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**PROSTITUTION, ORGANIZATION AND EMPOWERMENT**  
- A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TWO ARGENTINE ORGANIZATIONS FOR WOMEN  
IN PROSTITUTION

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is the result of a field study conducted in Argentina principally between December 2005 and March 2006. The aim of the study was to investigate whether the differences in the views on prostitution between two organizations created by and working with women in prostitution implies different outcomes in terms of the empowerment processes for the members. The main research question is: *do the organizations' views on prostitution have any effect on the empowerment processes for the women participating and if so, in what way?*

The theoretical point of departure for the paper is empowerment, which fits into the broader political science field of democracy and democratization theory. Empowerment is broken down into the notions of *choice*, with its dimensions resources, agency and achievements, and of *transformative impact*, on an individual as well as a collective level. The primary material for the study consists of nine deep-interviews with women from the two organizations, which is assessed using these concepts.

The two organizations of the study work with empowering women in prostitution in very similar ways. The significant difference between them is that whereas one, AMMAR-CTA, sees prostitution as sex work, the other, AMMAR-Capital, sees prostitution as oppression that cannot be a job.

After evaluating the material, it becomes clear that the work of both organizations promote the empowerment processes of the women participating. It is less obvious, however, whether the differences in the view on prostitution has any significant impact on these processes. Possibly, the 'sex work' position brings about a more positive self-image construction, but the question of the consequences of this stand in the long run also need to be taken into consideration. Nevertheless, the great influencing factor on empowerment lies in the organizing itself.

## RESUMEN

Este trabajo es el resultado de un estudio de campo realizado en Argentina, entre diciembre de 2005 y marzo de 2006. El propósito del estudio fue investigar si las diferencias en las formas de ver la prostitución entre dos organizaciones creadas por y trabajando con mujeres en prostitución implican resultados diferentes en términos de los procesos de empoderamiento de las miembros. La pregunta principal de la investigación es: *¿tienen las formas de ver la prostitución algún efecto en los procesos de empoderamiento de las mujeres participando, y de ser así, de qué manera?*

El punto de partida teórico del trabajo es empoderamiento, que cabe en el más amplio campo de ciencia política de democracia y teorías de democratización. Empoderamiento es escindido en las nociones de *elección*, con sus dimensiones de recursos, agencia y logros, y de *impacto transformativo*, tanto en un nivel individual como en un nivel colectivo. El material principal para el estudio consiste en nueve entrevistas en profundidad con mujeres de las dos organizaciones, lo cual es evaluado usando estos conceptos.

Las dos organizaciones del estudio trabajan con empoderando a las mujeres en prostitución de maneras muy parecidas. La diferencia significativa entre las dos es que mientras una, AMMAR-CTA, ve la prostitución como trabajo sexual, la otra, AMMAR-Capital, ve la prostitución como una opresión que no puede ser un trabajo.

Después de haber evaluado el material, está claro que el trabajo de las dos organizaciones promueve los procesos de empoderamiento de las mujeres participando. Sin embargo, queda menos obvio si las diferencias en la forma de ver la prostitución tienen algún impacto significativo en estos procesos. Posiblemente, la posición de 'trabajo sexual' da lugar a una construcción de imagen personal más positiva, pero también se necesita tomar en cuenta la cuestión de las consecuencias de largo plazo que conlleva esta postura. No obstante, el factor importante de influencia está en el organizar en sí.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper has its starting-point in the empowerment discourse, which fits into the broader political science field of democracy and democratization theory. To illustrate empowerment and links between empowerment and different types of organization, a case study of the organization of poor women in prostitution in Argentina is presented.

### 1.1. BACKGROUND

Development research has for a long time pointed to a connection between gender inequality and poverty, and between empowerment of women and social and economic progress.<sup>1</sup> Due to traditional unequal gender roles, women, especially in poor countries, often have limited access to safe work, fair pay, accumulation of economic assets and influence over important decisions affecting their lives, such as marriage and childbearing. Enabling girls and women to reach their full potential has positive implications for the whole society, both because women are vital economic contributors with their paid and unpaid labour and because of their role as primary caretakers for the next generation:<sup>2</sup>

When discriminatory burdens are removed, the capacity and earning power of women increase. Furthermore, women tend to reinvest these gains in the welfare of their children and families, multiplying their contributions to national development. Empowering women propels countries forward towards the MDGs and improves the lives of all.<sup>3</sup>

In 2001, Argentina's economy collapsed completely after a long economic recession. The country had returned to a democratic system in 1983 after seven years of military dictatorship. The military junta left a country heavily indebted, with hyperinflation and a devastated economy. The politics pursued by the following presidents was one of intense privatizations and market liberalizations, and the Argentine peso was tied to the US dollar. This created an illusion of economic prosperity, which became increasingly difficult to keep up with an overvalued exchange rate, poorly run public finances and an increasing international debt. The possibility of a future collapse in the dollar exchange rate led to a systematic flow of capital out of the country, and when also ordinary people started emptying their bank accounts the government decided to freeze them. From one day to the next a withdrawal limit of 250 pesos or dollars per week was imposed. This affected not only the middle class who saw their life savings taken away from

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<sup>1</sup> See for example chapter 1 and 2 in UNFPA, 2005: *The state of world population 2005. The promise of equality.*

<sup>2</sup> UNFPA, 2005: pp 9-10

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*: p 1 (MDGs = Millennium Development Goals; the UN declaration for reducing world poverty, to be achieved by 2015)

them, but also the poorer sectors of society, largely dependant on the informal economy, whose cash flow was now choked.<sup>4</sup>

Popular protests, that had been growing during the last few months now escalated, and culminated into large demonstrations all over the country in the end of December 2001. The president was forced to renounce his post, fleeing the government building surrounded by the protesting masses, in a helicopter.<sup>5</sup> A political crisis followed and between December 20<sup>th</sup> 2001, when Fernando De la Rúa resigned, and January 1<sup>st</sup> 2002 when Eduardo Duhalde entered office, Argentina had no less than five different presidents. In January of 2002, the peso was devaluated and a dollar now cost three pesos instead of one. The Central Bank lost billions of dollars of its reserves.<sup>6</sup> Poverty rates in urban areas rose from 35.9% to 57.5% in a year and a half, from May 2001 to October 2002.<sup>7</sup> As unemployment rates increased, the prices of staple food – which can be seen as most representative for the poor households’ consumption – rose by more than 78%, while the prices of provisions in general increased with about 64% between December 2001 and March 2003.<sup>8</sup>

Since 2003, Argentina has been recovering; the GDP is increasing again and the unemployment and poverty rates have gone down, although the levels are still higher than before the collapse. The most acute phase of the crisis has now been overcome.<sup>9</sup> However, the economic crisis in Argentina has affected the Argentine women disproportionately hard. Although legal obstacles for women hardly exist – women are formally allowed equal rights and participation at almost all levels in society – they are nevertheless structurally discriminated at all levels. This can rather be related to cultural conceptions of the place and value of men and women in society and a social and cultural system based on the man as the norm. The neo-liberal politics, and the rising poverty, have increased the responsibilities for women, giving them a heavier workload in the domestic sphere, as much of state provisions, such as health and child care, were transferred to the private sector, i.e. the households themselves. At the same time they have been forced to increase their working hours outside the home to economically maintain their families.<sup>10</sup> However, more than half of the female employments are found within the informal sector, and

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<sup>4</sup> Danielsen, 2006: *Landrapport om Argentina* and Sundström; 2002: “Sista dansen?”

<sup>5</sup> Sundström, 2002

<sup>6</sup> del Carmen Feijoó, 2003: *Nuevo país, nueva pobreza*: chapter 11

<sup>7</sup> INDEC: “Porcentaje de hogares y personas bajo las líneas de pobreza e indigencia en los aglomerados urbanos y regiones estadísticas, desde mayo 2001 en adelante”

<sup>8</sup> del Carmen Feijoó, 2003: p 123

<sup>9</sup> Danielsen, 2006

<sup>10</sup> Lipszyc, 2003: “Discriminación de género en la Argentina contemporánea. Breve diagnóstico”: p 95

women moreover tend to have the lowest paid jobs within this sector.<sup>11</sup> Along with the rise in poverty and the acute necessity for additional sources of income in many poor households, prostitution became a survival strategy for some women, a group that increased significantly with the economic crisis.<sup>12</sup>

The collapse in 2001 was a hard blow for the attainment of sustainable development and substantial democratization in Argentina. Hence, on the road to recovery, it is indispensable for Argentina to strengthen the position of women as a way of reaching this goal.

## 1.2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY AND PROBLEMS EXAMINED

Various studies are made that point to a positive relationship between some forms of organization of marginalized or disadvantaged groups and the empowerment of these groups. It is for example often claimed that women's community organizing in poor countries promotes their political and economic empowerment.<sup>13</sup> Using this established idea as its point of departure, the purpose of this study is to take the idea one step further by looking at the possible impact of the ideological content of the organization on the empowerment processes.

The organizations selected for this case study, two Argentine organizations created by and working with women in prostitution, are interesting since they offer very good possibilities to make comparisons. The two organizations work with basically the same group of women and arrange very similar activities, which are all related to the empowerment of the women in different ways. What distinguishes the organizations from each other is principally their view of prostitution – while one claims that prostitution is work and the women call themselves 'sex workers', the other organization sees prostitution as oppression that cannot be a job, but an activity that the women carry out for their survival in lack of a job and they call themselves 'women in a prostitution situation'. Logically, this could be expected to have implications for the way certain activities are carried out and for the content of those activities.

The hypothesis on which this study is based is that this difference between the two organizations could imply different outcomes in terms of the empowerment processes for the participating women. In order to investigate this, it is necessary to find the answers to questions such as if and

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<sup>11</sup> CEPAL, 2005: *Las metas del Milenio y la igualdad de género. El caso de Argentina*: p 44

<sup>12</sup> Dalén, 2004: *Prostitution in Argentina in the Wake of the Economic Crisis*

<sup>13</sup> A discussion of this can be found in Jaggar, 2005: "Arenas of Citizenship. Civil society, state and the global order"

how being in the organization has changed anything in their lives, and what has changed, if their own views on prostitution coincide with those of the organization and if this is a significant factor for being organized where they are. The main issue examined in this study is about the following question; *do the organizations' views on prostitution have any effect on the empowerment processes for the women participating and if so, in what way?*

### 1.3. DISPOSITION

Following this introduction where a brief background has been given and the purpose of the paper stated, chapter two is dedicated to presenting the theoretical framework upon which the study is built. It consists of a thorough exposition of the empowerment discourse and how it will be applied in the analysis. Thereafter the method used when carrying out the study is described in chapter three. Chapter four gives the context in which the study is placed and in chapter five the specific organizations of the case are presented. In chapter six the important results of the study regarding prostitution, organization and empowerment are interpreted and analyzed, with its point of departure in the empowerment discourse, examining the questions posed in the introduction. This is followed by a concluding discussion in chapter seven.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, the theoretical framework, which will be the point of departure for the analysis, is presented. The central concept is *empowerment*, which will be extensively elaborated on in the sections below.

