
Research Papers



Prostitution in Africa: A sociological Study of Eritrea (North East Africa)

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Abstract

Prostitution is a trade as old as mankind is a worldwide phenomenon that is not unique to any specific time. However, its level of prevalence in society and peoples attitude towards it varied according to socio-cultural, economic and political conditions.

Some scholars think that prostitution is a necessary social evil because it protects innocent girls and women against rape and the men can have another outlet for sexual relief(Rattanwanaship,1991).others think that prostitution is not only a question related to morality but is also associated with other serious issues of alcohol, drug and crime. Secondly, in contemporary times, it may pose a serious threat to public health because of HIV/AIDS spread. Thirdly, it undermines the institution of marriage and family.

Introduction:

Prostitution is perceived as a serious threat for women and children. Every year millions of women and children enter into prostitution. Especially in developing countries a large number of children and women are driven into prostitution because of economic reasons.

In Eritrea, likewise, the roots of prostitution can largely be attributed to socio-economic forces, as the case in other parts of the world. It is neither legalized nor criminalized in Eritrea. However, it is perceived as a barrier to social development especially in developing nations like Eritrea. That is why the government of Eritrea since its inception has focused on the issue. It has conducted various studies to assess the nature, prevalence and effect of the profession on Eritrean society. Several rehabilitation programs have also been initiated to rescue commercial sex workers from this risky profession by meeting their socio-economic needs.

This paper is an attempt to evaluate the

overall impact of the rehabilitation efforts carried out by different governmental and non-governmental bodies.

The first part of the paper deals with historical emergence of CSW in Eritrea. Prostitution is a century experience in Eritrean society. Colonization was one of the major factors that encouraged the bloom of this profession in this country.

Second part of the paper covers literature on prostitution. Here, different perspectives to understand the problem of prostitution have been presented. It also discusses the different models and experiences of rehabilitation initiatives undertaken in different Asian countries. These countries are known for their CSW rehabilitation programs. In this section, their social and economic bases of prostitution have also been discussed.

The third part of the paper deals with the methodology the research. This research used both quantitative and qualitative methods. On the

quantitative part questionnaire was used whereas on the qualitative part semi-structured in-depth interviews and case studies were applied.

Part fourth is occupied with the findings of the study. In this section, demographic findings are included.

Part fifth of the paper consists of the status of both, rehabilitated and active CSWs.

Part sixth of the paper presents the economic status of the respondents.

An analysis of the findings has been provided in the following seventh part. It provides with an analysis of the overall socio-economic environment of the Commercial sex workers. It tries to establish the impact of the rehabilitation programs by a comparative study of the socio-economic status of the rehabilitated and un-rehabilitated CSW.

Finally, in the last part conclusions of the study have been drawn and recommendations for effective rehabilitation have been provided.

Background of the Study

The emergence of prostitution in Eritrea

Prostitution has existed for along tome in the history of mankind. Although it is difficult to know when and where it had began precisely. Some literatures reveal that it was practiced in ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, and China. Sometimes it is also referred to as the oldest profession. In Eritrea the practice of prostitution as an institution was developed during the Italian colonization.

According to Araya (1992), “the establishment of Italian colony in Eritrea and the coming of large number of soldiers, officials and colonists, in most cases without their wives, led to considerable growth and commercialization of sex which soon reached on present proportions”.

In addition to colonialism, urbanization had also had its contribution in widening the spread of prostitution in Eritrea. Cities were the centers of development that attract rural migrants especially the young girls (mostly widowed because of war who were left without support). In the country side the occupational avenues were very limited. Hence, in order to escape the exploitation as housemaids because of poverty, the young girls chose to become madams or prostitutes.

In the successive eras of colonization, the immediate followers of the Italians were the British. As what the Italians did, the British followed suit. The Eritrean women remained full

time servants as they were with the Italians. At that time having sexual relations with Eritrean women was very common. Elderly people belonging to that era, report that venereal diseases were found to be widespread in the country during that time. After these two successive colonies, Ethiopian colonization continued with its two phases, the Hailelassie regime and the Derg regime. The former aimed at political integration and promotion of prostitution (in order for Ethiopian soldiers to have free access to sexual relations with Eritrean women). The opportunity of having sexual relation with native Eritrean women was widely practiced by Ethiopian soldiers in different places. Prostitution became a common activity especially in cities where military bases were located. War widowed women remained without any option but to open houses for practice of prostitution.

