

Now, to gather money it costs you more than before. Before sometimes no, like I told you that in a sauna I made 300, 400 pesos per day.¹¹⁷ Per day I made that. In how many hours? From eight to eight. Today no, the saunas are... 5 pesos they give you.¹¹⁸ And half an hour, one hour you have to be with the client. Or two hours. And you have to give it to him twice. The saunas, the saunas are no longer useful, only the street.¹¹⁹

At the same time as the number of women in prostitution has increased, the number of clients has decreased. There are fewer new clients, and the regular ones come more seldom nowadays:

The clients that normally used to come twice a month or once a week now come every other month or once a month. [...] Today it is so uncertain. Today you can't wait, except if they call you on the phone and say look, I'll come by. You can't wait, you can't wait for anybody nowadays.¹²⁰

Since there are more women in prostitution, the competition for the clients has hardened, which in turn has led to a fall in the prices. In general, the women charge between 20 and 30

¹¹⁶ Interview with Elena Reynaga, December 23, 2003

¹¹⁷ 300, 400 Argentinian pesos were at the time she is referring to equivalent to 300, 400 American dollars.

¹¹⁸ 5 Argentinian pesos today are approximately 1.5 euro (June 2004)

¹¹⁹ Interview with Carla, January 20, 2004

¹²⁰ Interview with Olga, January 8, 2004

pesos¹²¹, depending a bit on what the client wants to do. However, with the economically desperate situation most of the women are in, it is common that the prices can go even lower:

There are girls who go for 10 pesos. For 10 pesos, for 15 pesos. Even for 5 pesos. [...] What suits me are the ones like 30 or 40. The ones for 10 or 15 pesos don't suit me. With how many do I have to go then to make a few pesos?¹²²

This situation leads to the clients getting used to being able to use a woman's body for only a few pesos. Before, the rule was that the woman put the price for her own body, whereas now the clients take advantage of the women's necessity and often try to bargain and lower the prices even more. If they do not get it as low as they want, they just move on to the next woman.

6.4 GETTING OUT OF PROSTITUTION

"No, I don't see... Maybe there is a way out, but I don't see it." – Interview with Cecilia Lipszyc on February 6, 2004

None of all the prostituted women I met wanted to stay in prostitution or even knew anyone else who wanted to. I asked most of my interviewees if they then saw a way out of prostitution, but the responses were usually very negative. There are a number of obstacles hindering them from changing their life situations, the most obvious one for many being not having the possibility to escape from the control of a pimp or a brothel owner. But even for those who exercise prostitution 'independently', getting out is a difficult task.

It is very common that the poor women in prostitution are single mothers, which complicates their possibilities of getting a job. Most jobs available for poor, uneducated women are jobs that mean long work days, as for example housemaids, at a factory or as a cashier in a supermarket. A working shift of twelve hours is nothing unusual. These jobs therefore become practically inaccessible if they cannot leave their children alone for that long and have nobody else who can take care of them. A prerequisite for getting a job is almost always education, at least secondary school, very often experience, and references. Lacking this, the chances of getting a job diminish drastically. There are at least two important discriminatory factors on the labour market: racist discrimination and age discrimination. There is a widespread racism in the Argentinian society against people from the poorer neighbouring countries Paraguay, Bolivia and Peru, and especially against those of Indian descent. Many of the poor women in prostitution are from these countries and came to Argentina during the time it was the richest country in South America in

¹²¹ 20 and 30 Argentinian pesos are approximately 6 and 9 Euro respectively (June 2004)

¹²² Interview with Carla, January 20, 2004. 5 Argentinian pesos are approximately 1.5 euro, 10 pesos 3 euro, 15 pesos 4.5 euro, 30 pesos 9 euro and 40 pesos 12 euro (June 2004)

order to work and send money home to their families. Now many of them have ended up without a job and without money to return to their home countries. Only in very few cases may their origins actually be an advantage on the Argentinian labour market; if they manage to find an employer from their own country, who sometimes prefers to hire countrymen. Out of the few jobs available, most are for young women, not older than 25 years. Therefore, it is a bit easier for the younger women, they still have a chance to get into the labour market which is more open to them, but as Paula Barrionuevo at the *Hermanas Adoratrices* centre pointed out in my interview with her, it is still difficult since many at the age of twenty already have two or three children to take care of and in many cases also the responsibility for their younger siblings.

