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# 'Can you give me a lot of condoms, 'cause do you've got any idea how much a bag of cement costs?'<sup>1</sup>

## Adolescent Sex work, Future, Agency and Social Support on Isla de Margarita and in Caracas

Sara Wortelboer, Latin American and Caribbean Studies, University of Utrecht, August 2008<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract:

This article conducts an exploratory analysis of the multidimensional relationship between future, agency and context of adolescent (under age and adult) sex workers in Caracas and Isla de Margarita. A multi-method approach is used to clarify the way in which these young Venezuelan people creatively struggle on a daily basis with their context and background for the sake of organizing their current and long-term situation. Above all, it demonstrates that context factors are of decisive importance for the future prospects and perception, but that they leave a space for the adolescents who sell sex to exert their agency. Next, social agents are shown to downplay this agency of sex workers and to stimulate their long-term future poorly. Therefore, the article's aim is to provide an in-depth and qualitative analysis on the discrepancy between the youngsters' own interpretations and future dreams at the one side and the approach of governmental and nongovernmental support towards adolescent sex work at the other.

### Key words:

Adolescent sex work, future perception and prospects, contextual and individual factors, agency, social support and Venezuela

## The Commotion Put in Perspective

Despite the recent exclamations of ever rising numbers of young people selling sex, both under age and adult sex work has existed for centuries (Montgomery, 2001: 12) and obtaining knowledge about how many of them are involved is impossible as the informal segment of the sex industry is predominantly the largest. Still, un-sourced and random numbers have become facts and are used as evidence for epidemic escalations of 'sexual exploitation' (Ennew et al., 1996: 24). Stressing the exploding incidence causes that the population of analysis in this article; adolescents from 12 to 25 who are already involved in sex work, are overlooked (Montgomery, 2001: 37). This is exactly what has been happening in Venezuela: the adolescents don't matter anymore; the numbers do.

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Ibrahim Cortero, freelance social worker who worked for years for organization AMBAR, cites a street worker he met, 02-04-2008 - Caracas

<sup>2</sup> Many people are responsible for bringing this article to a good end, of which the women themselves are the most important. I am really happy so many people in Caracas and Isla de Margarita wanted to give their opinion about this difficult and often hidden theme. I especially want to wish all my luck to Yonathan, Nury, Sister Maria who presented me to the women, and all of the other people who for years have been shouting, but hardly been heard. Credits go to everyone who helped me in my favourite street of Isla de Margarita, to Christian who just pulled me into strip bars and who I bored for hours with this investigation and of course to Floortje and the other professors who were always thinking along.

The concentration on one single aspect of the sex industry, that of trafficked and sexually exploited minors and women, who are forced to work under shocking conditions, excludes the great majority of adolescent sex workers from the public and academic scene. Sensationalism is a way to draw attention to certain media publications and to legitimize programmes and policies of government, NGOs and religious bodies. In fact, the apparently old-fashioned 'sexual exploitation' discourse of abolitionists continues to be widespread in the Venezuelan societal, academic and NGO worlds. A group of liberals now tries to fight this discourse though.

Those who aren't trapped in the criminal world are often stigmatized as unscrupulous, immoral or insane. Likewise, their families –that are generally seen as fully responsible for the adolescent's situation- are immune for sympathy and support. Believes that sex workers who are actively working to supply for their livelihoods also do this by means of criminal activities are common, but untrue.<sup>3</sup> Many also accept moralistic statements that sex ought to be part of romantic relationships or that 'when people find themselves in a normal and accepted relationship and position in society (...), we aren't going to find prostitution'<sup>4</sup>. Heavy stigmas push sex workers to the outskirts of society and leave them powerless to prove the contrary.

In exploring the world of sex work, it is fundamental to have a realistic view on it. Sex work is as diverse, dynamic and multilayered as every working sector. There are many routes into sex work, forms of activities and types of clients. And like everywhere, the employees cannot be lumped together either. For instance, young girls who decide to step over the blurred line of informal sex work and have paid sex on few occasions, can hardly be considered sex workers, but do fit the definition. My decision was to leave behind the sensationalist emphasis on the mental abnormalities of (foreign) clients and exploiting intermediaries, such as pimps, brothel owners or the recently much heard 'traffickers'. This has given space to those where the commotion is all about; the 'exploited' sex workers themselves. Since their experiences always have been filled in by others, is it time to let them explain their own feelings, motivations and future dreams. In this article, adolescents in two places in Venezuela - the capital and its tourist location-, who for diverging reasons work in extremely varying conditions in the sex commerce, rectify homogenising stereotypes about sex workers.