Empowerment fits into the broader theoretical field of democracy and democratization theory. In modern political science, as pointed out by the Swedish political scientist Lars Rudebeck among others, there are principally two ways of viewing democracy. One is what can be seen as a minimalist definition, which limits democracy to its most essential institutional manifestations; universal suffrage, regular elections and basic civil rights. Within the other, substantial view, democracy is conceptualized as political equality in actual practice.<sup>14</sup> According to the minimalist view, Argentina is a democracy. It is however the substantial view that is the most relevant one

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<sup>14</sup> Rudebeck has summarized his arguments in: "On the Twofold Meaning of Democracy and Democratisation" (2002): p 4

for the case at hand and where the empowerment discourse would fit in. The substantial view does not settle only for the juridical institutionalization of political equality and basic freedoms as does the minimalist one, but holds that democracy has to do with the realization of these ideals in practice. The equalization of political power, as well as social justice and equality, thus become essential for democracy as such.<sup>15</sup> In order for a political system to live up to a substantial definition of democracy, the inclusion of marginalized groups in society is imperative, and in this context the empowerment of women becomes crucial.

## 2.1. CONCEPTUALIZING EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment is a widely used term in many contexts, above all in the gender and development discourses. There is a lack, however, of a general consensus on how to define the term. What is generally emphasized when referring to empowerment is that it reflects a process. It is neither a static condition nor a mere change in for example access to basic necessities. The discussion in this section has its point of departure principally in two works by the social economist Naila Kabeer, a specialist in gender and development issues.<sup>16</sup> With this as a basis for the discussion, I will also bring in some reflections from other texts which I have found fruitful.

Early discussions in the development discourse on the role and place of women, from the 1970's onwards had a *Women In Development (WID)* focus, seeing women as a vulnerable group that needed to be targeted by special 'women's projects', designed to help them, but positioning women as objects rather than subjects or agents of their own change. Although this was an important perspective to put focus on women's position within development processes, its limitations became increasingly criticized, and in the late 1980's the *Gender And Development (GAD)* perspective emerged. This takes in unequal gender relations and adopts a gender mainstreaming approach. Women are not seen as a 'special issue', a gender perspective should be applied to every aspect of the development process. Furthermore, women and men should be seen as subjects in their own right rather than objects of external intervention, a view that is also a crucial part of the empowerment discourse.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Rudebeck, 2002: pp 4-6

<sup>16</sup> They are "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment" (2001) and *Gender equality and women's empowerment: a critical analysis of the third Millanium Development Goal* (2005)

<sup>17</sup> Connely, etc., 2000: "Feminism and development: Theoretical perspectives": pp 57-64, and de Vylder, 2004: "Jämställdhet och fattigdomsstrategier": p 90

There is a strong link between poverty and the disempowerment of women. The link is direct, for example when the exclusion of women in decision-making structures results in the necessities of women being ignored or resources being distributed unequally. Indirect links are for example the dependency of women on men, which limits their possibilities to negotiate on crucial issues, such as the number and spacing of their children.<sup>18</sup> Development initiatives and projects directed at guaranteeing basic necessities and at themes related to infrastructure can facilitate women's empowerment. However, it is important for the impact of these initiatives that they are also directed toward the value systems that may prevent women from participating in activities outside their houses. Furthermore, for the poverty reduction initiatives to have a transformative impact in the long run they have to create possibilities for the women themselves to take possession of the process.<sup>19</sup>

Before going more deeply into the discussion of empowerment, a brief overview of the concept of power is necessary, since it is an intrinsic part of the whole empowerment discourse.

#### 2.1.1. POWER

The question of how to define power is vast enough to deserve a paper of its own. Here, I will only briefly touch upon and discuss the concept, concentrating on its relation to gender and empowerment.

Power is commonly divided into two types, *power-to* and *power-over*.<sup>20</sup> While *power-to* has positive connotations, referring to people's ability to make their own life choices and act upon them, even in the face of opposition from others, *power-over* comes with negative associations, relating to actors' capacity of overriding the agency of others, for example by using authority, violence or other forms of coercion. *Power-over* also operates in the absence of any explicit agents, as for example cultural biases or norms can constrain people's ability to make and act upon their own life choices.<sup>21</sup>

The French sociologist Michel Foucault has developed a theory where he sees power as a network system. Power is relational; it originates from and is exercised in relations as an intrinsic

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<sup>18</sup> Strandberg, 2001: *Conceptualising Empowerment as a Transformative Strategy for Poverty Eradication and the Implications for Measuring Progress*.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> In some literature, two additional types are mentioned: *power-with* (people organizing to achieve collective goals) and *power-within* (self-confidence, self awareness and assertiveness). However, the two forms mentioned above are the most common.

<sup>21</sup> Kabeer, 2005: p 14. See also chapter 3 in Holloway, 2002: *Change the world without taking power*

part of these.<sup>22</sup> Although this way of viewing power has been criticized by some feminist scholars, who claim that it leaves room only for individuals exercising power in relation to other individuals, while denying the existence of structures,<sup>23</sup> it can be used to enhance feminist theory. Even in a network of power relations there can be patterns of domination and the exercise of power, but these patterns are not seen as constant and unchangeable. The existence of systems of control or domination can be an effect of the interaction and concentration of different channels of power.<sup>24</sup> Hence, the contribution of Foucault for feminist theory can be a loosening of the sometimes rigid hierarchic model of men as oppressors and women as the oppressed, and the addition of explanatory models for how men can be powerless within the system and how women can sometimes contribute to their own oppression, how submission to an oppression can sometimes be perceived as more worthwhile than resistance. Nobody 'has' power, but people and groups are positioned differently within the networks of power relations.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, a gender system of unequal power relations between men and women can fit within Foucault's concept of power, seeing the system as relational, dynamic and interdependent of other networks of power relations.

Kabeer conceptualizes power as the ability to make choices. Thus, being denied choice means to be disempowered, and empowerment refers to the processes by which those previously denied the ability to make choices acquire this ability. Empowerment, therefore, is a process of change, which means that powerful people, who exercise a great deal of choice, are not necessarily empowered, unless they were disempowered to begin with.<sup>26</sup> Empowerment, as acquiring the ability to make choices, is then a positive form of power acquisition, linked with power-to. It can be interpreted as the process of enlarging one's sphere of action within the network of power relations.

### 2.1.2. CHOICE

The concept of empowerment is closely related to the ability to make choices. According to Kabeer, in order for choice to qualify as such, two conditions must be fulfilled. First, there must be alternatives, and second, the alternatives must be perceived as alternatives.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, she distinguishes between first and second order choices. First order choices are what she calls

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<sup>22</sup> Foucault, (1976) 2004: *Sexualitetens historia. Band 1. Viljan att veta*: pp. 102-107

<sup>23</sup> See for example Hartsock, 1990: "Foucault on Power. A Theory for Women?"

<sup>24</sup> Foucault, (1976) 2004: p 105

<sup>25</sup> Bordo, 1993: "Feminism, Foucault and the Politics of the Body": pp 181-182, 190-192

<sup>26</sup> Kabeer, 2001: pp 18-19

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*: p 14

strategic life choices, which are critical for people to live the lives they want, since they constitute the defining parameters of life, such as where to live and whether to marry and have children, for example. These in turn frame the second-order, less consequential choices. The empowerment process is concerned with the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices.<sup>28</sup>

The notion of choice, within the context of empowerment, can be thought of in three inter-related dimensions; *agency*, *resources* and *achievements*. The agency dimension refers to the ability to define one's goals and act upon them, and represents the process by which choices are made and put into effect. Although agency is often perceived in individualistic terms, it can encompass individual as well as collective reflection and action. But agency is more than just the observable action; it is also the sense of agency among actors.<sup>29</sup>

The second dimension of choice, resources, is the conditions under which choices are made. It refers to material resources as well as social and human ones that enhance the ability to exercise choice. The ability to define priorities and enforce claims conditions how resources are distributed and made available. The empowerment process then involves not only an increase in the access to resources, but also a change in the conditions under which resources are obtained.<sup>30</sup>

Together, agency and resources make up people's potential for living the lives they want. The extent to which this potential is realized is what is referred to by the third dimension, achievements. In other words, achievements reflect the outcomes of people's efforts. When the issue of power is relevant, i.e. when a failure to achieve can be associated with asymmetries in the distribution of capabilities behind it, it can be seen as a manifestation of disempowerment.<sup>31</sup> These three dimensions of choice are inter-dependent as they all contribute to and benefit from each other. Achievements lead to enhanced resources or agency and consequently capacity for making choices further ahead.<sup>32</sup>

Kabeer points out that it is important to distinguish between differences in the choices that people make and, which is what is of interest for assessing empowerment, inequalities in people's capacity to make choices.<sup>33</sup> In the discussion of choice, a central issue to take into account is the

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<sup>28</sup> Kabeer, 2001: p 19

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*: pp 19-22 and Kabeer, 2005: pp 14-15

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, 2001: p 20 and 2005: p 15

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, 2001: pp 21-22 and 2005: p 15

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, 2001: p 19

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*: pp 22-23

restraints that preferences and values can put on the choices people may make. Thus, in considering if an achievement represents a meaningful choice it is not only of importance whether or not other alternatives were materially possible, but also if they were regarded to be within the sphere of possible choice.<sup>34</sup> The transformative components of choice and agency must also be taken into account, that is, those that do not simply address immediate inequalities but are also used to initiate longer-term processes of structural changes. Thus, in situations of gender discrimination, evidence that an improvement of women's agency has led to a reduction in prevailing gender inequalities in achievements, can be viewed as evidence of women's empowerment.<sup>35</sup>