As mentioned earlier, the economic crisis has contributed to making it even more difficult to get out of prostitution. There hardly exist any job opportunities any longer and with the high unemployment rates the competition for the jobs that do exist is hard. The economic reality for the women in prostitution was also different before the economic crisis. Ten years ago it was possible to save money from prostitution and that way finding a way out through for example putting up a small business. Now, prostitution is a way of surviving from one day to the next. Both Elena Reynaga and Sonia Sanchez, the secretary generals of *AMMAR Nacional* and *Asociación AMMAR Capital* respectively, left prostitution before the economic crisis. They are also both strong women who know what they want and work hard to get there.

However, there are not only concrete obstacles, such as lack of other alternatives and discrimination on the labour market. Prostitution has hard psychological effects on the women, and breaks down their self-esteem. It can be difficult to believe that one is able to do anything else, or even deserves anything else, as Sonia Sanchez described; having very little self-esteem it can be difficult to recognise oneself as a person and a subject with rights. Then it costs a lot to take the decision to start studying, for example. Prostitution is a bad alternative, but the fear of change is sometimes stronger. Even if the women feel bad from being in prostitution and on the one hand want to leave it, it is on the other hand one of the few situations they in some way have control over and know how it works. To leave that one thing for something totally unknown can be very frightening. It is not easy and takes both willpower and energy. With the restrained economic situation these women are in, almost all their energy goes to just making ends meet in their everyday lives. Where shall they find the energy to change those lives? The people I interviewed from *AMMAR* and the nun congregations, working directly with women in prostitution, say their work has become more difficult since the economic crisis:

[...] they begin to create consciousness and 'I don't want to work anymore'. But the thing is also, what do we do? In a country where there is, I don't know, 20% unemployment,

what do we do? Then for the companions [the women in prostitution, my note], maybe it costs them even more to work when they've begun to create consciousness.¹²³

It has become difficult since they can help strengthening the women psychologically, but they have no longer any alternatives to offer when the women begin to realise that they not only want to, but that they actually can, are strong enough to, get out of prostitution.

One alternative for getting out of prostitution is finding a partner. One of my interviewees, Olga, found a partner who could help supporting her and she left prostitution behind for many years, until her partner died and she had no other alternative but to go back to the streets. The sister of Carla, who has also been in prostitution for a very long time, left when she found a partner who had his own workshop. She is now selling clothes in the streets and at markets. In such situations, however, the women maintain a strong dependency of men and are very vulnerable, as the example of Olga shows, but it is in most cases probably a better alternative than staying in prostitution.

One of the prostituted women I interviewed, Delia/Anita is an exception to the general rule. She has since she began exercising prostitution started studying and is halfway through her university degree. She was already before she got into prostitution very active in a left-wing party and says that she has for a long time vindicated human rights, as a woman, a citizen, and a person, above all. Therefore, she has always viewed herself as a citizen with dignity and rights just like anyone else. She also has a very theoretical understanding of prostitution where she sees it as a socioeconomic cultural construction by the system, attaching thousands of women to this situation.

And that the first to have prostituted the woman in Argentina was the corrupt governmental system that we have had for 15 years now.¹²⁴

This view probably helps her to distance herself from the activity and prevents it from breaking her down mentally, even if she admits that since she began to exercise prostitution it has been very hard for her to relate to men outside of prostitution. She also has a concrete plan for how to leave prostitution and is working towards it through her studies. She is well aware that it will be difficult and is planning to leave prostitution slowly, since she says prostitution creates an 'attachment to the streets'. All women I interviewed dream of getting out of prostitution, but Delia/Anita is probably the one most likely to actually make it.