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Sonia Orta Russián, director of the Centre for female treatment *Fabian Rulio*, Ministry of Justice, 14-03-2008 - Caracas. She states that there is no relationship between criminality and sex work in the sense that criminal women don't work in the sex industry and the reverse.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Nayive Reverón, journalist who wrote a book about sex workers, 14-03-2008 - Caracas

Theoretical arguments and practical help should be based on correct information, instead of outrageous numbers and sensationalist myths. Just two profound scientific studies on the agency of female migrants who sell sex in Europe (Agustín, 2008) and of under age sex workers in Thailand (Montgomery, 2001) really helped me during the writing process and are often cited in this article. Yet, Venezuelan adolescent sex work or future desires of just any young sex worker haven't been investigated qualitatively and open-mindedly, but is extremely important for the analysis of the rather random interventions social agents actually *do* carry out. This article is a modest but sincere effort to integrate both the future dreams of adolescent sex workers and the attempts of social helpers to comply with these dreams.

The goal of this article is exploring how adolescent who sell sex perceive and organize their future and what the multidimensional relationship with contextual, individual and institutional factors is in this. Whereas many authors describe adolescent sex workers as being victims of their surroundings *or*, at the other extreme, as opportunistic manipulators of those surroundings, very few look at the interaction between the context and the individual. Naturally, the personal and societal situation may practically smuggle the option of sex work in the youngsters' hands and almost all sex workers do come from very poor situations. However, it is simply offending to deny their small-scaled but active bending of their complex environments to rise from the ranks (see title of this article). By passing over the control adolescents take over their (future) lives, their empowerment is oppressed.

In the upcoming pages methodology and theory entwined with the empirical findings are elaborated to provide an in-depth analysis of adolescent sex workers' struggles to carry on and climb up. The empirical analysis starts with a theoretical bridge between the tripartite future, agency and context (section 1). Then the article shows that individual, societal and labour factors strongly determine the position as sex worker and their potential future, outside or inside the world of paid sex (section 2). The use of agency by interacting with this context for improvement of the future, is to a significant degree signaled in indirect acts and expressions (section 3). Actual action to change the long-term future appears to be harder to observe, and its existence is related to the personality, context and past experiences (section 4). The two-way interaction between actor and context in the form of social agents influencing the adolescents' future and agency and vice versa, adolescents' benefiting or escaping of this social support, is also subject of writing (section 5).

## Analyzing the Research Itself

The qualitative research for this article has been carried out in Venezuela during the period between mid February and the beginning of June 2008. I studied the subject of adolescent sex work for six weeks in Caracas and for two months on Isla de Margarita. The research started in Caracas, because here I found various possibilities to get in contact with organizations, governmental institutions and individual persons (or social agents) that had knowledge about the national situation. Isla de Margarita is notorious for suffering from sex tourism, which was the reason why I investigated the theme here for a substantial period. By using two different research settings, I had access to a wider range of information, while it also cornered the profoundness of the results. These two places of investigation can more or less be considered the 'average Venezuelan context', as 97% of the population lives in urban areas (Schnell-Anzola, et al., 2005: 25), which are mainly located on the coast-line.

Although initially the research focus was on child sex work in the context of sex tourism, during the field research I was forced to make two important changes in the research population. First of all, the concept of *child* sex work was replaced by the more specific concept of *adolescent* sex work. A large problem for the research was the difficulty of getting in contact with child sex workers. A small group of children (by many scientists, as psychologist Erikson (1982), defined by those under 12 years) is probably involved in sex work but, because of their criminalization and (possible) strict control by adults, impossible to find. I therefore had to turn to the older group of under age sex workers. The group of adolescents between 12 and 18 years who work in the sex industry was also hard to reach however. Their work is still illegal and they are afraid to talk about it. The length of the available research time turned out to be insufficient to build sustainable relationships. The low governmental priority of the issue and the fact that there are almost no organizations that are in contact with them, made it even more difficult to find them.

But the under age adolescent sex workers are in practice a lot less criminalized than the children to 12 years and their existence is more accepted in society. Indirect information about this group is a lot easier to obtain. I was able to carry out observations and informal conversations with under age adolescent sex workers. The group that could provide me with the most interesting research findings however, were the adult sex workers. Because they started working when they were under 18, were just a couple

of years older than or happen to know under age sex workers, they could provide me with detailed information about under age adolescent sex work. But as I like to make space for their own experiences as well I decided to include this young adult group into the research. The term *adolescent sex work* thus refers to teenagers from the age of 12 and under that of 18, but also to young adults in the age group of 19 to 25 years. If necessary I will emphasize if a girl is under or of age. In this way I believe the diversity of sex work among youngsters can be captured. Not only the differences between new thirteen year old sex workers and experienced women of 25, but also dichotomies as formality and informality, legality and illegality, streetwalking and brothel sex work now enter the theoretical analysis of this study.

