

SEXUAL IDENTITIES AND SEX WORK - INTERROGATING THE INTERFACE A STUDY ON CONSTRUCTED IDENTITIES AMONG FEMALE SEX WORKERS IN KAMPALA CITY

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Introduction

We have arrived in the sexual tower of Babel where a world of past silences has to be breached. (Plummer 1996)

This quote from the work of Plummer is very telling and gives scholars the energy to ask new questions about sexuality and what it means in the current discourse on gender and work. We recognize that sexuality as a subject of study in the social sciences has gained currency by moving the domain of knowledge production away from the psychologists and psychiatrists¹ to the social sciences. For long, our knowledge on sexuality was anchored within the totalizing discourse of the “pure sciences” that suggests that sexuality was one thing to everyone in the world and was an aspect of our biology with an inherent energy that can be used to explain all behaviors of people. The heterosexual married couple was the right mode of living and any differences were deviations that had to be explained scientifically. Today the place of the heterosexual couple is a rugged terrain that has been complicated by the emergence of sexual behaviors made possible by the triumph of capitalism and reconstitution of communities into providers of labor power. In this new context sexuality has become increasingly contested, commercialized and commodified.

This study therefore is concerned with mapping the complex terrain of commercialized sexuality – commonly known as sex work. The study is located within an interrogation of identity politics that focuses on issues of representation and how this impacts on the configuration of sex work in a post-colonial city. Asking these questions becomes important because the symbols and icons that line the world of sexuality are in themselves living cultural products and processes that shape our understanding of what sex work is, in Africa.

In most writings on prostitution, the opening statement of such writings invokes a canonical given with the famous cliché of prostitution as “*one of the oldest professions in our history*”². Such a cliché takes for granted the nature of prostitution as if it is one thing that all of us understand and therefore the only debate that remains is to ascribe a moral marker on it as “good” or “bad”. On the outset I want to point out that this study is not anchored within this kind of moral dichotomy of the good and bad things about prostitution. This study intends to unravel and bring to the fore questions on how identities are formed, negotiated and recreated within the realm of prostitution and what kind of new issues need to be focused on in our engagement of the larger intellectual project on gender and work.

The identity category - prostitute - is one of the most contestable areas in the discussion of labor issues the world over. In nearly all countries of the world, prostitution does exist in one form or the other. Authors have indicated that in some countries like the United States up to \$40 million per day is spent on prostitution. In Birmingham, a British city, up to 800 women are engaged in prostitution and one million people working in prostitution related businesses like massage parlors, saunas, escort agencies and on the streets (**Pateman 1988**). Paradoxically in a country like United States, cities spend up to 7.5 million dollars per year on prostitution control (<http://www.bayswan.org/stats.html>). These kinds of complex situations are important to unpack only if to try and understand why capitalism in its most liberal form as it is known today still views prostitution as double tragedy.

Turning to the world of intellectuals, we are seeing the arrival of scholarly as well as activist work on the pros and cons of prostitution. The medieval scholars stand out prominently in the quest for knowledge about prostitution when it is named as the oldest kind of trade in human bodies. References in the Holy Book of Christianity – the Bible are a case in point (St. John 8:3 and St. Matthew 21:31). These biblical utterances did not only valorize but also complicate the place of prostitution in ancient society and Christian morality. Indeed one notes that the place of the prostitute in the medieval era has always been marred with moral judgements and condemnation and yet condoned by the same society that criminalizes prostitution.

¹ See for example Sigmund Freud's 1993 article entitled *Female Sexuality*.

² See for example Whyte L (1980) and Bakwesigha C (1982)

In the legal realm, many laws of different countries have continued to exhibit ambiguity about prostitution. Under the British law it is the acts associated with prostitution like loitering, soliciting for sex publicly and earning from “immoral means” that constitute a crime not the act of exchanging sex for money (**Davidson 1996**). Versions of this same law exist in different parts of the formerly British colonial world. In Uganda the same vagueness exists in the law books against prostitution. Critical concerns that still mar the understanding and legal response to prostitution could be traced to the conception of the trade itself. An everyday definition of a prostitute suggests that it is a person who engages in sex for money. This definition however, falls short in pointing to other critical parameters like - the duration of relationship, mode of exchange, nature of exchange and a host of other issues that compound prostitution. This has made the curbing of prostitution difficult and myopic sections of the law like being “idle” and “disorderly” are invoked to charge women who are viewed as prostitutes. This in itself shows the frustration of the law and the patriarchal domination and oppression that still defines the morality of the world we live in. Nevertheless, the debate on prostitution still rages on and now needs to be taken into new horizons if we are to “move out of the ghetto in a methodological way” – to borrow **Mbembe (1999)** phrase.

One other dimension that still informs our knowledge production in post-colonial Africa is the ways urbanization and the organization of labor made its mark on the African continent. It is argued that the advent of urbanization and the reconfiguration of labor processes in African societies made prostitution possible and a necessary evil that accompanied the vulgar capitalism that came with colonization (**Whyte 1980**). The “detribalized” wage-worker in the urban centers was catered for in all aspects apart from their sexual needs. In this case, the women who only existed in the informal urban setting therefore served the sexual needs of the heterosexual male. It is also mentioned that for the colonial urban worker in the very harsh conditions, the prostitute offered a place for solace on their day off and possibly the only opportunity to sleep in a *real bed* (**Nelson 1987**). This was the kind of knowledge that was produced on colonial discourses on prostitution in East Africa and little is known about how these new relational paradigms shaped the labor discourse – if they ever did.

In the present day Uganda, arguably there are no more restrictions on the movement of male workers who only access *real beds* in the city through sleeping with prostitutes. This then means that the parameters around which prostitution is currently mobilized have changed and the past dynamics that may have made the trade possible have attained a new face. Yet it also brings to the fore the realization that the dominant discourse that shaped the relationship between male wage workers and female sex workers was one that criminalized the female and buried its head in the sand, viewing male behavior as a necessary evil of the patriarchal colonial capitalist system. Today, the women and men who solicit sex in exchange for money can no longer be described accurately through some crude method of women serving men in a dark corner of the city or the illegitimate beer brewer offering “a bed” to the legitimate but sexually starved colonial worker. The terrain of prostitution is now more complicated and interspersed with the complexities of urban living and urban survival. Economic problems seem to be the overriding factor given the increase of women entering the body marketplace. Yet it may be too reductionist to argue that material concerns are the only reason that drives human action. Can we then read other contending discourses in the realm of prostitution other than economics?

What this study has done therefore is take interrogate the different identity questions on prostitution and take stock of the discourses around prostitution and the resultant complications. Further more, feminist thinkers are also equally perplexed by the ways in which prostitution can be treated within the framework of feminist politics. Prostitution, for the radical feminists is the ambiguous embodiment of male oppression that reduces women to bought objects with men able to affirm their patriarchal rights of access to women bodies (**Shrage 1990, Pateman 1988**). Yet this argument is complicated by the fact that exchange of sex for money does not always occur within a coercive space. On the other hand, one has to attend to distinctions between “free choice” prostitutes and “forced prostitute”. The forced prostitute falling within the arena of a child prostitute and the vulnerable woman who is captured to become a sex slave. This for example is an issue of great concern in the East Asian countries where the statistics of sex tourism are highest in the world. “Free choice” prostitution still is an area of great controversy and contestation. This is so because of the complexity that arises in the interpretation of the contours of power and how they operate within this arena.

In this paper I shall concern myself with interrogating the nexus between sex work and identity questions in Uganda. This is an important area of inquiry in gender scholarship because of the lack of attention to this area and of its significance in everyday work experiences. In Uganda, two studies have been done in this area (**Bakwesigha 1982, Southall and Gutkind 1957**). Bakwesigha’s study uses data from the 1970s and is more anchored within a sociological perspective that labors to assemble statistics that in many ways leave the reader yearning for more in terms of trying to understand the different power complexities that are at play. The Southall study is anchored within the colonial patronizing mode of knowledge that does not see any agency in the African subjects. My study therefore borrows from discourse analysis popularized by (**Foucault 1977 and 1978**) to try and understand the nuances that one encounters within the world of prostitution.

The Problematique

Prostitution is one of the trades that have always taken place in the “illegal realm”. Prostitution is sometimes regarded as the nameless trade where men and women are involved in the buying and the selling services of the most contestable parts of the human being – the sexualized body. In order to understand the different facets of prostitution we also have to understand the social meaning of the body and the different ways in which power constructs the body both as a *laboring* body and a *sexual* body. One of the influential writers in this area is Michel Foucault who has written various works on the subject of sexuality. His work has been very instrumental in making the body a favored subject of analysis in Sociology, Anthropology and Philosophy (**Gatens 1992**).

Moore (1994) has also argued that the body is never finished and never perfectly socialized. The body is one area that adapts to different situations and to different challenges. It is used for work and is also a medium for the perpetuation of other bodies and as well as a site of enjoyment. On the other hand, **Foucault (1978)** has also argued that the symbolic meanings we attach to the body are not inherent in the body but are invoked through the different activities that bodies engage in as social beings.