¹²³ Interview with Elena Reynaga, December 23, 2003

¹²⁴ Interview with Delia/Anita, February 5, 2004

6.5 CAN PROSTITUTION BE A VIABLE SURVIVAL STRATEGY?

“And well, it’s a bit complicated my life. So all right. It’s surviving. Everybody can.” – Interview with Carla on January 20, 2004

The term ‘survival strategy’ is, as mentioned in my discussion of the theoretical framework, used to refer to ways in which a household or another form of economic unit tries to obtain the basic necessities for survival. This complicates its applicability to prostitution a bit, since prostitution is a very individual activity. It is common that the women in prostitution who are married conceal what they do for their husbands and also for their children. However, as Delia/Anita points out, it is not impossible that the husbands do know in many cases, they just choose to ignore it:

[...] when the crisis came many of the women who were housewives, many have had to go out on the street. To me it seems that in those cases yes, the husband has to know, because there was no money, there was no money, the wife goes out, she comes back with money, but it seems to me that there is a great fear, that you shouldn’t talk about that.¹²⁵

In that way, prostitution can be a survival strategy for the women, but for the household, the economic unit of which they form a part it is not, or at least not openly. Thus, these women use prostitution as a way of helping the household’s survival, but the household itself does not have prostitution explicitly as a part of its survival strategy.

However, survival is not only a matter of economy. How much is it worth for one person to sacrifice to survive? As many have pointed out, prostitution is very traumatising and many of the women have their own personal survival strategies just to survive mentally within prostitution:

You have to take whoever comes to you. And well, I learned to overcome that. When I go inside I say it will end, I close my eyes and say that it will end, it will end, I know it will end... And my mind is somewhere else, I think that this money will help me, and of other things when I’m with a guy, that no, that it’s not me, that it’s another person. Because if I start to think that it’s me I go crazy.¹²⁶

With the social stigmatisation connected to prostitution, many of the women do not even tell their families what they do, and they cannot count on any understanding from society either. Therefore they are very often all alone fighting for their family’s survival, in a mentally destructive activity without the support of the ones for whom they are sacrificing themselves.

Prostitution also brings with it other psychological side effects that make it difficult to use as a survival strategy. Many have difficulties saving the money they earn from prostitution. This has

¹²⁵ Interview with Delia/Anita, February 5, 2004

¹²⁶ Interview with Carla, January 20, 2004

not only to do with insufficient education and knowledge about how to administer money and budget, but also with the fact that the money comes from prostitution. One of my interviewees, the sexual educator, Sara Torres points out that studies made on women in prostitution show that they have symptoms of post-traumatic stress. One thing that happens with them is that many cannot keep the money, they spend it right away. The money is connected to the humiliation of selling one's body. Even if many, before the crisis, made enough money to be able to save and buy a house, for example, they did not do it. The few that manage to save their money are also the same that manage to get out of prostitution.

However, the reality after the economic crisis is harsh for the sector of women in prostitution included in this study:

It is surviving. It is that, surviving. Today everybody is surviving in Argentina. The majority. It is surviving. But they pay the consequences.¹²⁷

Being able to earn enough money to improve their living conditions is a dream very distant from reality for many. For women with children it is especially difficult, as Fernanda testifies:

It costs you; you try to do one thing or another to be able to maintain the three kids. For example, I also sell in the streets, as a peddler, I sell small things to be able to have another income for the kids.