### 2.1.3. COLLECTIVE ACTION

Although empowerment can be conceived as an individual process, Kabeer points out that:

[...] individual empowerment is a fragile gain if it cannot be mobilised in the interests of collective empowerment.<sup>36</sup>

A fundamental idea behind the collectiveness of the empowerment process is that women's unequal conditions are collective, rather than a question of individual failures. Hence, women's subordination should also be put to an end by collective action.<sup>37</sup> Women's collective action can help expanding their own room for action in several ways; the impact of the community in itself in strengthening women's self confidence, organizing collectively can help improving women's material conditions, and stereotypical ideas in society about gender can be questioned.<sup>38</sup> In a paper prepared for a UN expert meeting on empowerment and poverty eradication, the connection between the individual and the collective level of empowerment is described in the following way:

Unless the gendered power structures that subordinate women on the societal level are addressed, individual women cannot take full control over their lives. And unless a group of women feel worthy of safety and able to act together, a law prohibiting violence against women will have little effect on women's ability to change their situation.<sup>39</sup>

Consequently, the different levels are connected and mutually reinforcing in such a way that gender equality becomes both an outcome of the empowerment process and a catalyst for women's empowerment on the individual level. However, gender equality describes a state

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<sup>34</sup> Kabeer, 2001: pp 23-26

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*: pp 39-40 and Kabeer, 2005: pp 15-16

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, 2001: p 48

<sup>37</sup> Eduards, 2002: *Förbjuden handling. Om kvinnors organisering och feministisk teori*: pp 15-16

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*: p 16

<sup>39</sup> Strandberg, 2001

whereas empowerment refers to a process.<sup>40</sup> Equality is the result of a renegotiation of power relations, and requires that poorer women not only are able to gain access to goods, but that they are able to do so on terms that respect and promote their ability to define their own priorities and make their own choices, the essence of empowerment.<sup>41</sup>

#### 2.1.4. EMPOWERMENT, GENDER AND PROSTITUTION

The term 'gender' is connected to 'sex', but it refers to the social and historical construction of what is seen as 'masculine' and 'feminine', as opposed to the biological sex. It thus represents a social constructivist view, rather than an essentialist or biologist one.<sup>42</sup> The system of power relations between the genders in society is often called *gender system*.<sup>43</sup> The gender system is usually described as being marked by two principles; the one of separation and the one of the supremacy of the male norm. The principle of separation means, in brief, that the sexes are separated by being assigned certain gender qualities and spheres of activity. The principle of the supremacy of the male norm, in turn, refers to the norms and structures within the system itself, ascribing men as a group a higher value and a superior power position.<sup>44</sup>

In an unequal gender system where women are systematically disadvantaged compared to men, the role of prostitution can be interpreted in different ways. Some, commonly referred to as *sex radicals*, sometimes argue that prostitution can be empowering for women, whereas *radical feminists* usually argue that prostitution disempowers women.

The rationale for seeing prostitution as empowering for women is that it challenges the whole structure of gender inequalities by going against stereotypes of women's work as domestic with long hours, and of femininity as being fragile, passive, nurturing and emotional. This conventional paradigm is defied by the women in prostitution as they bring into the public sphere and offer to many men the services that women are typically expected to perform in private, for one man only, and for free. This destabilizes male power over women's bodies and sexualities, and challenges patriarchal images and representations of women.<sup>45</sup> Many sex radicals argue that the main problem with prostitution is not that it would be oppressive per se, but rather that it is

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<sup>40</sup> Strandberg, 2001

<sup>41</sup> Kabeer, 2001: p 53

<sup>42</sup> Gemzöe, 2003: *Feminism*: p 80

<sup>43</sup> 'Gender system' is a development of, and a more dynamic way of viewing, the widely used but more static term 'patriarchy'. For a discussion on patriarchy versus gender system, see for example chapter three "Från patriarkat till genusystem" in Gemzöe, 2003.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*: p 93

<sup>45</sup> O'Neill in Scambler, 1997: "Prostitute women now": p 4

today socially stigmatized due to cultural blindness and sexual taboos.<sup>46</sup> The sex radical view of prostitution as a way to empowerment is related to an individualistic view of society in general, with a focus on every individual's right to a free choice, even if that choice is prostitution. There are women who choose to prostitute themselves because of the economic benefits, the freedom it brings, or simply because they like it. Even though some oppressive structures that can have negative outcomes for women in prostitution are recognized, this is not seen as an argument against prostitution, but rather against society as formed today.<sup>47</sup>

The radical feminist way of interpreting the function of prostitution, on the contrary, is as an expression of power inequalities. Men dominate sexuality, and the existence of prostitution functions as a public recognition of men having a right of access to women's sexuality, thus legitimizing this order.<sup>48</sup> Prostitution gives men unilateral access to women's bodies, as the male client pays to use the woman's body for his own sexual satisfaction.<sup>49</sup> While sex radicals see prostitution as an economic transaction involving sexual services, most radical feminists see prostitution as the commodification of women's bodies. Being turned into a commodity among others means being a saleable object submitted to sexual domination by men, which is both degrading and disempowering.<sup>50</sup>

For the purpose of this study I have chosen to define 'prostitution' as the activity of having sex in exchange for money, using a wide definition of 'sex', thus including other sexual activities besides intercourse. Of course there exist borderline cases, where it is not very clear whether it is prostitution or some other type of relation. Nevertheless, this study is not about those kinds of cases, but about clear-cut prostitution.

An important issue to clarify for this study is how to name the activity in question and the women exercising it, since the choice of term in this case has ideological implications. As already mentioned, there are two main currents; one of which employs the term 'sex work' and 'sex workers' while the other one uses 'prostitution' and 'women in a prostitution situation', respectively. Principally, this has to do with the controversy over whether it is possible to understand prostitution as a job or not. The purpose of this study is not to decide whether one

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<sup>46</sup> See for example Ericsson, 1980: "Charges against Prostitution: An Attempt at a Philosophical Assessment": p 353

<sup>47</sup> Scambler in Scambler, 1997: "Conspicuous and inconspicuous sex work: The neglect of the ordinary and mundane": p 120

<sup>48</sup> Gemzöe, 2003: p 96-99

<sup>49</sup> Pateman, 1988: *The sexual contract*: p 198

<sup>50</sup> Shrage, 1989: "Should Feminists Oppose Prostitution?": p 347

side or the other is right. Hence it is preferable here to use the most neutral term possible. For this reason I have decided not to use ‘sex work’ and ‘sex worker’, as that would mean explicitly positioning myself on one of the sides. I do not want to use the term ‘prostitute’ either, to name the women exercising the activity, since the word has negative connotations and is often used in a degrading way. Furthermore, the word imposes an identity on the woman, that she is primarily a prostitute, not above all a woman who in turn exercises prostitution or sex work.

In terms of the activity, the most neutral words I have been able to find, and which I will therefore be using in this paper, are ‘prostitution’ and ‘exercise prostitution’. For the women who exercise prostitution I will use ‘women in prostitution’. I am aware that this is not a completely neutral term, but I have not been able to find a better one either, taking into account that it should neither be a term that imposes a fixed ‘prostitute’-identity on the women, nor one that explicitly vindicates prostitution as a job.

## 2.2. OPERATIONALIZING EMPOWERMENT

After presenting an interpretation of the empowerment discourse, the question of how to operationalize the concept in order to make it investigable, remains. The United Nations Development Programme, UNDP, has in its annual Human Development Report an index called *Gender Empowerment Measure*, which is an attempt to measure women’s opportunities. It uses three variables:

- Political participation and decision-making power, as measured by women’s and men’s percentage shares of parliamentary seats.
- Economic participation and decision-making power, as measured by two indicators – women’s and men’s percentage shares of positions as legislators, senior officials and managers and women’s and men’s percentage shares of professional and technical positions.
- Power over economic resources, as measured by women’s and men’s estimated earned income (PPP US\$).<sup>51</sup>

Argentina ranks 19 on the Gender Empowerment Measure list, and receives a value of 0.697, where 1 is the maximum, i.e. full empowerment of women.<sup>52</sup> Although this is an interesting example of a well-established way of measuring empowerment, its macro-level and quantitative

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<sup>51</sup> UNDP, 2006: *Human Development Report 2006. Beyond scarcity: Power, poverty and the global water crisis*: p 398 (PPP stands for Purchasing Power Parity and is an exchange rate that accounts for price differences across countries, which allows international comparisons of real output and incomes)

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*: p 367

approach is not appropriate for the study at hand in its current form. However, the basis for these indicators; women's decision-making power and influence in important spheres of life and control over key resources, remains the same also for an operationalization on the micro-level. But since this study is based on in-depth interviews, they need to be operationalized in a more qualitative manner in order to be applicable.

As pointed out in the previous section (2.1.2.), choice is a central component of empowerment, and therefore the three dimensions of choice, *resources*, *agency* and *achievements* need to be taken into consideration. When it comes to resources, Kabeer points out that this is more about ability to choose than about concrete choices made. To examine this I will look at the extent of control that women can exercise over important resources, for example in terms of being able to influence issues related to specific resources.<sup>53</sup> Agency in terms of measuring empowerment is associated with decision-making agency. I will base my measuring of the agency dimension on the women's perceptions of their roles in relation to decisions with consequential significance for their lives. However, it is also about the renegotiation of power relations in the decision-making processes, since having a say in important decisions does not necessarily mean empowerment unless some change in this influence has taken place.<sup>54</sup> The final dimension, achievements, is the result of the two previous ones. Assessing achievements will be done by looking at the extent to which desired outcomes are realized in practice. The evaluation of the results will be done both by considering the women's own perceptions of their empowerment and by considering information and facts from the interviews and other material that can help an assessment of the empowerment processes.

A crucial point for assessing empowerment is not to merely look at concrete outcomes in exercising choice, but also at the women's own perception of agency. The life situation many poor women in prostitution are in does not allow for a great deal of actualized choice. However, since empowerment essentially is a process rather than an outcome, it is still interesting to look at whether the women for example perceive themselves as subjects in their own right, who although a series of alternatives may not be available to them, at least have the self confidence enough to feel that they are entitled to the right to make choices were it possible for them.

So far, I have only dealt with the more individual-level aspect of measuring the empowerment process. However, as pointed out before, empowerment is as much a collective as an individual

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<sup>53</sup> Kabeer, 2001: pp 28-31

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*: pp 32-35

process. The women as individuals can undergo empowerment processes from participating in the organizations, but it is also necessary to look at the possible collective empowerment of women in prostitution as a group. Both when considering the individual and the collective empowerment processes, the transformative impact in terms of long-term structural changes is of vital interest.