The Derg regime was worse than all the previous colonial regimes. It is believed that prostitution grew at a faster rate during that time. The report of the UNICEF by acknowledging NUEW stated “since colonization, prostitution developed at a slow rate but it reached at its peak during the Derg regime, when a large number of soldiers overwhelmed the country. According to this report, Ethiopian women who came with the soldiers and natives practiced prostitution. At that time commercial sex was common in most of the towns despite the fact that that the Ethiopian soldiers were aimed militarily. They did not come with their wives or families and hence, they had no permanent contact with any women. Therefore, the Derg regime promoted prostitution in order to satisfy the immediate sexual needs of its soldiers. In post independent Eritrea, the government has taken several measures to regulate prostitution. Unlike the time of colonization, commercial sex workers today, is required to conform to certain conditions. For example, they go through a monthly medical checkup to ascertain their health conditions. In addition, prostitutes are not allowed to operate near schools, hospitals, and churches (MLHW, 1999).

Definition of Prostitution

There is no precise definition of “prostitution” as its meaning differs among and within societies and takes a variety of forms based on the activities of the participants. Different scholars have given different views. For example, prostitution is defined as “the gratifying of non-marital sexual access, established by mutual

agreement of women, her client, and/or her employer, for remuneration which provides part or all of her livelihood" (Winick and Kinsie, 1982).

In consonance with the above points, it can be defined as "prostitution is sexual relations on a promiscuous and mercenary basis with no emotional attachment, prostitutes make a living by sexual favor of anyone who will pay" (William and Kornblum, 1987).

According to the Encyclopedia of social sciences, prostitution is defined as "the act of practice of indulging in promiscuous sexual relations, especially for money and a prostitute is a (mostly female), who is engaged in promiscuous sexual intercourse for money and/or for material advantage".

The Authority of Social Affairs defined prostitution as "a woman or girl who violates Eritrean norms and values by selling her body for the sake of money" (Authority of Social Affairs, 1992).

Although the above definitions clearly show the divergences inherent in the attempts to define prostitution, they have three points in common:

1. The prostitute receives money from the customer in return of her sexual service.
2. The prostitute provides services to a number of persons.
3. The relationship between the prostitute and the customer is not influenced by personal feelings.

For the purpose of this study, a prostitute is regarded as a woman or a girl who earns her livelihood partly or fully by exchanging sexual activities indiscriminately for money or material advantage.

Types of prostitution in Eritrea

Based on the nature of their sexual activities, there are various forms of prostitution practiced in the world. However, the following categories of prostitutes are so far identified in Eritrea based on the places where prostitution is practiced. They are:

- a. Street walkers: This type of prostitutes seeks customers usually on the streets, most of the time they work at night.
- b. Home based prostitutes: These prostitutes use their houses as working places for the business.
- c. Bar owners: These types of prostitutes have their own bars or small drinking houses and practice prostitution as an additional source of income.
- d. Bar ladies: They work with or without payments and seek clients from their work place.

e. Small drinking house prostitutes: These types of prostitutes usually work in local drinking houses or tearooms and supplement their income with prostitution.

f. Secret house prostitutes: They perform prostitution in secret drinking houses.

g. Call girls: With the introduction of new technology of cell phones, call girl category of prostitutes has emerged recently.

Social and Economic Bases of Prostitution

The Social Bases

The roots of prostitution are to be found in the socio-cultural institutions and traditions that dictate gender relations and relations between parents and children. As one aspect of unequal gender relations, prostitution will continue so long as the social structure surrounding it and contributing to it, prevail. It will persist so long as men are considered naturally sexually active and aggressive but 'respectable' women must preserve their chastity and honor.