The income is also very insecure. None of the women I interviewed could give any numbers on more or less how much they earned each month. They do not know from one day to the next whether they will have money or not:

It is very insecure. But on Saturdays you can always get your 50 pesos. On weekdays 10 pesos, 20 pesos, sometimes nothing...¹²⁸

Considering the difficult economic situation most of these prostituted women are in and the lack of future prospects they live with, I see it as an impossibility viewing prostitution as a viable survival strategy. Nevertheless, it could be considered a survival strategy, even if it is not an especially good one. I find it difficult, however, to use the concept of survival strategy for the prostitution of these women. The expression of strategy itself has too many connotations to the existence of a choice; it implies that these women could take a look at the alternatives available and choose prostitution as the best way of reaching a set goal. These women all say that prostitution was their only alternative, and in this way it is not a strategy chosen by them, but

¹²⁷ Interview with Sonia Sanchez, January 6, 2004

¹²⁸ Interview with Claudia, February 26, 2004. 50 Argentinian pesos are approximately 15 euro, 20 pesos 6 euro and 10 pesos 3 euro (June 2004)

rather their only way of surviving. I therefore prefer the expression that Delia/Anita used in my interview with her:

Then I see my job as a cause, and as a survival alternative.

Prostitution in the context of feminisation of poverty in Argentina is not an explicit strategy, but rather an alternative, very often the only one available, for survival.

7. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

By examining the situation for women in prostitution in Argentina, within the context of feminisation of poverty, I have in this study illustrated how prostitution can be used as a way of surviving. This chapter sums up some of the findings of the study.

The aim of the essay was to do a descriptive case study of prostitution in Argentina, treating it as a case of feminisation of poverty, under the presumption that there is a causal relation between the increase in prostitution and the increasing poverty in the wake of the economic crisis. The main research question was how prostitution can be understood as a survival strategy in the context of feminisation of poverty.

For a number of reasons more thoroughly discussed in section 6.5 above, I find it difficult to use the concept survival strategy for the women in my study. They are not in prostitution because they have chosen it as their strategy for survival; rather they are in prostitution because they felt that it was their only alternative. Moreover, it is not an activity any of them want to stay in. I therefore prefer to see it for the individual women as a survival alternative. Thus, only when generalising on poverty and looking at the different ways in which poor people try to obtain their basic necessities for survival do I feel that it is possible to talk about prostitution as a survival strategy among others.

This essay focuses on prostitution and poverty and the relations between the two. The women in the study all stated poverty as their main reason for entering prostitution. Poverty can work as a push factor for women to enter prostitution, but it is not the cause for the existence of prostitution. Prostitution is a logical effect of the combination of the systems of patriarchy and capitalism. Within patriarchy, women are subordinated to men and in many ways seen as their property and objectified. As the capitalistic system promotes a commercialisation of almost everything, it is only a logical consequence that also women, viewed as objects by patriarchy, can be bought, sold and used by men. Thus, poverty is only a factor contributing a constant supply of women to meet the male demand. Prostitution can diminish with a decrease in poverty, but it can only cease to exist with the system claiming men's right to pay for using a woman's body sexually coming to an end.

Nothing is ever without context. Women do not enter prostitution due to an independent choice; they do so within the context of a patriarchal system where women are subordinated to men, and in the specific case of this study, they also do so within the context of feminisation of poverty. It is important to understand the context in which actions are taken in order to reach an understanding of why individuals act in a certain way. In this case the keys to understanding why these women are in prostitution lay in the gender power structures in relation to prostitution as

described in the theoretical point of departure and in the structural tendency captured through the concept of feminisation of poverty. During my field study and my work with the essay, however, I came to realise that gender power structures are only a part of the structural context in which prostitution takes place. Also very important factors for the population focused on in the study are the relations of power related to class and ethnicity. If it were not for the existence of patriarchal gender relations prostitution would not exist, as discussed in the paragraph above, but these women would not be where they are in prostitution if it were not for belonging to the socioeconomic class and ethnic group that they do. All of my interviewees were not from neighbouring countries with more Indian traits in their population, but all of them had a more or less dark complexion and black hair. The world of prostitution is strongly hierarchically divided along the lines of class and ethnicity, and I was often told by the women in the study that I with my white skin and, by Argentinian standards, blond hair could exercise prostitution in the centre of Buenos Aires and make good money. There is also a market for young, well-educated and beautiful women as call-girls for foreign executives who pay large sums of money for a night or even a whole weekend. But due to class and ethnicity and in some cases also age, there is a sharp dividing line between this world of prostitution and the one the prostituted women in my study find themselves in.