To sum up, these are the factors that will be considered when analyzing and interpreting the results of the study:

- Actual and/or perceived resources
- Actual and/or perceived agency
- Actual and/or perceived achievements
- The transformative impact of the organizations and the empowerment process on an individual level
- The transformative impact of the organizations and the empowerment process on a collective level

### **3. METHOD**

After formulating the theory, it is time to turn to practice. In this chapter the method used for conducting the study will be introduced and some important choices regarding the study will be explained. The practical details concerning the field study are presented and the limitations of the study are discussed.

#### **3.1. QUALITATIVE METHOD**

As pointed out in section 2.2. *Operationalizing empowerment*, the study in this paper is based on a qualitative method, focusing on a more profound understanding of the case at hand using deep-interviews as primary data in addition to literature related to the subject. Statistics are used when necessary for complementary background information but they do not form a major part of the material. Since the main interest for the study is the subjective positions of the interviewees, the best way to acquire information is through deep-interviews. This more qualitative methodology permits the interviewee to dwell on and develop the themes especially important to her. In

addition, it allows the interviewer to rephrase questions and in that way evade potential misunderstandings.

The division between qualitative and quantitative method is not a very clear-cut one, and they can be said to be different directions rather than completely separate methodologies. The choice of method, however, has implications for the kind of results and the conclusions that can be arrived at. Generalizations, for example become more difficult to make when having an in-depth focus rather than using vast amounts of data. This study is therefore best seen as an illustration of how the links between different organizations and empowerment processes can be understood.<sup>55</sup>

### 3.2. THE FIELD STUDY

The study was conducted for the most part during four months, in Argentina. Many of the contacts with people in the two organizations were established during a previous field work period for a C-level paper entitled “Prostitution in Argentina in the Wake of the Economic Crisis”, written in 2004.<sup>56</sup> Upon arrival in Argentina in late August of 2005, these contacts were resumed, but the more systematic field work for this paper and the interviews were initiated in December of 2005 and continued until March 2006.

Besides doing interviews I participated regularly in various activities of the two organizations, such as meetings, workshops and outreach work in Buenos Aires prostitution neighbourhoods.

The entire field study, meaning all the contact with the organizations and the interviewees within them, as well as any additional gathering of material, was conducted in Spanish.

#### 3.2.1. INTERVIEWS

The interview material consists of nine deep-interviews, which are listed in alphabetical order in the list of references. Five of these were from AMMAR-Capital and four from AMMAR-CTA. The interviewees were strategically chosen in order to get as much diversity as possible in the material and include both members of the directive committees of the organizations and regular participants, and there are newer members as well as women who were there from the start.

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<sup>55</sup> For a further discussion on qualitative and quantitative methods, see chapter 4 in Assarsson & Svensson, 1996: *Att fråga och svara. En introduktion till statsvetenskaplig metod*

<sup>56</sup> Dalén, 2004

When interviewing the women I used semi-structured open questions to leave space for the interviewees to elaborate on the answers. However, some key questions, like the ones presented in 1.2. *Purpose of the study and problems examined*, were used in almost every interview.

When conducting interviews, there is always the risk of the interviewee consciously or unconsciously giving what she thinks the preferred answer is. To avoid this as far as possible I tried to formulate the questions in a very open and ‘non-leading’ manner. To give one example; the interviewees were always first asked whether their lives had changed in any way from participating in the organizations, and only if their answer was affirmative would they be asked further questions about how this change was manifested. If the interviewee was asked a question she did not understand, I tried to reformulate the question without using examples as far as possible, in order to avoid forcing the answers in any direction. However, even with necessary precautions taken, it is always important to be aware of this possibility and take it into consideration when using the interview material in the analysis.

All interviews were recorded, with the interviewees’ permission and knowledge, and later transcribed by me. I have in a few cases changed the name of the interviewee. This has been done upon request of the interviewee in order to preserve her anonymity. It is indicated in the list of references.

### **3.3. WRITTEN MATERIAL**

The written material referred to in this paper is mainly books and articles. As a basis for the theoretical framework, two texts by Naila Kabeer are used, as presented in the previous chapter, and in addition to those, information from some other books and articles is also applied. For the parts that relate to the more specific context in which this study is set, mainly chapters 4 *Prostitution in Argentina* and 5 *The organizations studied*, much of the information comes from my previous paper on prostitution, referred to above. To the extent that internet has been used, it has been limited to official government web pages and the home pages of the two organizations in the study. Other written material that has come to use in this paper are information pamphlets handed out by the two organizations.

Some of the written material comes from libraries in Uppsala, whereas other was obtained during the field work in Argentina. Although some is in Swedish, the greater part of the material is in Spanish and English.

### 3.4. LIMITATIONS

Although none of the two organizations in this study explicitly prohibit men from being members, there are to my knowledge no active men in prostitution in neither of the organizations, and therefore the focus in the study naturally is on women. Some of the women in the study are currently in prostitution, whereas some have left it behind, and some exercise prostitution on an irregular basis; when their economic situations are such that they are left no other choice. However, they have all at some point in their lives exercised prostitution, and they are all currently members of one of the two organizations studied.

One of the organizations, AMMAR-Capital is limited to the city of Buenos Aires, whereas AMMAR-CTA has branches in several Argentine cities. Its headquarters is in the city of Buenos Aires. The main focus in the study is on the organizations' work in the city of Buenos Aires. However I also interviewed one representative for AMMAR-CTA in Córdoba.

When conducting a social science study it is never possible to completely isolate for all potential influencing factors and single out just one independent variable. Thus, any differences in the empowerment process can never with complete certainty be attributed to only one factor. A significant difference between the organizations, apart from their view of prostitution, is the fact that AMMAR-CTA belongs to CTA, *Central de los Trabajadores Argentinos* (Argentine worker's central), which is one of Argentina's largest workers' unions, whereas AMMAR-Capital is an independent organization. This is an issue which will be further discussed in chapters 6 *Prostitution, organization and empowerment* and 7 *Final discussion and conclusions*.

## 4. PROSTITUTION IN ARGENTINA

In this section some brief, but necessary background information on the prostitution situation in Argentina will be given, in order to put the results of the study and the analysis into context. The focus will be on prostitution in Argentina, especially in Buenos Aires, today.<sup>57</sup>

### 4.1. LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Argentina has an abolitionist approach to prostitution in its laws. It is regulated in the penal code under the title ‘crimes against sexual integrity’. It is not illegal for an individual to exercise prostitution, the one criminalized is instead:

He who promotes or facilitates the prostitution of minors of eighteen years of age, even taken into account the consent of the victim [...].<sup>58</sup>

[...] he who for profit or to satisfy wishes of other people promotes or facilitates the prostitution of those over eighteen years of age using deception, abuse of a relation of power or dependency, violence, threat or any other means of intimidation or coercion.<sup>59</sup>

[...] he who economically exploits the exercise of prostitution of a person, using deception, coercive or intimidating abuse of a relation of dependency, authority, power, violence, threat or any other means of intimidation or coercion.<sup>60</sup>

The severity of the punishment depends on the victim’s age and on how much force was used. For any person over 18 years of age the pimp or the trafficker can only be punished if it can be proven that their victim was somehow forced or fooled into prostitution.

In addition to this regulation in the federal penal code, there are local and provincial laws, such as the codes of offences or misdemeanours (*códigos de faltas y de contravenciones*), which further regulate prostitution. These laws are very often vaguely formulated, such as ‘public disgrace’ (*escándalo en la vía pública*), leaving very much room for interpretations, which lays the ground for arbitrary arrest. The Autonomous City of Buenos Aires has since 2004 a new code of misdemeanours (*código contravencional*), which was approved despite strong popular protests. Its article 81 regulates “the offer and demand of sex in public places” and stipulates one to five days of “work for public

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<sup>57</sup> For a historic overview of prostitution in Buenos Aires, see for example Guy, Donna; 1994: *El sexo peligroso. La prostitución legal en Buenos Aires 18875-1955*; Editorial Sudamericana, Buenos Aires, and Alonso de Rocha, Aurora; 2003: *Tristes chicas alegres. Prostitución y poder en Buenos Aires*; Editorial Leviatán, Buenos Aires

<sup>58</sup> Argentina Penal Code, Article 125 bis. (my translation)

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, Article 126 (my translation)

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, Article 127 (my translation)

use” or a fine of between 200 and 400 pesos.<sup>61</sup> Although the article explicitly states that the offence cannot be based on appearance, clothing or behaviour, this is not always the case when it comes to practice. Corruption is widespread in Argentina, also within the police force. Thus, brothel owners, who have an interest in keeping street prostitution down in order to control competition, very often get away with their own activities by bribing underpaid police officers not to arrest them and at the same time go after women in street prostitution.

#### 4.2. LIFE IN PROSTITUTION

Since Argentina’s economic collapse in 2001, prostitution has increased drastically. There are no official statistics on prostitution, neither before nor after, but no statistics are needed for the alert observer to notice this fact. Although poverty cannot be said to be a cause of prostitution, it is a contributing factor and prostitution can perhaps, in cases of poverty, work as a survival strategy. Not only the number of women in prostitution increased after the economic collapse, but also their age span. Both younger girls and older women than before can now be found in prostitution. Apart from poor women found in street prostitution and in brothels, the market for sex tourism in Argentina has also increased, where international executives are willing to pay sums that for young, well-educated girls are incomparable on the tough Argentine labour market. For the vast majority of women in prostitution, however, the economic collapse has meant a drastic decrease in earnings and a much greater insecurity.<sup>62</sup>

Prostitution is a high-risk enterprise for most women. Although Argentina still has a fairly low HIV/AIDS prevalence, women in prostitution constitute an especially vulnerable category.<sup>63</sup> Not only because they are constantly exposed to this and other sexually transmitted diseases, but also due to their weak position when it comes to negotiating condom use with clients. It is not uncommon for clients to offer a higher pay if they can have sex without using a condom, and even knowing the risks involved, there are sometimes women who just cannot afford refusing.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Gobierno de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires: *Código Contravencional, article 81*. (My translation. 200 Argentine Pesos is approximately 50 Euro, in December 2006. The Argentine government draws the extreme poverty line at just above 400 pesos per month for a family of two adults and two children.)