Prostitution is one phenomenon that refuses to fit neatly in our understandings of what work is or is not. One of the reasons for this is that the body becomes the site of work in prostitution and yet it is also a site of power struggles and identity politics. In prostitution, sex becomes the commodity and the body the marketplace. People pay and sell to step out of the complex web of rules and regulations that non-commercial sexuality accords them. Prostitutes are condemned by religion, laws are made against it and feminists' viewpoints are made to stand on their heads in debates about prostitution. At one point the prostitute is seen as the tragic frontline casualty and at the other point she is the self-serving collaborator who is betraying her sisters (**Davidson 1996:180**). Through other kinds of logics, the prostitute unlike the married woman may be seen as one who exercises a great deal of power and control over her sexuality. She can refuse men sexual access and also exists on the fringes of patriarchal control. Indeed, it can be argued that in contracting sexual services the prostitute is resisting patriarchy and refusing one-man ownership over her body thus challenging the stereotypical notions of power. For men - there are many ambivalent attitudes formulated about prostitution. In some instances, the very men who complain about commercialized sex are often the ones who may be going out to seek for female companionship.

In Uganda, prostitution was complicated by the arrival of a Victorian middle class and religious morality that accompanies the entire colonial project. The workers who were moved from the rural areas were kept in the city without their families and at the same time single women were allowed the space to exist on the fringes of the city. These two conditions allowed for the existence of different kinds of sexual liaisons that have been variously described (**Obbo 1980, Nelson 1987 and White 1980**). Contemporary Uganda has seen a rise in cost of living, but the city continues to be a place where various possibilities for work exist. These possibilities still exist within a work ethic that includes the subsuming of the confluence between work and sex. Against these perspectives, this paper looks at the different facets that can help paint a picture - with a context - about the nature of prostitution in Kampala City. The following questions guide this research; how is does one conceptualize the notion of identity and prostitution? What are the different ways in which identity articulates itself in sex work? In the emergent identities in sex work, what are the implications for patriarchal domination? What kinds of issues emerge for a better conceptualization of gender and work?

Theoretical Perspectives on sex work and the body

Sexuality, the body and Discourse Analysis

This paper is anchored within a theoretical framework popularized by the work of **Foucault (1978)** on the sexuality and identity formation. I link this work to different theoretical formulations by feminists and sociologists who have written variously about prostitution (**Sunstein 1990, Pateman 1988, Weeks and Holland 1996**). Foucault's original contribution follows from the intellectual fallacy that was propounded through the 1960s by different psychoanalysts led by **Freud (1933)** who argued that sexuality is a product of some inner human quality that even goes back to our childhood and this is incited to produce the different behaviors that we engage in as adults. Sexuality was reconstructed around the image of the dominant male phallus. Variations in sexuality were deviations from the masculine sexuality and they needed to be redeemed and understood within the masculine perspective. Foucault's contribution to this debate was to deconstruct this popular belief and argued that sexualities are constantly produced, changed and modified and hence the nature of sexual discourse and experience also changes. An explicit example of this sexuality comes from **Theweleit (1987)** who writes that;

If intercourse has always and everywhere felt, meant, and been the same, if a kiss is just a kiss, a sigh just a sigh, then it does not matter whether you are Roman or Barbarian, ancient or modern, 5 or 55, in love or just earning a living” (73).

The author uses the above example to illustrate the fallacy of universal assumptions. What this example points out to us is the fact that any approach that looks at sexuality from a Freudian perspective of biological predeterminism would not be able to get to the real history of sexuality in any given context. This point is well illustrated in the genealogy that Foucault maps out in his analysis of sexuality in the ancient Greek narratives of sex (**Foucault 1985**).

To locate this discourse within the discussion on sexuality and the female body, I briefly sketch out two schools of thought in the area of feminist scholarship about the body and sexuality. There are feminists who have argued that women need to affirm and celebrate the capacity of the female body. This is the capacity to recreate as well as nurture human beings. This school of thought looks at the body more as a biological entity that is *ahistorical* in its characteristics and its capacities (**Gatens 1992**). Hence this school of thought sees people as essentially male or female and does not look at the power that constructs these body dichotomies. Another school of thought is one that refuses body dichotomies of male/female and claims a history for the body. Within this perspective, understanding the body and sexuality also takes into consideration the different ways in which the environment and other typical activities of the body vary historically and create its capacities, desires and actual material form (**Foucault 1978**). To give an example of this perspective, the body of a domestic worker or housewife and the body of a female athlete do not have the same capacities. Each has different capacities as well as different desires and demands in order to accomplish its work. In this case the biological similarities cannot account for the specificity of these two bodies even though they are both female³. This kind of formulation is important when studying prostitution so that we do not reify sexual difference but also account for the ways in which typical spheres construct and recreate particular kinds of bodies to perform particular kinds of tasks. In this case therefore we do not see the body only as sexual but as *sexual within a context*.

A formulation that historicizes the body is very useful in seeing the different ways in which power constructs bodies which implores us to challenge *power* and not the *bodies* per se. It is also important to note that sexuality and the body are integrally connected to conceptions of femininity and masculinity and all these are constitutive of our individuality and sense of identity (**Pateman 1988**). In that case, when sex becomes a commodity, so are bodies and selves.

In trying to understand prostitution the easiest escape route has always been to see it as oppression of women by men – as if men and women are rigid categories which can be easily identified and their oppression easily mapped out. Further, this formulation gives us the chance to look at some of the ways in which bodies in prostitution also map out their own contours of power so that they cannot be analyzed by focusing on monolithic entities like male or female. In the next section I link this debate to the issue of sexual identities.

Sexual Identities and Sex Work

Identity becomes an issue when it is in crisis (Shotter 1993)

The crisis of identity occurs when things we assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable are displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty. Foucault introduces an angle when he points out to us that identity is bound up with the workings of power. This is a theme that he writes about in a number of influential works on sexuality, discourse, power and subjectivity (**Foucault 1978, 1985, 1986**). He suggests that identities are not “pre-givens”, neutral, unified and fixed. But rather identities are a product of a normalization strategy where the individual is not merely observed but rather regulated and “carefully fabricated”. This normalization strategy – which he calls discipline – has the ultimate goal of elimination of all kinds of social and psychological irregularities and the production of useful-docile bodies and minds. He extends this perspective to the understanding of sex, when he argues that the prevailing sexual discourse at anyone time does shape the ways in which different people influence or encounter sexuality. In our understanding of sex work and identities, we therefore need to attend to the different notions of normalization that go on in Kampala. These range from the social construction of the prostitute, the representation of the prostitute and also the ways in which prostitutes subvert the different social icons that society and sex as work inscribes on them.

Giddens (1991) writing on self identity offers some useful tips when the author argues that self identity has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of an individual. Who to be?, what to be? and how to act? are questions that must be asked. In this way one notes that identity is seen as a scheme formed through asking different questions and continually ordering the narratives that shape our lives. Giddens adds that, the more tradition (as a normalizing strategy) loses its ability to provide a secure and a stable sense of identity, the more individuals negotiate lifestyle choices and attach importance to these choices. Concern with lifestyle when thrown into doubt makes the individual question those routinized habits of relevant kinds even those most closely integrated with self identity (Giddens quoted in **Heaphy 1996**).

³ For a more rigorous kind of formulation see Moira Gatens (1992) article on *Power, Bodies and Difference* in Barrett M and Philips Anne (1992) book - **Destabilizing Theory**. This formulation uses Foucault as a starting point.

How then can these formulations be useful in the understanding of sex work? The fact that identities here are not seen as a given and static entity is a very important element of our understanding of sex work today. The sex worker as we shall see in the findings of this study is surrounded by different choices and narratives, which calls for innovative strategies that sometimes subvert the normalization processes of society. The sex worker travels and lives through different identities invoking different logics in different contexts. In some moments the prostitute has to emphasize her femininity and “availability” and yet in others she has to “wear” the identity of the “sophisticated woman”. In different lifestyle choices that a person employs lies the instability of identity and therefore the frustration of that one who hopes and believes that a prostitute has a monolithic identity and therefore can be analyzed within the framework of the deviant.

We therefore need to link this perspective of identity to another category that needs to be theoretically cleared before we employ it as an intellectual travelling companion in this study - the concept of sex work. This is one of the concepts that have been variously used by different writers. Sex work is sometimes taken as the “politically correct” term to use for prostitution. It has been used to make a distinction between paid and consensual relationships between sexual partners. It is a term that is employed to try and locate sex within the realm of work. Yet even with the naming done the category still suffers ambiguity and fluidity. Some feminist scholars and labor activists have shunned this distinction by arguing that marital sex should also be seen as a type of sex work (**Delpy and Leonard 1992**). Other influential thinkers in this school of thought who have been prominent in making this assertion are Simone de Beauvoir (a pioneer feminist) and Friedrich Engels (a renowned Marxist writer). Citations of both writers will be useful to illustrate their points of view. Simone de Beauvoir writes;

...for both the sexual act is a service, one hired for life by one man, the other has several clients who pay her by the piece. The one protected by one male against all others, the other defended by all against the exclusive tyranny of each (p.619).