In some societies prostitution is seen as "a universal and inevitable social evil, necessary to satiate an uncontrollable male sexuality. Prostitution is therefore, considered as society's safety valve against rape of women and the disintegration of the institution of family (D' Cunha, 1992, p.36). Even women themselves often share this perspective. Moreover, the premium placed on virginity and the sense of worthlessness of those who have lost their virginity to lovers and relatives led many women to enter into prostitution thinking that this is what they deserved. There have been several instances where the traditionally defined attributes of femininity: passivity, submissiveness, sentimentality, and sexual desirability-which are often associated with women, are exploited commercially by the sex sector.

In many societies women have traditionally played a major role as family bread winner (though not necessarily as decision makers). In recent years the number of female-headed households has expanded. The surveys conducted on prostitution reveal that many of the women in prostitution are divorced or single mothered (ILO, 1998, p.12).

The economic role of daughters in families is increasingly been changing. Many families now rely on income and remittance from their young daughters. In many Asian countries for instance, children especially girls are brought up with a sense of duty and moral obligation to earn money

to repay the care and protection given by their parents in raising them. Therefore, having entered prostitution against their own will, many girls nonetheless felt that they had fulfilled their obligations. Despite the risk of diseases and physical abuse, girls who had been sold in prostitution, return home with honor as they brought money, goods and security to their families (Belsey, 1996, p.18).

Another factor, which increases the demand for prostitution is “the preference for female virgins which exist in many cultures. In some countries sex with virgin or pre-pubescent children is seen as a verification or augmentation of virility. In others it is believed to cure sexually transmitted diseases or to mitigate the effect of age (ECPAT, 1995).

.The Economic Base

The commercial sex work not only provides substantial income and employment to those directly or indirectly involved in prostitution, it also serves as a mechanism for redistribution of income (particularly through income remittance from urban to rural and from prostitutes working overseas) as a survival mechanism for coping with poverty and as method of compensation for the lack of social welfare and income maintenance programs for large segment of the society. It is a significant source of foreign exchange earning with links between the growth of prostitution as a highly structured trans-national business and the expansion of the tourist industry.

A substantial amount of money changes hands through the direct and indirect activities of the sex sector, and often these activities are crucial, especially in the local economy. In Indonesia for instance, the financial turnover of the sex sector was estimated at between US\$ 1.2 and 3.3 billion per year, which accounts for 2.4 percent of the country's GDP.

The economic base of prostitution means that the relationship between the growth of the sex sector and economic development cannot be ignored. This is one of the reasons why more and more women, children and men have been drawn into commercialization of sexual services and why there is a growing demand for such services. While the growth of the sex sector is closely tied to economic progress, modernization and growing sense of materialism are some of the other factors contributing to the growth of prostitution.

Methodology of the study

Statement of the problem

Under ideal circumstances, women would

not need to engage in commercial sex work nor would a client base for such service. Since commercial sex work is the last option women left with to do for their survival providing other options ceases.

Objectives of the the Study

- 1.To analyze the Economic condition of the commercial sex workers
- 2.To assess the social conditions of the commercial sex workers.

The Universe of the Study

The setting for this study is Asmara, in zoba Makel. The study was conducted in the slum localities of Aba Shawel administration. Under this administration there are different localities namely, Geza Berhanu, Edaga Arbi, Hadish Adi, Medoshto, Geza Banda Habesha, and Abashawl. From this localities the sample was taken from Abashawl, Geza BGirhanu and Edaga Arbi. These areas are located in the North eastern part of the capital-city displaying the important characteristics of the slum areas like: lack of sanitation, over crowdedness or congested housing pattern and poorer social sevice facilities. The constituent populations in these areas are mostly low-income workers forming nationalities of diverse origins – namely, Eritrean, Ethiopians, Nigerians, Sudanese, and Yemeni.

Commercial sex work is one of the chief attributes that these areas are known for. Brothels are common observations along with some bars and traditional – drink serving homes.

Population under Study

The population under the study comprises of only female CSW's in the age range of 18 to 40. The study included subjects of two categories.