Prostitution is a very complex and wide issue and there are several aspects apart from the economic ones in focus in this essay that deserve to be examined further. One interesting issue is for example the question of demand. The crisis struck the whole Argentinian society. Why is it then that there are still enough clients willing to use their scarce income to buy women's bodies? My interviewees said most clients are married men with families, why do they not prioritise their families? Another issue is the one about terminology, how to refer to women in prostitution, and also the unionising of so-called sex workers. What does that lead to? Due to the limited scope of my study I have not been able to investigate any such issues in this essay.

Argentina's economy is recovering slowly. Unfortunately, according to Cecilia Lipszyc, most of the new jobs created are not aimed at women. It therefore remains more difficult for women than for men to get out of poverty. Within the near future, I see no possibility for a change in the prostitution situation. If the positive trend continues, it must eventually lead to an improvement for women as well. Through this, many women will hopefully be able to find a way out of prostitution. However, as pointed out before, the key to putting an end to prostitution does not lie in eliminating poverty, but rather in eliminating a social structure based on men's supremacy over women and commercialisation of their bodies.

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INTERVIEWS

The names with * have been changed to keep the informants' anonymity

***Carla** – Currently prostituted woman – January 20, 2004

Cecilia Lipzsysc – Sociologist, expert in women's studies, vice president of ADEUEM (Asociación de Especialistas Universitarias en Estudios de la Mujer) and a feminist activist – February 6, 2004

***Claudia** – Currently prostituted woman – February 26, 2004

Delia/Anita – Currently prostituted woman – February 5, 2004

Elena Reynaga – Formerly prostituted woman, president of AMMAR Nacional – December 23, 2003

***Fernanda** – Currently prostituted woman – January 8, 2004

Magui Bellotti – Member of the feminist group Atem 25 de Noviembre, member of the redaction of the feminist magazine Brujas and a feminist activist – February 25, 2004

Olga – Currently prostituted woman – January 8, 2004

Paula Barrionuevo – Social worker at the Hermanas Adoratrices centre, February 27, 2004

Sara Torres – Sexual educator, Argentina's representative in CATW (Coalition Against Trafficking of Women) and a feminist activist – December 21, 2003

Sonia Sanchez – Formerly prostituted woman, president of Asociación AMMAR Capital – January 6, 2004

Verónica Sereno – Employee at the Puerta Abierta Recreando centre, February 19, 2004

PARTICIPATORY OBSERVATIONS

January 6, 2004, Sewing workshop at Asociación AMMAR Capital

January 8, 2004, Sewing workshop at Asociación AMMAR Capital

January 14, 2004, Sewing workshop at Asociación AMMAR Capital

January 20, 2004, Sewing workshop at Asociación AMMAR Capital

January 26, 2004, Sewing workshop at Asociación AMMAR Capital

February 2, 2004, Sewing workshop at Asociación AMMAR Capital

February 3, 2004, Sewing workshop at Asociación AMMAR Capital

February 5, 2004, Sewing workshop at Asociación AMMAR Capital

February 9, 2004, Sewing workshop at Asociación AMMAR Capital

February 18, 2004, Distribution of food at Asociación AMMAR Capital

February 23, 2004, Sewing workshop at Asociación AMMAR Capital

February 24, 2004, Sewing workshop at Asociación AMMAR Capital

February 25, 2004, Sewing workshop at Asociación AMMAR Capital

February 26, 2004, Sewing workshop at Asociación AMMAR Capital