<sup>62</sup> Dalén, 2004

<sup>63</sup> The rate is 1.1% for men and 0.3% for women (UNFPA, 2005). However, the male/female ratio is declining rapidly; until 1987 it was 92/1, whereas it now is down to 3/1, and heterosexual relations without using protection is now the most frequent way of transmitting the virus (CEPAL, 2005).

<sup>64</sup> Dalén, 2004

Another common risk factor is the constant threat of violence, from the clients as well as from the police. Many women in prostitution express a continuous anxiety when going off with a new client, since there is never any guarantee that they will come back alive. Women in prostitution murdered by their clients are not something unheard of, and sexual and other physical abuse is even more common.<sup>65</sup>

As mentioned before, the lives of most women in prostitution in Argentina are not ones of economic surpluses, rather the complete opposite. Especially since the economic collapse it has become difficult for many to make ends meet. It takes longer hours on the street and more clients to earn the sufficient money. The alternative to street prostitution is brothels. They are very common in Argentina, and many of the women in street prostitution at one point started out there. Although brothels offer more security in terms of access to a stable clientele, the pay per client is lower, the working hours are longer, and there is not the same freedom to, at least in theory, be able to turn down unwanted clients.<sup>66</sup>

There are no programs aimed specifically at women in prostitution from the part of the Argentine federal government. Some provincial governments, and the government of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires gives financial support to individual projects initiated by AMMAR-CTA and AMMAR-Capital and the two organizations are allotted quotas of government aid programs for persons in poverty to administer for their members.

## **5. THE ORGANIZATIONS STUDIED**

In this chapter the two organizations in the study will be presented. Information comes from the interviews I have made with representatives of the organizations, and from information material handed out by the organizations as well as from their respective homepages.

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<sup>65</sup> Dalén, 2004. For example there is the case of 25 year-old Rosa Andrea Machado murdered by a client in Córdoba in 2003; 32 year-old Sandra Cabrera, secretary general of AMMAR-CTA's Rosario chapter, murdered in 2004, probably by the police; and the 30-something women in prostitution disappeared and/or murdered in Mar del Plata since 1996, probably by the police and influential brothel-owners.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*

Before moving on to the presentation of the organizations, it is necessary to clear up some terminology issues. Both organizations claim the name AMMAR.<sup>67</sup> I have separated them by calling one AMMAR-CTA and the other one AMMAR-Capital. These are however not the names used by the organizations themselves. The organization I have chosen to call AMMAR-CTA simply calls itself AMMAR. The Buenos Aires chapter of AMMAR-CTA is called AMMAR Capital. However, this name is also claimed by the other organization, which I call AMMAR-Capital. The confusion originates in the fact that it all started out as one organization. As most of the members of the Buenos Aires chapter a few years later decided to break with the main organization and start their own, they took the name with them and are now a registered organization under the name AMMAR Capital. Nevertheless, AMMAR-CTA which then formed a new Buenos Aires chapter still claims the right to that name. I have chosen to use the terms AMMAR-CTA because the organization is a part of CTA (*Central de los Trabajadores Argentinos*, Argentine workers' central), and AMMAR-Capital since that is the actual name of the organization. When referring to the Buenos Aires chapter of AMMAR-CTA I will use this term, since calling them AMMAR-CTA Capital would simply be too confusing.

### 5.1. AMMAR-CTA

AMMAR-CTA still uses the original abbreviation for the name, and has *union of Argentine sex workers in action for their rights* as a watchword. As an organization they are part of the CTA, but the individual members of the organization are affiliated directly to AMMAR.

AMMAR-CTA consists of a national organization and of 15 local chapters in 10 out of Argentina's 24 provinces<sup>68</sup>. The national organization's office is located in CTA's national headquarters in the city of Buenos Aires, and the office for the Buenos Aires chapter of AMMAR-CTA is on the premises of CTA Buenos Aires.

In total, the national organization has around 3000 affiliated members all over the country, out of which around 300 belong to the Buenos Aires chapter. Anyone who is either in prostitution or used to be in prostitution, and is of age, i.e. eighteen years old or over, can become a member of

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<sup>67</sup> The original name AMMAR is an abbreviation of *Asociación de Mujeres Meretrices de Argentina*, or Association for Women Prostitutes of Argentina.

<sup>68</sup> To be exact, Argentina has 23 provinces and one federal district, which is the autonomous city of Buenos Aires. AMMAR-CTA is thus represented in 9 provinces and in the federal district. When referring to the Buenos Aires chapter of AMMAR-CTA in this paper, it is the local chapter of the city of Buenos Aires that is referred, not the province of Buenos Aires.

AMMAR-CTA. There are no formal restrictions against men in prostitution as members or against transvestites<sup>69</sup>, but the overwhelming majority of the members are women. There are very few men in prostitution in Argentina, and for transvestites there are other organizations, that AMMAR-CTA sometimes cooperates with for some of their activities.

AMMAR-CTA has a national board elected every year and each chapter has a directive commission consisting of around six to eight members. However, the goal is that all affiliated members should be able to participate so once a week there is a meeting where everybody is welcome and where most of the decisions concerning the organization are made.<sup>70</sup>

The organization is financed from membership fees, which are 5 pesos per month.<sup>71</sup> Their offices are within the CTA buildings so they do not need to pay any rent. None of the representatives of the organization receives any salary, and for the different projects the financing is usually dependent on external funding.

#### 5.1.1. HISTORY<sup>72</sup>

The early history of AMMAR-CTA overlaps with that of AMMAR-Capital since there was only one organization in the beginning. It started out in 1994 in the city of Buenos Aires. At that time arbitrary arrests were very common, and many women in prostitution spent almost as much time in jail as outside it. The different pimps, who at that time controlled almost all street prostitution, had to bribe the police with large weekly sums for the women to be left alone. If they could not afford to pay, the women were simply arrested by the police, and often beaten up and abused in jail. It also happened that police from one district were paid and then the women were arrested by another police district instead.

When some women in prostitution first started to organize it was to try to stop this heavy police repression. There were two anthropologists studying prostitution in Buenos Aires at the time, encouraging the women to organize and helping them when starting out. They were soon joined

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<sup>69</sup> It is not uncommon with man-to-woman transvestites/transsexuals/transgender in prostitution in Argentina, in particular in the city of Buenos Aires. Some use only female accessories, whereas some have gone through surgery to varying degrees. They are all commonly referred to as 'transvestites' in the public discourse in Argentina, and they also generally refer to themselves by this terminology.

<sup>70</sup> This information comes from the interviews with the secretary generals of the chapters of Buenos Aires, Jorgelina, and Córdoba, María Eugenia. According to them, all AMMAR-CTA chapters function in roughly the same way.

<sup>71</sup> 5 Argentine pesos are approximately 1.25 Euro in December 2006.

<sup>72</sup> The information comes from my interviews with Sonia (AMMAR-Capital), December 1, 2005, Elena (AMMAR-CTA), December 9, 2005, Jorgelina (AMMAR-CTA), February 10, 2006 and Graciela (AMMAR-Capital), March 29, 2006 and from information materials from AMMAR-CTA and AMMAR-Capital

by two lawyers teaching them more about their rights. In the beginning, however, it was very difficult. Wherever they tried to meet, on the street or in bars or cafes, they were always taken away by the police, even the anthropologists and the lawyers. In 1995 they were offered a place in CTA and could continue organizing more in peace.

As the organization grew stronger, and with the support of the CTA, they managed after a couple of years to put an end to much of the police abuse. When the immediate threat from the police was reduced, the organization started working with other pressing issues, such as health and promoting human rights. The organization also expanded to other Argentine provinces, and a local chapter in Buenos Aires was formed, besides the national chapter at the CTA headquarters. Even if the organization almost from the very beginning had been a part of the CTA, which is a national labour union organization, it was not until after a couple of years that the question of unionizing women in prostitution became an issue within the organization. When demanding rights as workers, such as access to social welfare and pensions, came up on the agenda, some women who formed part of the Buenos Aires chapter reacted against this and in 2002 they decided to leave the CTA. Their primary reason for separating was that they did not agree with the notion of prostitution as work and did not want to become recognized as sex workers.

After the separation, AMMAR-CTA formed a new Buenos Aires chapter, and is today an organization in continuous growth.

### *5.1.2. ACTIVITIES*

AMMAR-CTA counts on a wide range of activities, which include weekly meetings for the members, workshops on health, prevention, human rights, unionization and self esteem. These activities take place both at the organization's offices and in the different prostitution neighbourhoods where the active members of the organization do outreach work, both giving information and handing out condoms.

Furthermore, the organization has lawyers and social workers that work voluntarily with assisting the women in solving problems, and psychologists that help working with mental issues. They also have agreements with some hospital clinics where the women can receive health care, especially gynaecological exams, in a comfortable environment.

In Buenos Aires, the CTA has a school where the women can finish their education, since many have not completed primary school and in some cases cannot even read or write. In Córdoba, AMMAR-CTA has started an official school, with financial help from the provincial government. In the framework of the *plan jefes y jefas de hogar* (plan heads of households); a subsistence program financed by the government and channelled through NGOs where persons in poverty receive 200 pesos per month<sup>73</sup> in exchange for doing community work or work skills training, the organization has established micro enterprises where some women can learn sewing in order to find an alternative income to prostitution. They also administer a government alimentary support program, *plan nacional de seguridad alimentaria*, aimed at persons in a situation of social vulnerability with the purpose of improving health and nutrition, where the beneficiaries receive a box of basic groceries each month

### 5.1.3. VIEW ON PROSTITUTION

AMMAR-CTA is a union for sex workers. There are two main reasons for taking this stand. The first is a reaction against what they see as a victimization of them, seeing them as *pobrecitas* ('poor little things'), by those who claim that prostitution is not a job. The second reason relates to the living conditions of women in prostitution in Argentina today, and the necessity of vindicating prostitution as a job to be able to claim rights as workers.

AMMAR-CTA considers saying that prostitution is something else than a job part of a discourse imposed by society. The women I interviewed often pointed out that they used to see themselves as unworthy persons, doing something bad, since that was what society had them believe. Starting to see themselves as workers helps them above that:

It is all a process of growth, where one says, 'listen, this gave me the possibility, this job gave me the possibility to give to my children what I did not have. Which is education, health and a home.' Then, if this is not decent, then where is the dignity?<sup>74</sup>

They want to be seen and respected as women and workers, and not as poor little prostitutes to be felt sorry for.