Engels (1985) says;

Marriage of convenience turns often enough into crassest prostitution-sometimes of both partners, but far more commonly of the women, who only differs from the ordinary courtesan in that she does not let her body on piecemeal as a wage worker but still sells it once and for all into slavery (p.102)

In both cases de Beauvoir and Engels have bracketed sex as work for both the prostitute and wife in a home. One overriding constant being that in both cases the woman is *selling* herself to a man. This has been the debate that has got taken up by some of the contemporary feminists like (**Pateman 1988**) in her influential work entitled *Sexual Contract*. In this work she argues that one has to understand prostitution under the whole rubric of the sexual contract. She argues that in some instances the prostitutes take on sex work in order to earn money like in any other job where women chose to be. However, she is quick to add that we should not therefore just equate prostitution to other forms of labor since in other forms of labor the contract is between the men and workers and here it is exclusively a contract between men and women. She goes on to say that prostitution is part of the exercise of male-right to sex, one of the ways in which “men have always ensured that they have access to women bodies” (ibid:194). These she concludes are some of the ways in which prostitution can be differentiated from other forms of labor.

Connell (1987) has also contributed to this discussion by pointing out that sex work is one that takes place in the context of interpersonal balance of power that derives from the unequal access to resources which one partner possesses and the other does not have. The author expands the horizon of resources by noting that in this case resources may include; money, physical strength and sexual attractiveness or even the capacity to deploy anger or love.

Indeed the debate on sex work still rages on and a view from the practitioners maybe useful at this point. In the Manifesto for Sex Workers of Calcutta, under the sub-heading *why do women come to prostitution?* They note;

Women take up prostitution for the same reason as they may take up any other livelihood options available to them. Our stories are not fundamentally different from the laborer from Bihar who pulls a rickshaw in Calcutta, or the worker from Calcutta who works part time in a factory in Bombay. Some of us get sold into the industry. After being bonded to the madam who has bought us for some years we gain a degree of independence within the sex industry. A whole of us end up in the sex trade after going through many experiences in life, - often unwillingly, without understanding all the implications of being a prostitute fully (<http://www.bayswan.org/manifest.html>).

One notes from this discussion that the history of prostitution and work is one that is marred with many contradictions and complexities. It also tied in with the history of sexuality, social control and capitalist exchange relations, which increasingly do commodify everything.

In this paper therefore, I find that taking a stance on either to use the term sex worker or prostitute is a complex and futile position. I will therefore want to use the terms interchangeably in this study, in order to allow for a break in the terminology monotony but also to make the political statement that a discussion of prostitution cannot be separated from a discussion of work. Trying to only name the trade prostitution and not see it as any other thing is hiding away from the practical reality of prostitution, because what makes prostitution is not so much the sexual service but the return, or rewards that the persons who engages in it gets.

Conclusion

A lot can be said about the disciplinary factions that make up the world of scholarship on sex work. However, I will put the debate to rest if only because I have borrowed a few intellectual signposts that will help to mould the rest of this paper into a useful contribution to the debate. In the presentation of findings I will keep returning to some authors to draw energy and intellectual morale for arguments presented. I will only make one point that binds most of the pieces in this section together; that an intellectual engagement with prostitution cannot operate without subverting the normalizing strategies of social sciences. In the quest to understand the notion sex work we need to work on the basic assumptions that create the knowledge of sexuality that we hold and use throughout our processes of knowledge production. As it will become evident in the sections that follow the generation of knowledge in this work depends on innovations rather than inscriptions of the paradigms of traditional social science research.

Methodological Issues

I open this section with a caveat that this paper in some ways grapples with the question of research ethics, often presented as a personal and moral concern for the individual researchers. At the offset, let me submit that, focusing on ethics can also be a way of de-emphasizing and downplaying the power relations that structure every aspect of research. "Ethics talk" can be a way of separating and 'purifying' one area of thought from another. By showing that ethical debate cannot be separated from questions of power, this study takes cognizance of the paradox that research cannot be justified - in and of itself - as an ethical practice because all social research *is* an engagement with power. Let me also add that the way individuals operate in sex work raises difficult methodological, ethical and philosophical questions, not only in the research process but also in the evaluation of what the individuals are prepared to reveal about this most intimate part of their lives.

The Sampling Process

31 women who are self-professed sex workers were interviewed for this study. 10 of them were contacted through one of the sex workers who agreed to work with the research team – this group was coded as Speke Hotel Group. The rest were contacted through a Local Council (LC) leader in one of the locations of the study coded as the Kisenyi group.

Sampling for the Speke Hotel Group

For the sex worker who worked with us, we contacted her one evening before the fieldwork commenced in a Kampala pub known as Rock Garden Café. Through a confidant who is a bouncer at the Café and also works in one of the sports clubs I go to, it was possible to establish contact with this key informant. I brought up the topic of sex work with the bouncer during one of our conversations and he offered to show me one of the girls who was "good natured" and would be helpful. We arranged a meeting through the club bouncer to talk to the key informant. At that meeting I introduced myself and told her about the objectives of the study but realized that she was reluctant to continue that conversation on the first day. We therefore talked about social life generally in order to build enough rapport. I gave some more explanations about the kind of work I was doing but without asking for any particular help. She was fascinated by the idea that a man was "just interested in learning about sex workers". We arranged a second meeting for the following day to allow both of us to think through this first encounter.

From the bouncer I learnt that she cross-checked my information and asked if I was a genuine person or she was being used or spied on. After the bouncer convinced her, she accepted to come on the second day. I found out that this key informant was studying in one of the business schools in Kampala. She accepted to be part of the study if she was going to be paid for the time she would spend doing the work. We agreed on the mode and amount of payment. Her task was to identify some of her friends who would be willing to talk to the study team. She mentioned that she could identify them but may be it was better that we meet them during the day or on Sundays when they are relatively free. She suggested that her residence would be the meeting place. Through her we managed to talk to 9 girls who all said they were sex workers. In order to ensure that we talked to respondents who were in the trade, I always insisted that she identifies her friends during the evenings when we are in the bar and then follow up the meeting during the day which would be suggested by the respondent.

Sampling for the Kisenyi Group

Sampling for the Kisenyi Group was through one of the Women Local Council secretary in the area whom we had worked with on a previous study in the area. During that study on poverty we did an analysis of the livelihood options of a prostitute and drew a livelihood analysis diagram using participatory methods. During that time we asked a few questions on the subject of sex work and the LC official promised to be helpful when we come to do a specific study on sex work. When we returned for this study, she identified about 25 women who were sex workers, but we could not interview all of them for various reasons. Some were not available during the interview times and 3 of them after second thoughts refused to be part of the study.

Sampling of Locations

Kisenyi: Is in the Central business district area of Kampala city and has for long been associated with sex work. In the early sixties it was a place known for bringing together many immigrants from different parts of East Africa. The people in Kisenyi still talk of the Tanzanian women known as the Baziba who were very popular among men because they were considered very beautiful⁴. Kisenyi was also a place where you had a lot of working class people who worked in the biggest market in the area. Kisenyi is also an area where prostitution has been politicized in the public sphere discourse of the area. A case in point is during the Constituent Assembly Elections in Uganda, where one of the contestants for the election who is a half caste was referred to as *mwana wa malaya (child of a prostitute)*. We were told that because of this metaphor being used on the candidate he was able to win overwhelming support in Kisenyi because all the women in Kisenyi said *we are all malayas so we shall give our son*⁵. The councilor has since then been an ardent supporter for the sex workers rights and in one of the dissemination exercises in a study we had done earlier which he attended he specifically asked us not to use the word prostitute in our work but sex work⁶. These were some of the reasons why we chose Kisenyi.

Speke Hotel Area/Rock Garden Café: This area could be taken as the *Red Light District* of Kampala. Speke Hotel and Rock garden Café are in a place next to one of the popular and oldest hotels in Kampala, which is known as Speke hotel. Sex workers line the streets around this café and the hotels in the neighborhood which include; Sheraton Hotel (a five star hotel), Grand Imperial Hotel, Speke hotel, Nile Hotel and Mosa Courts apartments (high class apartments). All these hotels are the best in Uganda and nearly all the expatriate community that first come to Kampala stay in one of these hotels. It is mostly middle class Ugandans who can afford to drink in this area and beer goes for 1500-2000 shillings and yet in other places beer goes for 1000-1200 shillings. The place therefore attracts a richer clientele than other parts of Kampala.

Methods for Data collection

In order for one to get data on such a topic it is necessary to engage with the respondents lived experiences and perspectives as well as the feeling and perspectives of other persons. I therefore used ethnographic research methods for data collection, emphasizing the use of longer interviews and unstructured questioning and observation of the spaces where the different key informants were. The self professed prostitutes who connected us to her friends was one of the key informants in this study. Through the long term engagement with her in the research process she was able to reveal a lot of inside information which could not be easily got at by working with tools like questionnaires. We were able to even hold focus group discussions - not structured in any conventional way - on tables in different bars where we worked. Though the women gave us their names they said they did not want them used in the report. For the women in Speke Hotel area, many of them offered to first write a script about their lives, which we could then use for discussion. However, some of the scripts were not easily readable, but all the same we worked with them and acknowledged their efforts as very important.