- 1.Those CSW's which are rehabilitated and
- 2.The active CSW's

The study however never took under consideration the ethnic or religious dimensions of the subjects.

Sample Setting

For the purpose of this study the quantitative data comes from a written questionnaire administered to a sample of (120) one hundred and twenty commercial sex workers. Hence, the Socio-Demographic profile of Commercial Sex Workers was established through quantitative data of 120 CSWs. The sample included seventy (70) from those, which either got some rehabilitative opportunities or never experienced any; and the remaining fifty (50) were from those who are no more in the profession and

are working in activities like sewing and weaving. However in this paper the researcher presents the results largely collected through case history of 4 participants to examine quite deeply the overall feeling, socio-economic improvements and barriers to their well-being of the CSWs.

Socio-Demographic Conditions of Commercial Sex Workers

The research was conducted among 50 rehabilitated CSW and 70 active (un-rehabilitated) commercial sex workers. Moreover, interviews were conducted with 4 key informants. The demographic characteristics of the respondents were as follows

	Age distribution									
	18-22		23-27		28-32		33-37		38-42	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Active CSW	28	40	24	34	10	15	4	6	4	6
Rehabilitated CSW	12	24	20	40	8	16	10	20	-	-

Table 1: Age distribution of the respondents

The respondents were all females, from which only three individuals among the active commercial sex worker were Ethiopians. The age distribution of respondents in both categories ranges from 18-38 years. Majority of the active CSW (77%) were found to be below the age of 30 years. Among the rehabilitated CSW majority were above 25 years (76%). The mean age of the active CSW was 24 years, but it was 27 years among the rehabilitated CSW.

Level of Education

	Level of Education									
	Illiterate		Elementary		Junior		Secondary		Higher Education	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Rehabilitated CSW	2	8	3	12	6	24	13	52	1	4
Active CSW	8	23	12	34	12	34	3	9	-	-

Table 2: level of education of respondents

When we look at the educational level of the respondents, it varies from illiterate to higher education, i.e. 12+ on teaching institution. The higher number was found on elementary and junior level among the active CSW, whereas it was secondary school in the case of rehabilitated CSW. From the active CSW only 9% were below secondary school level, while 56% of the rehabilitated CSW's had a secondary school and higher educational level. This shows that with the increase in educational level the readiness for rehabilitation also increases, and similarly it is less

likely in the case of the CSW with lower educational level.

Marital status

With respect to the marital status of the respondents, there is a similarity among both categories of the rehabilitated and the active CSW. At the time of the study, none of the respondents were married. When the rehabilitated CSW were asked if they were married after rehabilitation one of them admitted to be so.

	Marital status									
	Married		Divorced		Widowed		Single		Others	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Rehabilitated CSW	2	4	10	20	2	4	36	72	-	-
Active CSW	6	9	4	6	6	9	52	74	2	3

Table three: Marital status of the respondents

All the respondents were sing, majority of which were divorced or widowed. But based on our observation and interview with some respondents, they often cohabit with some 'boy friend' which they call 'Seb-ay', it literal meaning being husband even though it is not intimate or legitimate relation. Majority of the respondents for active and rehabilitated CSW however had children.

Number of Children

	Number of Children							
	1-3		4-5		>5		No child	
	NO	%	NO	%	NO	%	NO	%
Rehabilitated CSW	26	52	8	16	12	24	4	8
Active CSW	34	49	6	9	4	6	13	37

Table four: Number of children of the respondent

92% of the rehabilitated CSW had children, 24% of them had more that 5 children. From the active CSW 63% had children even though only 24% of them were previously, married, divorced or widowed.

Case Studies

Aster is 19 years old CSW, she lives with her mother in Gheza Berhanu, the only reason for her to work as a CSW is to support her family which formerly was her mother's responsibility. Her mother was working as a CSW, but now she is no more in the profession due to age factors. As a result Aster had to support her family, and the only means through which she can do was continuing her mothers legacy. She is now supporting her 3 younger brothers and her mother. Her mother admits that her daughter's reason to join CSW was mainly economic problem of the family.