Although they consider prostitution a job, AMMAR-CTA does not promote it. Rather the opposite, many say that they would never wish it for their daughters or sisters, since it is a very hard life, and if it were not for the economic desperation, hardly any woman would voluntarily go

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<sup>73</sup> 200 Argentine Pesos is approximately 50 Euro, in December 2006. The Argentine government draws the extreme poverty line at just above 400 pesos per month for a family of two adults and two children.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Elena (AMMAR-CTA) December 9, 2005

into prostitution. Thus, one of their goals is that no woman should have the necessity to go stand in a street corner in order to survive. However, in the meantime, they organize as workers to improve their living conditions and claim the rights of any other worker. One important issue is for example the right to pension benefits so that women in prostitution should be able to retire. Being workers also makes it easier to claim a position within the working class, of which they consider themselves a part and share many problems with.

Not wanting to recognize prostitution as a job originates in the double standards in society, according to the secretary general, Elena. The women work with something that supposedly is for procreation, and that is not to be talked about. She points to the fact that there are many women who live with husbands that abuse them or simply are never home, that receive money from them to live each month. This is more accepted than women in prostitution coming to an agreement with a client about providing a service in exchange for money. Paola from AMMAR-CTA points out:

I consider myself a sex worker. I go and I work. And I charge my work. Just like I could go and clean floors I charge my work. I am a worker. Those are my rights, to call myself a worker.<sup>75</sup>

The objectives of AMMAR-CTA are to defend their human rights as women and persons, to work for their health and sexuality without risks, and for their labour rights to be recognized by society.

## 5.2. AMMAR-CAPITAL

AMMAR-Capital works under the watchword *association of Argentine women for human rights*. The organization only has one chapter, which is in the city of Buenos Aires, with around 480 members. Although most members are women either currently or formerly in prostitution, this is not an excluding requisite for membership. Instead, they say that they are an organization for women in a situation of social vulnerability, since it is also a way to prevent women from ending up in prostitution, seeing that vulnerability and marginalization can work as contributing factors. However, most women in the organization either are or used to be in prostitution, and the focus of the organization's work lies there. Neither are there any restrictions against men or transvestites as members, but the priority is on women.

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<sup>75</sup> Interview with Paola (AMMAR-CTA), February 15, 2006

AMMAR-Capital has a directive commission consisting of seven members, since a formal direction is a requirement for being a registered organization. However, in practice the goal is to have a horizontal organization where all members are able to participate on an equal basis.

The organization is financed from membership fees, for those who can afford to pay them. The office is provided by the socialist party and some of the activities are held on the premises of a Methodist church. None of the representatives of the organization receives any salary, and for the different projects the financing is usually dependent on external funding.

### 5.2.1. *HISTORY*

The history of AMMAR-Capital coincides with that of AMMAR-CTA up until 2002, when some members decided to form their own organization. After leaving the CTA Buenos Aires office, they moved to the neighbourhood Flores where they are still today. After the separation they have built up their own organizational structure and is now a growing organization.

### 5.2.2. *ACTIVITIES*

The activities of AMMAR-Capital are very similar to those of AMMAR-CTA already described. Where the two organizations differ in terms of activities is that AMMAR-Capital has no school, although they have had a few minor education programs, and that the micro enterprises are more expanded than in AMMAR-CTA, where only a couple of women participate so far. AMMAR-Capital started with their micro enterprise programs in 2003 and each semester one or two groups of between 15 and 20 women have completed them. At the time the study was conducted they had one micro enterprise where the women learned sewing skills and one where they learned hairdressing.

### 5.2.3. *VIEW ON PROSTITUTION*

AMMAR-Capital does not want to see prostitution as a job, and just like AMMAR-CTA, they have both ideological and strategic rationales for this position. First of all, just because they earn money to survive through prostitution, this does not necessarily turn it into a job. It is rather a survival alternative. How could it be a job when practically everybody is to get out of prostitution, and nobody would wish it for their children?

[...] because you cannot recognize something as a job when there is still exploitation, slavery.<sup>76</sup>

They want rights and equality, but they do not want them as workers. For example, they do not want retirement as prostitutes, a situation that they have always tried to get out of, and that many have been hiding:

How can a person that lied her whole life about what she lives from, the activity that she lives from, when you are old and can't take it anymore, sixty five years old, be going to recognize something that you were hiding your whole life and that you will hide always? Retire as a prostitute when you lied your whole life?<sup>77</sup>

They want the right to pension benefits, but rather as housewives or autonomous women, or anything but prostitutes.

Furthermore, they are opposed to recognizing themselves as sex workers, since that would mean a de facto acknowledgement that they already have a job. That removes the possibilities to demand the right to a job or to work training; the government can instead hand out condoms and claim that they facilitate or improve the women in prostitution's working conditions.

I have a proposal: the condom that the government gives me, I give it back to them. In exchange for my body. Let us do an exchange. I don't want more condoms from the government, but I don't want them to expropriate my body anymore. I don't want them to expropriate my subjectivity anymore. If I appropriate my body and my subjectivity, I know what I will want, I will be able to decide, if I should protect myself or not. I will decide what to do, whether to stay in the street corner or do something else.<sup>78</sup>

However, they point out that this position in no way aims at victimizing the women in prostitution, they do not see themselves, nor do they want to be seen as victims by others.

The objectives of AMMAR-Capital are to improve the living situation for women, both through pressing the state to generate public policies of employment, decent housing, health and education and through strengthening the women themselves to overcome their situation. They also want to work for the respect of the human rights of women and to eradicate all forms of violence against women.

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<sup>76</sup> Interview with Graciela (AMMAR-Capital), March 29, 2006

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Sonia (AMMAR-Capital), December 5, 2005

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*

## 6. PROSTITUTION, ORGANIZATION AND EMPOWERMENT

In this chapter I aim to describe and analyze the impact the two organizations have on the empowerment processes of the women participating in them, focusing on the possible effect of the differences in the view on prostitution between the two organizations.

### 6.1. PROSTITUTION AND DISEMPOWERMENT

In the interview material collected from the organized women in prostitution for this paper a clear pattern of prostitution as disempowering emerges. Above all, it is the position of prostitution and women in prostitution within society and the social stigma upon them that the women hold forward as disempowering factors:

Because you know what happens, they made us believe that for being whores we are not worth anything. And that the only thing we were good for was to stand in the street corner.<sup>79</sup>

They witness how they, when they first started out in the organization, had no perception of their own value as persons or of their own entitlement to any kinds of rights:

Because definitely you didn't know neither as a women nor as a prostitute, nor as anything, about your rights, nothing. We were the bad and the... and for us it was normal, that is the worst part of all.<sup>80</sup>

In a recent study from the University of Buenos Aires on people living in the margins of society, there is a chapter on prostitution in the poor southern outskirts of Buenos Aires.<sup>81</sup> In this chapter the difference between *stigmatized* and *stigmatizable* actors are pointed out. The meaning of stigmatizable actors is that they are exposed to the possibility of a social stigma, but this condition is not directly perceivable, as opposed to stigmatized actors, such as people from a certain ethnic origin or, to take the example in the book, transvestites. As stigmatizable actors are not immediately distinguishable as such, the fear of discovery and probable reprobation can lead to a series of constant occultation strategies to, if possible, avoid discovery and the assumed sanctions. This social stigma becomes a label that ends up being the truth even for the women themselves.<sup>82</sup>

I, at one moment in live, thought that I was bad for standing in the street corner. That I was doing something bad, that I was a bad person, and I lived hiding myself. When the kids came

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<sup>79</sup> Interview with Elena (AMMAR-CTA), December 9, 2005

<sup>80</sup> Interview with Graciela (AMMAR-Capital), March 29, 2006

<sup>81</sup> The name of the study is *Los nuevos rostros de la marginalidad. La supervivencia de los desplazados*. (Mallimaci and Salvia, 2005) and the chapter is called "Trabajo sexual: estigma e implicancias relacionales. Trayectorias de vulnerabilidad de mujeres y travestis en situación de prostitución en el sur del Gran Buenos Aires." (Meccia, etc.)

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*: pp 114-115

out from school, I hid myself, out of respect. When the police came I bent my head down and accepted that they took me away because I thought that I was doing something bad.<sup>83</sup>

The possibility of maybe not being discovered and thus trying to hide away makes it more difficult to organize stigmatizable groups of actors, such as women in prostitution, than stigmatized groups, since it is harder to organize those who do not dare to show their face.<sup>84</sup>

However, it is not only the social stigma that disempowers women in prostitution. AMMAR-Capital also points out prostitution in itself as a disempowering factor. Sonia, the secretary general of AMMAR-Capital gave an account of a reflection workshop where the women were asked to brainstorm words that they associated with sexuality and feelings. The women had come up with words such as 'hate', 'envy', 'rape', 'betrayal' and 'groping', but not for example 'love', 'happiness' or 'hugs'. According to Sonia, they did not pronounce those words because they do not know them:

That's what prostitution does. That is what it does, I tell them, it destroys a person's subjectivity. This is why I say it, the contempt is very strong for the activity that destroys you as a person, and converts you into this cold object that does not react, does not decide, does not anything.<sup>85</sup>

This picture also came out in another interview where Laura from AMMAR-Capital talked about how being in prostitution had made it very difficult for her to relate to other people. She has acquaintances but no close friends.

Furthermore, there are a series of other factors contributing to the disempowerment of the women in the study. A significant one is poverty, effectively limiting the women's possibilities of exercising agency. Structures of power relations in society creates discrimination in terms of gender, ethnicity and class, all of which work against these women.

## **6.2. ORGANIZING WOMEN IN PROSTITUTION**

All the interviewees were asked how they came in touch with the organization, if they knew when they started out that there were two organizations with different views on prostitution and if so, why they chose the one they were in. Some of the women had participated since the beginning, at the time when there was only one organization. These women were the ones who seemed to have taken the most active stand on the issue, since they had at one point in time actively chosen to

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<sup>83</sup> Interview with Jorgelina (AMMAR-CTA), March 29, 2006

<sup>84</sup> Meccia, etc., 2005: pp 114-115

<sup>85</sup> Interview with Sonia (AMMAR-Capital), December 1, 2005

stay in AMMAR-CTA or to break out and form AMMAR-Capital, depending on their views on prostitution. The ones that broke out, for example Sonia and Graciela who now form part of the directive commission of AMMAR-Capital describe it as a process of growth, where the issue of prostitution as work was not a very salient one in the beginning. It was not until after a couple of years, when the police repression began to cease, that ideological questions such as using the organization as a union and demand rights as sex workers came more into focus and thus it was at this point that the process of ideological formation and questioning really came about, for the women that left as well as for the women that chose to stay.