We also worked with a short interview guide for the women in Kisenyi because they thought they did not want to "just talk" since some of them were working during the day and our "transport refund"⁷ was not enough for the long interviews which we wanted to carry out with them". We did not have any structured interviews with any men but did talk to some of the men who have interacted with the world of prostitution. We talked to the ones who worked in the bars where we went and also to the security guards at the different drinking locations. We were not able to talk to any Policeman because they were reluctant to be part of the research. The time when this research was being carried out

⁴ Information given by the LC I councilor who worked with us as a guide on this study. For purposes of this study we shall refer to her as - **Guide**. Studies by Southall and Obbo attest to some of these facts. See for example, Southall A. W et al (1957) **Townsmen in the Making; Kampala and its suburbs** and Obbo Christine (1980): **African Women: Their Struggle for Economic Independence**..

⁵ Information from the Guide.

⁶ This was during the dissemination exercise for a on poverty assessment in Kampala. One of the activities we had to do was to take back the finding in a public meeting where the leaders from the area would be given a chance to comments

⁷ This refers to the small incentive fee of 5000 shillings, which we had to give to each of the women.

there was a big Uganda Government inquiry into the conduct of the police that was taking place and many of policemen we contacted said they did not want to be part of such a study. As one of them put it; “*how do we know that you are not Ssebutinde staff trying to find out how we handle these sex workers*”⁸

Problem encountered during the research

Studying sex work is a challenging and interesting topic. One has to start by grappling with one’s personal biases. In the first place I found that some of the questions we started off asking were sometimes offensive to the women whom we interviewed, so we had to learn asking questions in a non-offensive and we had to be patient with the respondents.

We also had to find ways of working through some of the research biases that the respondents had. Sometimes the respondents started off talking about their problems and they were wondering if we worked for Non Governmental Organizations that could provide “credit” for them. For these kinds of respondents they preferred to portray themselves as a suffering lot. After they found out that we were not only interested in their problems but also the ways they coped on an everyday basis, they then started talking about some of the different ways in which they worked.

The times when the research had to be done were awkward. We had to always work late into the night. Some of the respondents felt safer talking after 10:00 p.m. We also sometime had to bare the wrath some of the women had against the state. For example some of the women wanted to know why men go out with prostitutes and yet they are married, or why the Government does not want to legalize sex work yet so many men in Government go out with prostitutes. To these questions we had no answers and therefore all we did was to sometimes stimulate a debate and that meant that we ended up using a lot of time. We also has to spend a lot of money because we usually met in bars and we had to buy some drinks.

The methodologies used for this study could not be standardized to our satisfaction because we found that there we different perspectives that we could not get at easily using some of the tools we are trained to use in social research. We therefore had to be as innovative as possible

The study was also done at odd hours which meant that one had to stay out late in the night and sometimes writing of the findings could not be done at the study sites and we had resort to getting home and recollecting as much as one could about a certain response and where possible cross check this information, but this was not always possible.

The Routes and Roots of the trade

The story of the trade in sex in Kampala city cannot be divorced from the story of the rise and development of Kampala city. One of the detailed studies of the colonial scholarly tradition on urban living comes from the work of (**Southall and Gutkind 1957**), who wrote the book entitled *Townsmen in the Making*. The authors give an account of the development of Kampala and points out that the object of the study is;

...not to discredit the unfortunate, but to reveal the unhealthy features of urban development at their growing points before they become widespread (p.19).

This was the patriarchal and patronizing principle that informed the production of knowledge on urban places. Indeed for Southall et al it was only the *Townsmen* in the making and nothing to do with the making of the *Townswomen*. Though the study does refer to the women in some of the observation scenes and shows the central part they played in the trade of waragi and the immunity they enjoyed from the Buganda Police because some of them were related to the Kingdom, this did not amount to *townswomen* in the making. These dynamics one may argue could have brought in more interesting analysis of some of the notions of identity in the urban setting and how the context influences the identity that one mobilises. Without just apportioning blame to the Southall study, one realizes that there were a number of important ways in which works like that of Southall were instrumental in informing the colonial policy on “free” developing communities in the city. These places were seen as deviant spots and therefore in need to be sanitized because they were in themselves creations of the failed strong hand of the colonial law on urban centers.

Even with all the different ways in which the above authors viewed locations like Kisenyi they did take off - quite a bit of time - to record some of the issues of prostitution in Kisenyi and in Mulago. One of the opening statements made in this study is a telling one and shows how for long Kisenyi has been a place where sex work was seen as an acceptable mode of occupation. A section in the book entitled: Prostitution and Concubinage start thus;

⁸ The particular policeman who said this was a friend because he came from the village neighboring the secondary school I went to. But he was very skeptical about my involvement in this kind of study and was convinced that I had sinister motives. After sometime we also reanalyzed our objectives and were convinced that a police perspective would be another interesting study of it own. Ssebutinde was the name of the Lady Judge who headed the inquiry into the police.

Every variety of sexual relationships is found in Kisenyi, from relatively durable concubinage to blatant prostitution for cash payment. Kisenyi is always full of goodtime girls who hang around beer bars waiting to be bought drinks (79).

The quotation is accompanied with some detailed accounts of the ways in which different women and men were involved in sex work in Kisenyi. Most of these issues have not changed drastically but there are certainly a few changes that have happened because of the end of colonialism and therefore more men and women moving into other places within the city. One elderly woman in Kisenyi who accepted a short interview about the changes that she saw in the area mentioned that;

Today the high class men do not come here for sex. In our days all the African men who were big shots in Government would have a girl in Kisenyi. We had the Baziba who were very beautiful and very "clean" women and the men liked them a lot. But when the bazungu went at independence then the high-class men stayed up so they could drink from those bars where the bazungu used to go⁹.

Obbo (1980) has analyzed some of these changes and how they affected women who migrated to Kampala city in the post independence period in Uganda. From the work of Southall and Obbo one realizes that sex work in Kampala city is one with a history and one which is related to the changes in the process of urbanization. In the next section we focus on how some of the demographic characteristics of the interviewees helped to restructure their identity positions. This focus on the demographic is not so a description of characteristics but to show how self identity is created through a negotiation with different normalizing strategies of the individual.

Demographics as sites of identity construction.

Age and Identity

When does one become a man or a woman? This is a question that not only related to the age as a demographic factor, but also relates to age a defining factor in prostitution. In the short survey of the 21 respondents in Kisenyi we found most of them were below 30 years of age (80%). Of these we had about 38% below 20 years of age. This is an important factor because one recognizes that there are many young women who are involved in sex trade. The 10 respondents who offered life histories also had an average age of about 18 years. We did discuss the issue of age and how important age was in the construction of the self-identity of the sex workers. One of the respondents had the following to say;

As young girls if you have dropped out of school or your family does not have money to pay for your school fees, sometimes you find that you have no choice but to quickly find an occupation that you can do while you are young. I did start off as a housegirl but all the boys in the family I was working for - even their father wanted to sleep with me and they were only paying me 10,000/= per month. I met a young woman who was staying near our shop and I noticed that she was always very smart and yet she was always at home through out the morning. So one day I asked her if she could help me and find a better job but she just laughed and said I should just wash her clothes. I did this for sometime and I found she had very nice trousers and shoes and I asked her again and one night she told me we should go together. That first night I earned 25,000/= shillings and I was fascinated by the idea that I could actually double my salary in a night. I realized I had to use this body before I grow old!¹⁰

Age for the women was seen as part of the critical points for a person who intends to be a sex worker. Indeed the women said that in some instances one has to look younger than what one is - because "*men like young women...we do not even mention that one has ever had a baby otherwise the man may think that wagwaamu da (you are already spent)*"¹¹.

I am reminded of submission by **Giddens (1991)** who argues that self identity in what he calls high modernity is sculptured from a complex plurality of choices and reordering of narratives. The narrative of age in this scheme of the prostitute's identity seems to be one that is reordered with contradictions and divergent choices. For that one looking for the "experienced" woman then age becomes a lucrative identity and yet for those who are out to explore the young and innocent, age loses its currency. It is important therefore to recognize the role of age on the level of self and representative identity. Age offers a discursive space for the articulation and reproduction of different identities for the sex worker in which dominant definitions of feminine presented are made explicit and sometimes contested.

⁹ Interview with old woman in Kisenyi May 2000

¹⁰ Interview with a woman staying in Kabalagala and working in the Rock Garden Café area

¹¹ This is a metaphor that suggests that some one had slept with so many men and therefore her body is spent. It is also interesting to note that in some other instances experience was said to be a very good investment because some men wanted "experienced" women.

Educated Identities

Western education is one of the invasions which colonialism did bring with it. Education is supposed to be the civilization and modernity is delivered¹². Education as a technology of colonialist subjectification works by universalizing of values embedded in the English and represents the colonized as the inferior and uncivilized. The educated person is one that can talk authoritatively and therefore access different kinds of spaces and can mobilize different identities. As a laborer, the higher one is educated the better wages one get and the better off one is. For the sex worker, the knowledge of the English language was not only a marker of success but a reaffirmation of the identity of a sophisticated sex worker but also has a gateway to success in the trade.

Most of the women we interviewed in this study said they had limited education. The meaning being that they had gone to school for a few years and did not speak very good English. The majority of the women in Kisenyi reported that they had attended only primary school. They made up to 57% of the respondents in Kisenyi. There were a few women who had never attended any school. Education was an important factor because many of them cited the “end of being at school” as a very decisive factor in their becoming sex workers. Below are some quotations from different women on education and how it shaped their lives,

Respondent 1:

Yes, I used to go to Bwala Primary School and stopped in P.6. Things became very expensive and my parents could not afford school fees. I stayed at home for four years and I got a boy friend who made me pregnant and then she refused to take responsibility of the baby...I suffered and struggled until I gave birth. My child is now seven years and she goes to school.