Case 1: case history of a respondent why she joined the profession

23 years old CSW. Helen has worked within the profession for 5 years and has one child. She is single, but she has a boy friend, who lives on the earnings that she brings from her clients. Emphasizing the importance of having a special boy friend she says, "if a girl doesn't have a boy friend she is not respected and she is not secure to work in the area. So we need to have a boy friend despite their dependence on us. And in case we need a child we can have a father.

Case2: case history of a respondent that witnesses the question why they choose to cohabit with Boy friend.

Yodit is a 27 years old rehabilitated CSW, She lives in Geza Brhanu, and her house is very small almost 2m x 3m. She was trained in tailoring for six month by the HAMSET project; she was given all the materials she need for work. Yodit's main problem is lack of working place; her small house is very inconvenient for her to work due to lack of enough space.

Case 3: Case history on problem of the RCSW

Hadas, 38 years old, rehabilitated CSW, worked as CSW for more than 10 years. She joined CSW after her husband's death. Hadas used to send 600-800 Nakfa monthly. When she was asked if her parents knew about her work she said that her parents know that she gets the money from washing clothes. They know nothing about CSW since they live in rural areas and they are too old.

Case 4. Case history on the knowledge of parents to their daughter's profession

Aster was trained in house keeping by the Ministry of Tourism. After her training she took some practices in a hotel, but since then she didn't find any job. She tried to work as bar lady same times but she found it uncomfortable. She said some of us get job after training but many other are still not working including me, some of them are working as waitresses in lower wage. We are still waiting for the, the MOLHW of Zoba Maekel, to find such a place to work for.

CONCLUSION

Commercial sex work is only a century's experience in Eritrean society, despite its constant change and boom with the influence of colonization. It has been culturally unaccepted practice for the past century. Until now members of such group have been discriminated and stigmatized the Eritrean society

However prostitution as an old human

profession is still persisting. In Eritrean society prostitution can be cited as one of the fastest growing practices that can result in grave social economic and health consequences. And this can be among the reasons for raising more attention from different organizations and ministeries. Prostitution is neither legally accepted profession nor legally criminalized act, but the government of Eritrea believes that prostitution is a social problem and is striving to check its prevalence. Thus, rehabilitation of commercial sex workers is one controlling mechanism aimed at reducing CSW by providing them with job skill training and helping them re-integrate with the larger society.

Prostitution is not caused by a single factor, it can be caused by different factors. The most common reasons are economic and social factors. Early marriages, divorce, loss of virginity, rural to urban migration, and others are some of the factors. Other than the above-mentioned factors, socialization is a main factor for the young females who are bought up in slum areas, to force potential teenagers into prostitution. (Centre of CSW in Asmara).

Unlike the social forces the economic factor influences a women and girls to inter prostitution in two ways. Firstly, economic problem forces them enter into prostitution as the last option of earning money. On the other hand, high –income attainment can attract many others to join the professions and make it less likely for those already in the profession reluctant to leave the work. But still there can be many other reasons. The MLHW, MOH and other organizations have been working in rehabilitating CSW to re-integrate them with the society. The research has studied the impact of rehabilitation on the lives of the CSW in relation to the Active CSW.

In conclusion, the finding show that even though, the rehabilitation programs did not secure the socioeconomic condition of the rehabilitated commercial sex workers the responsible organizations and ministeries however insist on explaining that taking few commercial sex workers out of that profession is a success in itself. Lack of economic security however can be the factor for regression of the rehabilitated commercial sex workers, as it was the reason before, for the majority of the CSW, to join the commercial sex work profession.

Recommendation

The following points are about a brief recommendation of the researchers on prostitution

and rehabilitation of CSW. Some of the recommendations are already clearly discussed points in the research.

Recommendation with regards to CSW

1. The ministry of MLHW should have clearly articulated policies on prevention and rehabilitation of CSW.
2. Society should be educated on the consequences of rural to urban migration and early age marriage.
3. Grass root education should be provided for the young girls in the slum areas, so as to avoid role-modeling CSW.

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