For the other women, the ones that joined the organizations at later points in time, the situation is slightly different. For them, the ideological standpoint was not always the decisive factor for joining one organization or the other. Instead, many of them came in touch with the organizations through other women they knew who were already affiliated. For some, their first encounters with the organizations were through one of their assistance programs and the affiliation became a form of economic subsistence rather than an ideological positioning. The two organizations also partly work in different neighbourhoods in the city of Buenos Aires, so for women exercising prostitution in Flores, it is more likely for them to be affiliated with AMMAR-Capital and for women exercising prostitution in Constitución, it is more likely for them to be affiliated with AMMAR-CTA, to give an example. However, this does not mean that the view on prostitution is of no importance to these women. Much of the activities arranged by the organizations have their basis in the view on prostitution, especially the discussion groups and reflection workshops, and in those the issue of prostitution is frequently discussed, permitting the women to form an opinion and take a stand, something that most of them have never done before.

However, representatives from both organizations are careful to point out that they do not want to impose any views or ideologies on the women participating, and that an important part of the process of growing as a person is being able to form ones own opinions. Elena Reynaga from AMMAR-CTA says about using the term sex workers:

And we don't impose on them how they want to call themselves. On the contrary, we work a lot, and then the ones to decide are the women, not us.<sup>86</sup>

Although AMMAR-Capital as an organization does not view prostitution as work and are against prostitution as such, neither they want to impose these views on the women:

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<sup>86</sup> Interview with Elena (AMMAR-CTA), December 9, 2005

This activity was imposed upon us, to prostitute ourselves. In one way or another. We don't want to impose once again.<sup>87</sup>

Nevertheless, of course, the ways in which the respective organizations view prostitution will have an impact on how the women participating come to shape their identities, since it is worked with from one particular perspective. But maybe that is of secondary importance to the primary fact that they are actually working with assisting the women in constructing identities based on a positive notion of themselves as persons with a value and citizens entitled to rights, whether as sex workers or as women in a prostitution situation.

Another important issue is the internal decision-making structure within the organizations and the level of influence the participating women feel that they have there. Empowerment is not a charity activity with people from above helping others; it is a process that requires active participation at all stages. Thus, the women interviewed were asked how much influence they felt that they had on the decisions taken and the activities carried out in the process and whether they felt that there was room for them to take a more active part if they would wish to do so. Both organizations have the explicit aims of giving all its members equal opportunities to participate on all levels. However, participating actively in an organization takes time and money, time to dedicate to the organization, and money since the more time spent on the organization, the less time available to spend on earning a living, time that most of the women cannot do without. Consequently, in both organizations there is a small group of very active women who get the role of 'leaders', albeit involuntarily. But it is a situation that they are aware of:

But the growth also has to be collective. I have a lot of women now; one from the directive commission here in Córdoba is going to travel to Canada to the international meeting on HIV/AIDS to represent AMMAR Nacional. So that it's not Elena, Jorgelina or Eugenia. That other women begin as well. If not, it doesn't work.<sup>88</sup>

But the women interviewed who were not among the most active ones still said that they felt part of the organization, and that their opinions were listened to, to the extent that they expressed them:

Yes, yes. I have opinions, I ask, they listen to me. Yes, I belong, I don't feel part of, I belong to AMMAR-Capital.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Interview with Sonia (AMMAR-Capital), December 1, 2005

<sup>88</sup> Interview with María Eugenia (AMMAR-CTA), February 24, 2006

<sup>89</sup> Interview with Marta (AMMAR-Capital), March 20, 2006

### 6.3. THE EMPOWERMENT PROCESS IN TERMS OF CHOICE

According to the theoretical framework on which this paper is based, choice is a central part of empowerment. Particularly important is the ability to make strategic life choices. Thus, in this section the focus will lie on analyzing the interview material, looking at the empowerment process in terms of choice, through its components resources, agency and achievements.

#### 6.3.1. RESOURCES

When assessing resources the aim is to look at the extent of control that women can exercise over important resources. As pointed out in the theoretical framework, the important aspect is the ability to choose rather than concrete choices made.

One of the most basic resources that exists is language. Not only language as a way of everyday communication, but also referring to being able to use language to formulate demands and express standpoints on issues:

The first reunion about human rights that I went to, there were many people, and I didn't even dare to talk and besides, I didn't even understand what they were talking about. They were all speaking in my own language and I understood absolutely nothing. Nothing. Nothing of anything. Today, I can sit down and discuss with these people.<sup>90</sup>

Before one can even begin to question a situation, or even more so to begin to demand a change, such as respect for one's human rights, one must have the tools to formulate this. Something for which one does not even have the words to express is difficult to find within the sphere of possible choices to make. In the context of ability to choose, having the access to one's rights as a citizen, in terms of being aware of and comprehending them, and in that way expanding the potential life options becomes a crucial step on the road of empowerment.

Other resources that the women can gain access to through participating in the organizations are of a more hands-on nature. These are for example the skills that they are able to learn, both basic schooling and practical crafts:

I used to be afraid. Not that much anymore. [...] Now we can raise our heads, because we are learning in order to get away from the street.<sup>91</sup>

The women acquire skills that are necessary resources to be able to make other choices in life. One of the most basic and concrete resources of them all is of course money. This is also one of the most difficult ones to access. However, the micro enterprises that the organizations are able

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<sup>90</sup> Interview with María Eugenia (AMMAR-CTA), February 24, 2006

<sup>91</sup> Interview with Claudia (AMMAR-Capital), March 7, 2006

to offer some women within the *plan jefes y jefas de hogar* are one step on the way. The *plan nacional de seguridad alimentaria* program is another. However, when putting the *plan nacional de seguridad alimentaria* in relation to empowerment, it is very important to remember the central role women's own agency in the process:

We don't want that. Because it is a program that creates dependency. Pure welfarism. [...] but we will use it as a strategy to approach the women. Because you can't talk to them about prevention and health when their stomachs are empty. So then, well, at the same time as we hand out the goods we give chats about gender, health, the organization, how we are carrying through the organization, what there is to do.<sup>92</sup>

Thus AMMAR-Capital, although they are against the program as such, since they would prefer a job to be able to buy their own goods and choose for themselves instead of staying dependent of the good will of the government, has decided to use it as a tool to work towards their own goals as an organization. AMMAR-CTA, however, sees it differently:

I can't ask for a hundred or two hundred boxes from the government, do a workshop and put eighty women there and then only after that hand them the boxes. Because then you are repeating what the system did all your life. This thing of cheap welfarism or cheap clientelism.<sup>93</sup>

For them, using the government's programs for other purposes does not become a way of turning a system creating dependency into something else but rather replacing one power, the government, with another, the organization.

### 6.3.2. AGENCY

The next dimension of choice is agency. The idea here is to look at the women's perceptions of their roles in relation to decisions, especially those with consequential significance for their lives, and the renegotiation of power relations in the decision-making process. As for the other dimensions, it is interesting to look at both perceived and actual agency.

Both organizations work with strengthening the women's self-confidence in different ways, to give them the sense of self-worth that is necessary to dare to demand their right to influence over their own lives. As Sonia from AMMAR-Capital points out:

The thing is that we work a lot with the *compañeras* that are in the micro enterprises. Because if not, they will just be like bodies put in front of the sewing machines or with the hair rollers in the hairdresser's and it's not your body.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Interview with Sonia (AMMAR-Capital), December 1, 2005

<sup>93</sup> Interview with Elena (AMMAR-CTA), December 9, 2005

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Sonia (AMMAR-Capital), December 1, 2005

Achieving a sense of value and of being a person in one's own right is essential for being able to exercising agency.

Paola from AMMAR-CTA provides an example of how her participation in the organization has helped her increasing her potential of exercising agency:

That I put my rights into effect in my house also. 'Sorry, but I am a person, I am a human being, I have my rights. I have the right to wake up in a bad mood, I have the right to go to bed in a bad mood, I have the right to not wanting to clean today and clean tomorrow instead.'<sup>95</sup>

Paola has been able to strengthen herself and renegotiated power relations within her family giving her more space to act on. Considering the quote above, there are aspects that seen from one perspective perhaps could be interpreted as suppressive. She holds forward that nowadays she is the one to decide for example when to clean the house and if she does not feel like doing it one day it is up to her to decide whether to do it or to leave it for another day. However, there is no questioning of the division of responsibilities as such. The demand is for her husband to respect her wish to do the household chores when she herself decides to do them, not about him sharing the responsibility for them. But in assessing the empowerment process it is important to recall the starting point for most of the women:

When we talk about working a lot with the theme of self confidence and the theme of violence, we talk about them and we work with them a lot because it is not that you just suffer from violence when you start being a sex worker. The majority of us come with histories behind us.<sup>96</sup>

Seen from this context even being able to express opinions and require to be listened to in the home, even though these are still within the framework of a traditional gender system is nevertheless a huge step for many.

### 6.3.3. *ACHIEVEMENTS*

Achievements is the last dimension of choice, and can be interpreted as the outcome of resources and agency together. The evaluation here is done by looking at the extent to which desired outcomes are realized in practice.

For most women within the organizations, exercising prostitution has not been a free choice, in the meaning of being able to make a conscious life election having several equivalent and

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<sup>95</sup> Interview with Paola (AMMAR-CTA), February 15, 2006

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Jorgelina (AMMAR-CTA), February 10, 2006

appealing alternatives. Most women also express a desire to leave prostitution. Thus, getting out of prostitution would for them be a crucial achievement. Supposedly, the economic situation in Argentina is improving, and the unemployment rates are going down again. However, when I asked Jorgelina from AMMAR-CTA about this, her answer was no, for the poor classes the situation is not getting any better. The number of women in prostitution on the streets has not diminished lately, for example. Thus, the women that manage to leave prostitution behind are way fewer than the ones who would wish to do so. Nevertheless, being in the organization is a way to at least begin to see a way out, to see alternatives, a hope that many of the women did not have before.