Respondent 2:

I used to go to school up to primary five but I found school boring and I was aging (she was getting to 13 years) so I dropped out.

Respondent 3:

Yes I have ever attended school and I am still in school in one of the schools in Kampala. (she refused to mention the school and the class). But I had to drop out because my parents could not pay, but because I know I cannot be on the streets all my life I go to school and I pay for myself.

Respondent 4:

I stopped in senior one, my father passed away when I was still very young and my mother got married to another man who helped to pay the school fees, he also died when I was in senior one and my mother become sickly so I had to stop school so that my sisters and brothers could continue.

The quotations above point to the different ways in which education was very instrumental in influencing these respondents' decisions to opt for sex work. This was coupled with the reality that their parents were not able to pay and cater for their daily needs during the times when they dropped out of school. Women also talked about the importance of education in sex work. As one of the women put it;

If you are educated there are chances of getting a good man. Those girls who know a lot of English easily get men. That is why some of the girls come from Makerere to work with us here because they know that if they “add” their English to sex work they can make a lot of money on the streets. That is why there is a lot of competition now¹³.

Fulfilling a client's needs did not just entail having a good body but also being able to communicate in a way that ensures the camouflaging of the identity of the illiterate street girl. The women mentioned that sometimes men are attracted to women because they can speak “good” English. One of the women brought out the perspective that one can deny her identity as a prostitute and therefore be able to negotiate a higher fee if she can portray herself as a *good girl who “does not do these things for money” but just has a small problem*. Again one notices the mobility and fluidity of identities in sex work intertwined the discursive strategy of being an educated person. The women involved have learnt to *live* these multiple identities as everyday strategies of their investment in sex work. Education was therefore related more to the representative identity that the prostitute mobilizes. While age is a marker of self identity as shown in the previous section, education was an icon, a defining factor, that gets thrown into the body market place through the employment of language and speech. Indeed in the whole schemata of the use of English one sees the ways in which language is a fundamental site for identity construction and therefore is a potent instrument for cultural control but in this case for entering the post colonial body market. The English language here displaces the native languages

¹² A good reference on this point comes from the work of Bishop Alan (1990) on Western mathematics as cultural imperialism and Ashcroft Bill et al (1995):425.

¹³ Interview with a woman from Kisenyi May 2000

which the sex workers know and the local languages are constituted as impurities and therefore English is the standard and other languages are variants¹⁴.

Place and the identity question

The place subject is supposed to be able to throw light upon subjectivity itself¹⁵. It is important to think of place conceptually in such a way because the relationship between the self and place where the self is located can be very telling in our understanding of the notion of identity. The naming of a space as urban gives it a discursive productivity and a history and process of social construction is embedded on it. For the sex worker, the space where the trade can be carried out is not only a visual construct but also a space that enable alternative lifestyles. The sex workers in this study came from different parts of the country. The geographical spread for example for the respondents in Kisenyi showed that about 38% were from the western parts of Uganda and another 38% from the southern, about 20% from the central districts and 5% from the Eastern parts of the country. For the respondents from the south some of them mentioned that they came from as far as Rwanda. It is important to note that it was not only girls from the central region, where Kampala is located who were represented in this trade. Some of them noted that some men even go on to ask them where they come from before they can buy their services. The women noted that these were usually men who looking for women from specific tribes because of the imaginations they held about the sexual prowess of certain ethnic groups. In a group discussion the women mentioned that the Banyarwanda and the Banyankole were seen as women with better bodies than most of the other girls¹⁶.

Respondents in Kisenyi noted that currently the ethnic mix is mostly Ugandan and as one respondent mentioned, there were many more people from different East African countries in Kisenyi in the sixties and early seventies. They noted that the eighties and beyond were marked with political upheavals and economic hardships and therefore it was mostly women from within the country who migrated to Kisenyi.

The Speke Hotel Group also mentioned that in other locations like Kasanga there are many more women from different countries. One of them had this to say,

The Banyarwanda, Barundi and the women from Zaire usually opt to stay in places like Kasanga. This is because here the community does not care a lot about the girls and most of the people in the slums around work in bars where these girls go so they do not want to antagonize them. After all they are the ones who make business boom. When some of the women from these neighboring countries come to Kampala, they hire a room and they stay there for about one or two months and they live in group of four or five afterwards they go back to their countries. These girls speak many languages like –French, English, German and very good Kiswahili so the white men like them a lot¹⁷.

From the above quote it is evident that origin for the women in sex work was not limited to Uganda only. We had a chance to talk to one of the girls who said she comes from Rwanda and she said that, *Uganda today has got a lot of whitemen who come to do work for many Government projects in the country and we come to give them company*. In this kind of migration, the anticipation of the kind of clientele that is available in the certain place is a very crucial factor. We shall return to the point of clientele later. Many of the girls also mentioned that they came from rural areas in those different locations where they were coming from. We did not have a question on the rural-urban divide but the metaphor “coming from the village” was very prominent in the speech of the different women we talked to.

In a nutshell it is important to point out that the use of these three kinds of demographic characteristics is not so much to stay true the traditional social sciences - of knowing the demographic structures - but to actually interrogate their contribution to the production of the identity of the sex worker. One notes that the representative as well as self identities are negotiated within other demographic discourses. This chapter therefore attempts to elaborate that age, education and place provide different iconographic energies to the construction of the identity of the sex worker. In the next chapter I go on to present the different *sites* where multiple identities are played out. I discuss how these different factors shape and are also reshaped by the existence of sex work.

Space, Sex and Identities

In this section, I do engage in an interrogation of the role of spaces in the constitution of the identities employed by the sex worker. It is important first to start with a theoretical exposé if only to rejuvenate the spirit that informs my analysis. **Harvey (1990)** argues that the capitalist mode of production is one where material practices and processes of social reproduction are always changing and with that comes the attendant changes in the meanings of spaces. In the progress of capitalist consumption and production our conceptual apparatuses and representations of space and time

¹⁴ See Ashcroft Bill et al (1995):283 for a discussion of these concepts.

¹⁵ See Ashcroft Bill et al (1995):392-3 for a discussion on place and the colonial subject.

¹⁶ Group discussion in Rock Garden Café – June 2000

¹⁷ Interview with women in Rock Garden Café – June 2000.

change and these have material consequences for ordering our daily life. The invasion of the capitalist mode of production on the space we call Africa today is a case in point for this study.

The case of the African urban experience in Uganda is anchored within the paradigm fetishized by the colonialist that the African was a temporary wage worker at the risk of being “detrabilized” (Cooper 1996). This was then turned into the vision of the African - turned industrial man after colonialism living with his wife and children in the modern society. Around this conception came the problems that we see going through the urban experience. A patriarchal and gendered imagery of African labor followed after the two above fetishes failed. The colonialist became obsessed with prescribing a social reproduction of a space where the African wage laborer would be joined by his wife and the wife’s role prescribed as - *reproducer of labor*. The African woman was relocated to the informal urban locale or customary structures to ensure masculine domination over her as the colonial powers went on to reconstruct the urban space.

Obbo (1980) captures the attendant spatial and social reproduction of identities that went on through time. She writes;

Once the migrants have arrived in the towns, they make pragmatic attempts to relate to the urban conditions that they encounter, as individuals, as members of ethnic communities, and as representatives of social groupings and classes (including religious organizations), or just as women (p.101).

In the urban setting, new meanings can be found for older materializations of space and ancient spaces are appropriated in very modern ways, which sometimes subvert the very original logic prescribed for the urban space (Harvey 1990).

To turn to the space that sex work occupies. We recognize that this is a space that is constructed around the western capitalist mode of production discourse, which is dependant on the celebration of the male libido whose erotic explorations have to be fulfilled as part of the accumulation of resources and exploitation of the female body. In the next section I give some of the descriptions that we recorded of the different spaces and the attendant discourses that surround these spaces.

The Homes of Sex Work

The slum has always been a sexualized space. Marked with the notion of the “free” space where everything can be done one finds different kinds of activities and opportunities in these areas. Southall et al (1957) describes Kisenyi as undergoing “free urban development” and explains that; *free here means free from fully effective regulation of the building and settlement (p.19)*. Kisenyi and many of the other slums areas are also places where the *effective regulation* of the sex worker is also not possible. The women in this study mentioned that the reason they choose slums for places of abode is because “*no one peeps into your life*”. One is able to mobilize identities that are not possible in other locations where the LC 1 Chairperson will poke his/her nose in your business. The slums are therefore important spaces for the sex worker in urban areas because of the *laissez faire* identity and also because of the economic sense they make for the sex worker who is struggling to make ends meet and needs cheap accommodation and minimal attention. Many of the women in this study would either live in the slum or work in the slum. Even for those who chose to work in the high class parts of the city, the slum was always an important place of abode.

For the sex workers who worked in Kisenyi, some of them worked from their homes but others had makeshift brothels, which they worked in. One of them described the ways in which the brothels worked;

Someone who is an official on the L.C in this area owns the house. So he takes care of any law enforcers who may want to disturb us. We pay him some five thousand shillings per day and he gives you a room where you meet your customers. I come here from around 10:00 am in the morning and sometimes I go on until the evening. The owner provides a bed, some water and soap. Business is good here and one just has to decide how long you are ready to work each day¹⁸.

Another kind of brothel, which the respondents mentioned, is the “lodge”. These have proliferated the Kampala urban space with most of them depending the “short time” customers who are ready to pay the rate that will have been charged for a full night’s accommodation. These do serve a more upper class clientele, who may be middle class males who would want to go to a decent place away from the eyes of the public¹⁹. It was mentioned in the group discussions that some of these places are located in decent neighborhoods, which do not have any inscriptions of sex work on them.

¹⁸ Interview with a woman in Kisenyi May 2000

¹⁹ This issue was mentioned by a barman in Kabalagala

Places of Operation

One notices that in what is discussed in the section on the Homes of Sex work only involves those spaces where service provision is carried out. From the respondents we found that different clienteles have got different places that they go to and therefore at the “point of soliciting”²⁰ for clients the women need to think about the places the man wants to go to. When a question was asked about places of operation we had various responses. Three major categories could be discerned. These included women who solicited sex on the streets, dance halls and bars. However from a narrative with some of the girls it was found out that many of them had different places they operated from. A respondent’s narrative of her daily routine during the week is useful at this point;

After I put my house in order I start off at around 5:00 p.m. and I go to one bar in the middle of town where I play some pool up to around 7:30 p.m. Sometimes I get lucky and get a customer during that period, but if I do not get one I chat with the bar boys and any patrons in the bar. At 7:30 p.m. I walk along Nile Avenue to see if there is any customers passing by. If there are no customers coming my way I go to Rock Garden Café or Speke Hotel. I go to the toilets and make up my face in the Ladies and sometimes change my dress, because in the day I wear trousers and in the evening the men want to see your legs so you have to expose them. I then move on to the streets up to about 10:30 p.m. Usually I get a customer for a short time before 10:00 p.m. If I do not get one I then go to a bar in Kansanga where many white men drink till late. I stay there until I get someone for the night²¹.

This narrative was very telling for us because it made us understand the different ways in which the women in sex work have got to negotiate different identities to fit in different contexts and therefore do not have to appear as one thing to all people in all places. Most of the girls had different places where they go to and they mentioned that one has to have friends working in the bar or hotel where you go so that they can allow you to use a table while you drink one soda as you wait for customers. Some of the women also pointed out that this movement is sometimes important but it is easier for those who have worked for a long time and have made many friends in the city and cannot be bullied by other girls, who may not know you. The women who were just getting into the business mentioned that they need to first operate from one place before they go out to other places.

Another perspective that was mentioned was that the women do change their mode of operations depending on the days of the week. One girl had this to say;

On weekends there are many people around, so the clubs and the bars are very popular. Men get drunk as early as 7:00 p.m. and want sexual services after that. On weekdays it is a bit complicated and sometimes the most lucrative places are the streets because the men want to have some quick sex and then go home. So one has to keep thinking about where to go²².

Apparently, a number of strategic decisions have to be made for one to be able to get the most out of sex work.

The women in this study did mention that when they are many “foreign guests” in town especially whitemen their business booms. Many women remembered the time when there was a contingent of American troops in Uganda who were supposed to go to Rwanda during the aftermath of the genocide in 1995. For those who were sex workers at the time, they said that they made a lot of money. Other respondents also mentioned that at times when there are conferences with foreign delegates – these are very lucrative times. A newspaper article in the Sunday Monitor captures the essence of the moment when it describes the life of sex workers in Durban. The author writes;

From experience, major conferences, never mind what kind, offer a considerable upswing income. Last year’s Commonwealth Heads of State conference, also held in Durban, saw her averaging R 500 (USD 5) a day. There was no way she was going to miss out on the 13th International Aids Conference. Aids or no Aids, survival was the game. Better to die of Aids than of starvation, she thinks²³.

Though written with an air of chauvinism the article did point to some of the advantages offered by the international conferences. The author portrays prostitutes as if they never think of AIDS but only their survival, an issue which this study does not find to be consistent with our findings.

²⁰ To use a working place language I have called this section Front Office to image a space where the client first goes before being attended to.

²¹ Interview with a woman in Rock Garden Café – May 2000

²² interview with a woman in Capital Pub – June 2000

²³ Article in the Sunday Monitor October 15th 2000 by Pusch Commey, adopted from New African.

Some respondents also mentioned that they go to towns upcountry or outside Uganda. However, they were quick to add that they only do this if there they know they will make money from other towns. However, one of our respondents felt that most towns in Uganda are not “good for business”. She mentioned that in most places there are local women and they usually charge very little money compared to the Kampala based women. A few of the respondents mentioned that there are women who sometimes travel outside Uganda. They mentioned that a few women go to Kenya but of recent they felt the market in Kenya had gone down. Our key respondent for the Speke Hotel group had a story to tell us about her trip to Dubai.

I saved money for a ticket and pocket money to go to Dubai for about eight months. A woman who had been to Dubai before convinced me to think of going to Dubai. We got visas and I bought my ticket and we went. In Dubai we started off in a small hotel where we both stayed. But I did not like the life in Dubai at all. We were going out with mostly Pakistan and Indian men who were very low class workers. They gave us a few dinars which were equivalent to about 6000 Uganda shillings. It was so disappointing to me. In Kampala that is money paid by taxi conductors and I do not go out with such men! It was so difficult even to make enough money for one to survive in Dubai. The men preferred prostitutes from Russia because they were white women. The Arabs were also very queer men. They would buy you and only have anal sex. I am not used to that and it was very uncomfortable. After two weeks I became desperate and I wanted to move on. The other disappointing thing was that the women we found in Dubai had sold their passports to some black market people and they were very hostile and intimidated me to give them my passport. I refused and they wanted to beat me. I had to change my hotel after and when I realized it was getting more dangerous, I booked my flight and came back to Uganda. I think in Uganda I am better off²⁴.

Sex workers do not only imagine success only at home but also move to other countries. In this narrative it was clear that it is not very simple for the sex worker to break into other worlds. These kinds of trips are fueled by the imagination and success stories that the women have been fed with. Most of the women believed they would go to Dubai, have sex with some “Oil Sheikh” and come back to Uganda driving a sleek car with a lot of money to invest in business. This was mentioned many times by some of the younger girls. Many of the girls were also trying to find ways of travelling to foreign countries like Britain and the Scandinavian countries. One of the women mentioned that her colleagues had become successful because she was working in a Strip-Tease bar in Copenhagen, Denmark - she was saving money to join her.

The Price Tag

Early studies on Kampala suggest that sex for money has been around for sometime. In Kisenyi, **Southall et al (1957)** writes about the different rates and modalities used by the Baziba women to charge for sex. In Mulago Gutkind in **(Southall et al 1957)** also reports that the phenomena of charging men money for sex was a prevalent one. **Obbo (1980)** introduces another angle when she makes an analysis of how the women in Namuwongo another low-income community manipulated the men in their lives to get money from them. One of our respondents gave us a dimension that showed the ambiguity around money and relationships. She mentioned that money was one of the things, which one had to negotiate very carefully. All our respondents mentioned that they did not have a set price for their sexual services but they depended on the ways in which the different customers presented themselves. A respondent had this to say;

Some of the men want straight sex so they ask you upfront how much you want and they “go with you” and you pay. In that case you only have to ask if it “short time” and “transnight”. If he looks smart and a presentable gentleman you then ask for 10,000/= -15,000/= for short time and about 30,000-50,000/= for transnight. If you have already worked and you can afford to “miss him” you can play around with him, go and dance, drink beer and then disappear when he is drunk and you go home. If the man is an amateur you may decide to push the price higher. If it is a muzungu you charge in dollars usually between \$20-50 depending on how he looks. Very few bazungu want short time. Sometimes, you find that it is a guy who always comes back to you so you give him the price he is comfortable with. Sometimes you like the character of the man so you do not charge him a lot so he can keep coming back. Other times he can be a filthy guy but also with a lot of money so you give him a high price and go with him. There are many things that one has to consider in this business²⁵.

Incomes earned from prostitution are not known in the statistics on prostitution. But for the women involved in prostitution, these incomes do offer a competitive and viable work option to some of the work that is being done in other professions. The respondents pointed out that they are able to invest their money in other businesses, others are able to pay for brothers and sisters in schools and carry out a number of other livelihood supporting activities. All respondents mentioned that they had some kind of responsibility and therefore their money was spent “responsibly”.

²⁴ Interview with women in Al’s Bar Kansanga – April 2000

²⁵ Interview with women in Gourmet Bar near Ange Noir Discotheque – June 2000

From a theoretical perspective I am reminded of **Appadurai (1986)** thesis on the social life of things, which provoked thinking about the artificiality of the divide between commodities and gifts. In one sense it is “Ugandan custom” in sex work that the man who takes out a lady does pay the bills and at the same time the man expects “something” [read sexual favor] in return for this generosity. But at the same time girls do not always want to “pay back” in the ways that men would want to be paid back. Clearly many of relationships in Uganda are understood and mediated through the medium of money, but how much coercive power does this social category – money – have? Does control of money define the shape of the relationships? How does sex work reshape understandings of commodities? Can we then talk about the materiality of relationships and sociality of things? In this case is money only a material resource that shapes the social world of prostitution or is there a social element that is fulfilled in the exchange of money in relationships (**Ssewakiryanga and Mills 1995**)? If sex work for the sex worker is for the fulfillment of material needs, could we argue that for the men who buy sex – this is the fulfillment of a socially anchored need – the expression of male domination and satisfaction of the male ego? Answering these kinds of questions will help us to get a clue into the confusing tangle of things, emotions and power that make up everyday experiences of sexual relationships in the area of work.