There are many obstacles on the way; many of the women are single mothers, with little or no work experience, and little or no formal education. On the harsh Argentine labour market they have very few competitive advantages. Some women manage to combine prostitution with other sources of income, for example selling things at markets, or working as housemaids. But making a sustainable living is difficult since the earnings are very insecure. The women I interviewed that had managed to leave prostitution behind had all done it with the help of a partner who maintained the household economically. Although this is a better alternative than staying in prostitution for many, the women continue in a strong dependency on men, and the situation is very vulnerable, considering the risk for the relationship to end, and the women having to go back to prostitution, or for the women to stay in a bad relationship for the sake of not returning to the streets, which in itself can be interpreted as a form of prostitution. Even so, having a somewhat secured financial situation gives the women some necessary breathing-space to be able to create their own income alternatives without having to worry about how to afford buying dinner that day. The support of the organization can work as important assistance on this road to finding alternatives.

#### **6.4. TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACT**

When assessing empowerment it is of vital interest to look at whether the effects of the empowerment process have had any transformative impact in terms of long-term structural changes, and for the purpose of this study, the interest lies also in looking at the impact that the organizations have had on this process of change. The transformative impact can be observed on the individual level, in each person's life, as well as on the collective level, for the group as a whole.

#### 6.4.1. *INDIVIDUAL*

All the interviewees were asked what the most important thing their participation in the organization had given to them. Without exceptions, their answers were all variations on the themes 'grow as a person', 'gain self confidence' or 'feel self-value'. After years, or even a lifetime, of being made to feel like a person worth nothing at all, this is a very significant transformation, which can be seen as laying the basis for all the other; without feeling like a person, no empowerment is possible.

As pointed out before, most of the women employed a series of occultation strategies in order for people in their lives, such as their children, not to find out about them exercising prostitution. This becomes both practically very limiting for their daily lives and the constant fear of discovery becomes a heavy mental pressure on them. Building up self confidence and realizing that, for exercising prostitution, they are not bad persons, or persons who deserve contempt, many of the women have, through their participation in the organizations, decided to tell their families. It is a difficult, but very significant, step that paves the way for enlarging the sphere of choice and action.

The individual empowerment is not something that comes by itself, or can be taught to someone through the organization, as María Eugenia from AMMAR-CTA witnesses on how she has changed as a person since she started organizing:

Maybe the growth as a person, being able to realize what your rights are, the person you are, what you're worth, everything you can do, that. Realize how one can grow if one puts the mind to it. Because the growth doesn't come by itself, either. You also have to make a great effort on your part, in learning, in growing, in wanting to know, in wanting to participate.<sup>97</sup>

Although all women interviewed hold forward their personal growth as the best thing that being organized has earned them, it is not an undivided positive experience:

Two things come together, sometimes you say to yourself 'oh, why did I have to become aware, it would have been better to have stayed like that, not understanding anything, better to live like that', because you suffer more when you understand. When you are aware that you lost 20 years of your life that were of no use at all. Because that is the worst of all, you

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<sup>97</sup> Interview with María Eugenia (AMMAR-CTA), February 24, 2006

weren't with your children, you were mistreated, beaten, with all the humiliation that being in prostitution signifies.<sup>98</sup>

#### 6.4.2. COLLECTIVE

The collective level does not apply only to the organized women in prostitution, but also in a wider perspective to poor women in prostitution as a group. One of the major achievements of the organizations is the reason to why they started out in the first place; to put an end to the arbitrary arrests of women in prostitution and to the abuse in jail. On a group level, this is one of the most important achievements of all, which in many ways has laid the ground for reaching the others, both individually and collectively.

Closely linked to this improvement in the encounters with the police is a transformation in the treatment from the whole society. All the interviewees were asked whether they, apart from the impact that the organizations had on the individuals participating, believed that the organizations also could contribute to change in a wider perspective, looking at society as a whole. Not all are optimistic about things:

It seems to me that society will never look at you well. They always see you as the strange thing. That, no... to me it seems very difficult that it will change. But at least this helps you to survive things. Society will always condemn you.<sup>99</sup>

Others, however, especially the ones that have been part of the organization from the start maintain that over the years that the organization has existed, a transformation in society has taken place:

What we began to show in front of the society, through media, of the organization is that here are persons, here are human beings that did not choose to stand in a street corner, but for that they don't have to wash their hands with us. We made changes, indeed we made changes. Of course that it's not, changing 37 million people, obviously that some will never change, but it's not with us, they will never change with the poor. There are people that won't change and so be it.<sup>100</sup>

Of course, achieving changes will probably not mean any revolutionary transformations, considering that perceptions on women in prostitution is something deeply rooted in society's cultural norms, and hence something that is unlikely to be brought about in a few years, by two relatively small organizations. The point is instead that the organizations, which essentially are its members, have managed to reach such a level of acceptance in society that they are now invited

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<sup>98</sup> Interview with Graciela (AMMAR-Capital), March 29, 2006

<sup>99</sup> Interview with Laura (AMMAR-Capital), December 6, 2006

<sup>100</sup> Interview with Elena (AMMAR-CTA), December 9, 2006

to lecture in schools and are recognized by the government to the extent that they are granted money and support for some of their projects. These aspects are by far not enough, but still of great importance.

#### **6.5. A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE TWO ORGANIZATIONS**

When comparing the two organizations to each other, the most important aspect to look at is whether any perceivable impact on the empowerment processes for the women can be attributed to the differences in the views on prostitution between the organizations or if there in fact are other factors that are of greater importance.

As mentioned in 3.4. *Limitations*, a significant difference between the two organizations is that AMMAR-CTA belongs to one of Argentina's largest worker's union, whereas AMMAR-Capital is an independent organization. Although AMMAR-CTA runs its own finances and is not sustained economically by the CTA in other ways than by being provided with an equipped office; them being backed up ideologically by a large and influential organization is a noteworthy factor. Having the possibility to use organization's well-known name can make it easier to obtain funding for projects and to get their message through to the public.

Although the views on prostitution held by the organizations will have an influence on the content of many of the activities, and thus in a longer perspective on the empowerment processes of the women participating as well, it is, as pointed out in 6.2. *Organizing women in prostitution*, less crucial than the fact that the women are actually being empowered through organizing. The big difference lies in the before and after organizing, not in the choice of organization. Both organizations aim at strengthening the women as subjects in their own right, helping them in gaining self confidence as well as skills to be able to decide on other life alternatives than prostitution if they wish. When understanding empowerment as the process of enlarging a person's sphere of action it seems as though it is the organizing in itself that is the influential factor rather than the ideological content of the organization, as long, of course, as the organization strives for empowering the women. However, a small difference can be perceived, which originates in the fact that prostitution is a very dominant part of the women's self-images and identities. Although both organizations work with building up identities based on being first and foremost women and citizens, the prostitution part still hangs on. From this perspective, constructing prostitution from the positive notion of work, instead of the negative notion of

oppression can make it an easier burden to carry. The terminology itself emphasizes the women more as acting subjects than as victims.

Still, the differences in the organizations' views on prostitution are not only of importance for the individual members of the organizations, but also for how society will come to look upon this phenomenon. Hence, although vindicating an identity as sex workers possibly is more positive for the women in the short run, a valid question to ask is whether this leads to a desirable situation in the long run. The position of asserting prostitution as work becomes a bit contradictory or even contra productive when at the same time recognizing the destructive situation that it brings many women to. Establishing prostitution as a profession among others institutes it even firmer as a legitimized part of society, which in turn would work against many of the other efforts of the organizations, such as assisting the women that so wish in finding other work options. As pointed out by Sonia from AMMAR-Capital, establishing prostitution as work effectively removes the possibilities to put pressure on the government to provide women in prostitution with alternatives. Furthermore it weakens many of the organization's own arguments for obtaining funding for their programs – why spend money on assisting these women to find work alternatives when they already have a job; better to spend them on the unemployed?

## **7. FINAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

By studying and comparing two Argentine organizations created by and working with women in prostitution I have in this paper examined whether the organizations' views on prostitution imply different outcomes in terms of the empowerment processes for the women participating and how this would be manifested. This chapter sums up and discusses some of the findings of the study.

The theoretical point of departure for the paper is the concept of empowerment, broken down in the notions of choice, with its dimensions resources, agency and achievements, and of transformative impact, on an individual as well as a collective level. The most notable finding in this study is that the work of the organizations can be said to promote the empowerment processes of the women participating. The burning question, however, was whether this turns out any differently in the two organizations. The most straightforward answer to this question is no. From the material this study is based on, it is not possible to say with certainty that any

differences in the empowerment processes can be attributed to the organizations' views on prostitution. On the other hand, the answer is not as easy as a straightforward yes or no. From the interviews with the women in the two organizations, a slightly more positive position can be discerned among the women from AMMAR-CTA. As elaborated on in 6.5. *A comparison between the two organizations*, it is possible that this can be a consequence of the more affirmative connotations of the sex work terminology. However, it is the organizing in itself that is the by far most influential factor on the empowerment processes. It would be interesting with further, and more extensive, studies on the topic that perhaps could shed more light on what the implications of different views on prostitution really are.

It is difficult to make any predictions about what the future will bring for the women in the organizations and women in prostitution in general in Argentina. If the economic situation for the country as a whole continues to improve, the conditions for the poorest sectors of society must brighten as well. Nevertheless, as of today it seems like there is still a long way to go before poor women in prostitution will be able to make a conscious choice on how to make a living, and then turn it into reality. As for the organizations, it is crucial that they do not get caught in their own ideological disagreements, forgetting that their real adversaries are not found in the other organization, and failing to see that the similarities are more than the differences, and that they on many issues would benefit from working together to be stronger.

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#### INTERVIEWS

The names with \* have been changed to keep the informant’s anonymity.

**\*Claudia** – AMMAR-Capital – March 7, 2006

**Elena** – Secretary General, AMMAR-CTA – December 9, 2005

**Graciela** – Treasurer, AMMAR-Capital – March 29, 2006

**Jorgelina** – Secretary General, AMMAR-CTA Buenos Aires – February 10, 2006  
**\*Laura** – AMMAR-Capital – December 5, 2005  
**María Eugenia** – Secretary General, AMMAR-CTA Córdoba – February 24, 2006  
**Marta** – AMMAR-Capital – March 20, 2006  
**Paola** – AMMAR-CTA – February 15, 2006  
**Sonia** – Secretary General, AMMAR-Capital, December 1, 2005