The Commodity – The Body

The body-as-used, the body I am, is a social body that has taken meanings rather than conferred them (Connell 1987:83).

Connell’s point provides us with a very important tool to analyze the ways in which identities are deployed within the world of sex work. The phrase above shows how the different elements of our social practice act as significant markers of our bodies. What Connell points to is the inadequacy of one looking at the body as a biologically determined body trying to see the crucial role that social processes play in marking bodies and therefore allowing different ways of using and playing with our bodies. **Moore (1987)** also makes another point when she borrows Bourdieu’s phrase that “bodies take metaphors seriously”. She makes the point that living bodies give substance to the social distinctions and differences that underpin social relations. If one is to link this to the representation of bodies in sex work, one realizes that the body of the sex worker is an important part in the construction of what sex work is. The body of the sex worker is adorned, pierced and oiled to live to the patriarchal ideology of the feminine.

Nearly all the girls we talked to mentioned that it was important to keep ones body “in shape”, “clean” and try to wear “something sexy”. All these were telling metaphors because they were anchored within a knowledge base that celebrated certain elements of femininity. One of the girls had this to say when interviewed about what they wear and how looks count in this trade. She said,

Our bazungu [whitemen] customers like slender and dark girls. The fat girls do not get a lot of market among the whites. The blackmen have varied tastes but some of them look only for fat girls. One has to be careful about how you look if you are targeting the guys with good money then you have to work on yourself very well. We also have to dress well, you have to know what is the latest style and try and get it. The good thing is that Owino market²⁶ now has a good variety of clothes. Some of the shops in town also have good and cheap clothes - one has to always be on the look out. Of course the short skirts are very popular and so are the bikini-like dresses, so we have to look for those ones also. For the hair, braids are the best because they are cheap to maintain and one does not have to keep worrying about combing after every customer²⁷.

From the narrative above one notices that there are many ideologies and discourses that are mobilized and supply the ways in which the sex workers treat their bodies. The markers that the women mobilize can be traced back to the way the black woman has been represented by the colonial gaze in history. Here I am reminded of the history of Sarah Bartman the slave woman billed the “Hottentot Venus” whose naked body is still displayed after her death in the Musee d’Histoire Naturelle in Paris. She was studied by many scientists and her nude body and large buttocks admired by a large audience in Europe and she became the icon of colonial African women’s sexuality (**Mama 1997**). The quote below illustrates the paradox of images that were held within the colonial world and do even survive today.

African men were assumed to be virile, to have huge penises, and to be obsessed with despoiling the European women, while the African women were assumed to be insatiable mistresses of seduction, a disposition which rendered them well suited for the provision of sexual services (ibid:68).

²⁶ Owino market is one of the biggest markets in Kampala and is located in the central business area of the city near Kisenyi community.

²⁷ Interview with a woman in Rock Garden Café – June 2000

How much deconstruction of these images has gone on is a point that we shall need to ponder seriously. However, what we see here is that sex workers live to some femininity images that are thrown around by society and make sense in the perpetuation of sex trade. Another important element is the ways in which these women negotiate their body politics, which is essentially anchored with the “politics of dress”. The women have got to look and imagine themselves as modern even if the second hand market is the only place of solace. They buy these clothes because the magazines, the TV, the videos all sanction certain images as modern, sophisticated and sexual. One of the women mentioned that she uses JIK detergent to bleach herself since the “brown girl” is one of the identities in vogue²⁸. Let me move into the area of representation and try to establish the connections.

Representing Sex Work

Following up closely on some of the issues of identity and the body that we have discussed, I would want to touch one of the other elements that this research investigated and this is how sex workers are represented both in speech and in writing. In order to give this section meaning I take recourse in some of the works that critic the very notion of what we use as an essential paradigm of gender studies today. Here I am inspired by the work of **MacKinnon (1990)**, who says that;

Post-Lacan, actually post-Foucault, it has become customary to affirm that sexuality is socially constructed. Seldom specified is what, social, it is constructed of, far less who does the constructing or how, when, or where. When Capitalism is the favored social construct, sexuality is shaped and controlled and exploited and repressed by capitalism; not, capitalism creates sexuality as we know it."Constructed" seems to mean influenced by, directed, channeled, like a highway constructs traffic patterns. Not: Why cars? Who is driving? Where's everybody going? What makes mobility matter? Who can own a car? Are these accidents not very accidental (p.212).

The media, mostly print media, is very instrumental, in creating the identity of the prostitute. A case in point comes from a very recent phenomenon in Uganda. In September 2000, Uganda witnessed massive arrests of sex workers off the streets by the Police. They were traded to Luzira maximum prison on charges of being “idle and disorderly”. It beats one to understand the logic of that phrase but it seems an uncontested notion of the post-colonial law in Uganda. What interests me in this section is the ways in which the prostitutes were photographed or drawn in cartoons. The front pages of the daily paper the *New Vision* and the *Monitor* all chose the photos of the sex workers boarding a very high lorry to Luzira. The photos all giving a detailed rear view of the most skimpy dressed sex workers. The cartoons that followed were even more intriguing²⁹. This in itself was more of a celebration of the eroticized image of the sex worker so as to speak the language of male domination.

Mbembe (1997) has called this representation in his work on cartoons - the “image as a figure of speech”. Mbembe has gone on to argue that the pictographic sign does not solely belong to the field of seeing but also is in itself a figure of speech. He notes that this speech expresses itself not only as a mode of describing, narrating and representing reality but also as a particular strategy of persuasion and even violence (ibid: 152). This is a useful tool for one to start engaging the different articles that came out after the arrest of prostitutes. Different people supported sex work, others felt it was an immoral act, others a part of the strategies towards eradication of poverty in people’s livelihoods but each of these views would be accompanied by a picture that will allow the “male gaze” to function as an act of male domination and even violence³⁰. We realize that this representation in itself is a normalizing strategy, which intends to demonize, eroticize and fantasize prostitution as an object of sexuality. This opaque violence (to borrow Mbembe’s term) in figurative expression in the forms of cartoons for public consumption is in itself a process of affirming and recreating an imagined identity of the sex worker. An analysis of these cartoons is in itself material for another study. However, I need to point out that in these cartoons one needs to read a number of discourses at play. What is seen – the visible cartoon and what is not seen are both important figures of speech. In these cartoons, patriarchal social reality is transformed into a sign, which the public uses to decipher the erotic world of sex work. The “invisible” that the cartoons do evoke or the “imagined visible” are not just two sides of the same coin but are both played out as part of the same sexual and erotic identity of the sex worker.

Sex Work and the State

I want to locate the discussion of sex work and the state in a framework that links identity politics to notions of the state. Identity politics as it is related to sexuality is a problematic category. One notes that the different experiences and political desires of certain groups do reconstruct what is known as identity politics. One can analyze identities by focusing on the subject – that is the issues that a certain groups intend to put forward, or one can concern themselves with the *form* that the identity politics tends to take (**Wendy 1995**). Both are critical to the analysis of sex work and in this section both *issues* and *form* will be focused on to have a contextual understanding of what sex work is can what

²⁸ Interview with woman in the Kisenyi- May 2000

²⁹ See Sunday Vision p.14, October 8th 2000 and Monitor September 11th 2000 in appendix I.

³⁰ See for example cartoon in the New Vision of October 16th 2000 in appendix II

ramifications we need to attend to because of the way it is articulated. Within the frame of identity politics – that danger has always been to turn identity politics into “injury politics”, with claims and counter claims being thrown around about a phenomena like sex work.

However, it is important to note that this quest for moral claims usually get handed over to the state authorities like the police and the justice system. This implies that a new legitimization is endowed on these state structures (**Valverde 1999**). The state structures therefore take it upon themselves to decide and to take action on any issues of conflict between the state and the sex workers. This not only empowers the sexist police and prison apparatus but also robs the revolutionary potential that identity politics need to bring to the fore.

The violence meted out by the state on prostitution is one of the ways in which different identities of the prostitute are constructed. I want to think about the different ways in which the sex workers challenge hegemonies of the state as “resistance identities”. These are identities that the prostitutes deploy in order to survive through situations where they get in contact with state agents. The police for long are the chief agents in the regulation and disciplining of prostitutes. Before we get into the insights provided by the different prostitutes on this issue I want to revisit the notion of the body and how bodies resistant and are controlled. **Patton (1998)** in his analysis of Foucault’s notion of power notes that adult pleasures are separated in two categories - the normal and the pathological. This he says is one of the pedagogic controls of the experience of modernity. In this schema, the female body is connected to the realm of reproduction and childbirth and these become the “taken for granted” orderings and classifications of the female body. Nevertheless, in this construction of sexuality, one notes that sexuality is always fabricated upon an active body and therefore resistance always accompanies the deployment of sexuality.

For the prostitutes in Kampala, the police is always a reality and a feared arm of Government. For the respondents in Kisenyi, many mentioned that their worst days were the days when they were arrested by police. One of the respondents had this to say;

I was arrested by the police one day and the policeman gave me three options: give him all the money I had worked for, sleep with him or take me to the police. My money was hidden in two places in my bag and under my shoe. So I gave him - 10,000 shillings from my bag and then he said that I am a crook and he knew I am hiding some money in my shoe. I then had no choice but to give him the money in my shoe. It seems he had ever arrested somebody else who hid money in the shoe. So he took all my 30,000 shillings I had made that night. I was very frustrated, I just took a cab and went home crying³¹.

Here we note that law enforcers use their power not only to discipline women but also to extort money for their own personal gain and affirm the patriarchal control. Some women noted that sometimes they stand near guarded places and the security agents in such instances they are useful allies. For a fee they help one to escape the wrath of the police. However, in other instances the women mentioned that sometimes they did have a lot of problems with the police. They sometimes become very violent and beat them up. One woman had this to say;

One day we were standing with my friend in our spot and then a small car with a muzungu and a policeman inside stopped and a they jumped out, the policeman started by slapping me and said bring the dollars! bring the dollars! , I had no clue what he was talking about but it seems the muzungu had been robbed and he could not identify the girl who robbed him. They took us to a police station and we had to spend the night in jail. The next day I sent one of the policemen to a friend who came and I had to promise to give my friend my TV as mortgage so that I could find money for bail. Life on the streets can sometimes be very tough³².

In Kampala, the most spectacular swoop was the massive one where the police and Local Defense Units personnel rounded up 60 sex workers in September 2000 from different streets and around night clubs in the city. They were charged and taken to Luzira prison. Mixed reactions came up in different places with some people calling the swoop a hypocritical response to the issue of prostitution. The Chairperson of an organization known as Federation of Women Business Industry Organization and Agriculture contributed money the prostitutes’ bail³³. The sex workers vowed to go back to their businesses and even went ahead to “offer half price” to their customers to make up for the “times of scarcity” when they were in jail³⁴.

From this incident, it is apparent that the law in Uganda seems to be trying to criminalise prostitution but the reaction of the state law organs this time round were completely confused about how to handle the sex workers. Many articles

³¹ Interview with women in Rock Garden Café – June 2000

³² Interview with women in Kisenyi - June 2000

³³ See The Monitor September 30th 2000

³⁴ See Sunday Monitor October 1st 2000

were written in the newspapers and the challenge seemed to be that to criminalizing prostitution without thinking of who the clients are, is very problematic and a reinforcement of the sexual domination that favors men in heterosexual liaisons. From this incident, it was also clear that the state was reacting to what we have termed “injury politics” – with some people feeling that sex work was injuring their self-esteem as people and therefore the sex workers had to stop. The state in this case reproduced the violence against the sex workers, through invoking the power of the legal discourse of being idle and disorderly.

A number of other reactions occurred, with the most significant from the Vice President (who is a woman) was quoted as having argued that no one should talk about sex work with talking about how to find alternative survival strategies for the women. She argued that women, who are sex workers do not enjoy sex but do it in order to survive and provide money for their children³⁵. Significant about this issue is that the Vice President brought out the complexity of the demarcation between pleasure and work and the plight of prostitution. She was arguing using an alternative discourse that did not fit well with the official sexist ideology, that sees sex outside marriage as very evil and sexual services as deviant behavior. It became apparent from the reactions to her utterance, that many the public wanted to stay true to the discourse that mutes the voice of the sex worker. However, what was also interesting to note that the radio stations also cashed in on this event and quickly moved into inviting self professed prostitutes to the radio stations so that they can offer their views.

What was noticeable about the recurring discourse was the insistence that the prostitutes were forced into the life they were living. Very few if any mentioned it as an alternative mode of work they had taken on. We did ask one of the girls who had mentioned that she feels comfortable with this work why everyone was saying they were “forced”. She mentioned that, that was the kind of talk that many people wanted to hear. The significance of such an event lies in the fact that within the public culture discourse, sex work was still an ambivalent discourse. Sex was still seen as an act, which functions within the realm of the heterosexual conjugal union. The sex worker was still the deviant and the concern was for the public to think of “alternative” ways of stopping sex workers. By implication the solution lay in controlling the women and nothing serious was being said about the men. The men seemed to be invisible and not even one offered to say if they were customers. The only clue available to the public was that the men are “powerful” and “respectable” people. In the public debate the men’s voice was muted only heard when condemning the girls. What one reads in this discourse is the fact that the female sex worker was identified as the problem and therefore what was needed a redemptive strategy that closes off the deviant behavior. This in itself is a reductionist approach that offers a universalist solution without offering a critical perspectives of the different aspects that interplay in sex work.

Concluding Remarks

Ending this truncated narrative of struggle and play of identities in sex work, it seems the polemics will continue. The same debates of who gains from prostitution?, is prostitution sex work?, how much do the men gain?, how about the women who sell sex?, is there a political economy of prostitution?, should sexuality ever be liberated?; all these are still being played out and this study is a rejoinder to the continuing debate in the conceptualization of sex and work. The conviction to take the bold step and investigate the question of sex work is in itself the political position that sounds the warning that we cannot rely on hearsay and fabricated moral prescriptivism to answer complex questions that surround the area of sex work. Even with these “tongue in the cheek” caveats slapped on this narrative I will try and point out some of the treads to we can use to give some pattern and color to this complex question.

For or against Sex Work?

In order to make myself clearer I need to emphasize what this study is NOT about. Many times authors who write either in the newspapers or in academic publications want to get to the question of *why do women enter the world of sex work?* I do not think this is the most important question in trying to understand sex work. The reasons for entry into a “profession” is just one part of the story, and I think this perspective is located within the narrow focus that prostitution is a problem for women only. Asking the question why men buy sex is also important but may also polarize the debate and it becomes “the knowing woman trying to find out what the pathological man is doing”. What I intend to do in this work therefore, is to move the debate into a realm that asks questions of the ways in which bodies are *disciplined* by different social systems and how new identities emerge in this process. The fact that there are emergence of new identities does not provide all the answers but helps us to look at the nuances that get covered up in the patriarchal sexual domination that women involved in sex work have to negotiate on an everyday basis.

The only moral status with which I would like to associate with is contained in an analogy by (**Shrage 1990**). The analogy is that; if a person decides to eat cat and dog meat, is the most important question whether eating dog or cat

³⁵ See Sunday Vision article by John Eremu entitled: *VP Defends Prostitution*, October 15th 2000 and cartoon on 16th October 2000 in New Vision

meat is “really” healthy or unhealthy? Or whether it is “really” like eating chicken or beef? What may be the most important point is that if one includes dogs meat in ones diet, the person does upset others and therefore does damage to both oneself and to others. Hence the issue I am raising in this work is that “objective reality” (if the dog meat is “really” healthy) is not the most important but the “social reality” (you and others are affected by your eating dog’s meat) in which we live. Hence the argument here is not that unconventional behavior is okay but that within the unconventional behavior we need to ask the harder questions of how it is played out in society. In there, lies the answer of the different ways in which capitalist domination articulates itself with the realm of sexuality. In that way we then get to the questions of the different elements of power that structure our identity and hence our relative position in society. Identity helps one to locate their position on the social compass and that is one step in deciding which direction one wants to take. This is the intellectual project that this paper tries to achieve.

Sexuality is one of the areas that have undergone a critical and yet frustrating engagement in feminist and gender work. Feminism gave us the energy to critic sexuality in the famous pronouncement of the “personal is political”. Put another way, that the sexual is political”. What this meant was that we cannot keep engaging debates about sexuality as part of the private sphere which we know is marred with different shades of domination. This opening up has meant that in the conceptualization of even other parts of the feminine experience one cannot run away from engaging with the most oppressive locale for many women in the world. Even as we question sex and work, there are unresolved questions about the nature of sexuality itself. Heterosexuality has already been earmarked as having undue oppression because of the ways in which it appropriates domestic work as no work and also uses sex work as a mode of oppression. Yet for many and mostly the developing world feminists, the role of heterosexuality is seen as central to the continuation of society’s affirmation of other experiences of emancipation.

This study is anchored within this very large and ongoing debate in which I decided to take the narrow focus of “wondering about” identities and sex work. We have made snapshots at the different parts of what sex work is – the place, the bodies involved, the spaces they occupy, their representation and the ways in which other hegemonic sites interface with the sex worker. There are other parts that have been deliberately left out, for example - the role of men – because one needs a theorization of masculinities in order to arrive at some systematic knowledge production process in this area. This study cannot therefore end with a moral tone but rather with an affirmation that sex work as an experience of the advent of capitalist economies is in itself a very complex trade, the emancipatory sites within it are only limited and confined within the dominant site of male domination. Hence, to think of deconstructing sex work further, we should go on to engage the nature of capitalism and how it has been managed in the postcolonies, how it has become both a vehicle of emancipation and also oppression through its different shades of perpetuating patriarchy. I dare say that prostitution is not an aberration but it is a consequence of well established beliefs and values that form part of the foundation of our lives – we need to redirect our guns to those beliefs and values!

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