The second decision I made was integrating sex work in the local 'market' into the research, since its role turned out to be of mayor importance. A substantial number of sex workers aims at sex tourists *and* also at local demand. I carried out the research on Isla de Margarita during a very low tourist season. Sex workers often work here on an occasional basis -carnival and Eastern are profitable periods-, but many also turn from tourists to local clients after these periods (O'Connell & Sanchez, 1996: 6). In Caracas as well as on Margarita the extensive local sex market is impossible to deny and I believe adding this aspect of the adolescents' work has enriched the research findings. Moreover, it is now possible to combine an analysis of the situation in Venezuela's capital and in its most internationally directed location in one article.

Within this 'multi-strategy research' (Bryman, 2004: 34) the methods of open interviewing, informal conversations and 'participatory observation' were found to be the most constructive. None of the interviews with sex workers were planned ahead and some were carried out in the place they were working. The rest of the interviews took place in public places or in the hospital of Porlamar, Isla de Margarita, where they come to have their monthly health check-up. In this way most girls were in a context which felt familiar and safe to them, which positively influenced the interview results.

During the interviews I used a tape recorder when interviewing institutes and, for anonymity reasons, a note block when interviewing sex workers. Because of the sensitivity of the subject and the associations with interrogations and legal matters that a tape recorder can produce, I purposely never used it with them. Still, it is possible that my position as researcher influenced their stories, where they can perceive the relation as unequal and being totally open about their lives as dangerous. Also, telling me 'sad stories' may be seen as strategic or customary. I wrote their quotes down as literal as

possible and use these in this article. The translations of the Spanish testimonies are my own. I can't guarantee that these were their exact words however. For anonymity reasons, the names used in this article have all been changed.

Despite the difficulties I encountered during the research, I was able to carry out short (varying from ten to sixty minutes) interviews. The total research population consisted of five transsexuals and twelve female sex workers. The transsexuals worked on the streets and three women worked in brothels in Caracas. One transsexual also worked as an escort girl. On Isla de Margarita I met six girls who worked in a strip bar, one in a brothel and two independently (on the street and by telephone and internet). One of the strippers also works as an escort girl. The ages of the sex workers range from 19 to 25, with four older sex workers as exceptions who have been adolescent sex workers. From the transsexual sex workers I know that they started working when they were under 18. Of five girls the starting age is unclear and the rest started working when they were adults.

Because many interviews were carried out during working hours I couldn't take too much of their time. By doing many short interviews I have however obtained very broad and diverse information. Next to the interviews, I have had the opportunity to observe and have many informal conversations with a large group of young sex workers. In Porlamar, the capital of Isla de Margarita, I lived in a street where adolescent sex work was present (see figure 1), which gave me the opportunity to daily observe this theme. Furthermore, I cooperated with government bodies, national and local NGO's



Figure 1: the street of observation. At night until 10 'o clock a group of under age sex workers operated here. After 11 transsexual sex workers arrived.

and I approached social workers, journalists, researchers, religious persons and scholars. In total I carried out 50 interviews with a variety of people who are involved or who try to offer support to adolescent sex workers. A list of all relevant research activities can be found at the

end of this article.

## 1 Future, Context & Agency

As every adolescent, also adolescent sex workers have dreams about futures in wealth, health and love. Adolescents have their whole future still ahead and they have to make choices for their socioeconomic, physical and psychosocial *future*. As adolescents are active agents in their own life, also those working in sex work can influence their future situation. But if circumstances are miserable and opportunities missing, the young person's willpower may not be enough to radically transform its situation. The background, past experiences and current context all determine the *short- and long-term*<sup>5</sup> future of adolescent sex workers and the extent to which they can change their future circumstances themselves. The discrepancy between their future, how they realistically perceive it and how they imagine it to be ideal grows as the adolescents encounter more contextual obstacles<sup>6</sup>.

When talking about the ideal and real future with adolescent sex workers, ambiguity is observed. The subject of future isn't the most popular theme, but they can all to some extent tell what they *wish* their future to look like. The nongovernmental organization AMBAR (*Asociación de Mujeres por el Bienestar y Asistencia Recíproca*), who tries to help under age and adult sex workers in Caracas, did a quantitative research among 104 minors. It turned out that almost all teenagers who sell sex have concrete desires for the future (2002: 113). Every adolescent sex worker has its own ideal of the future (Agustín, 2008: 46). For some gaining more money in sex work is part of this ideal. This group dreams of being better able to support themselves financially, in a way that they can have their own dream life, mostly in the form of a house (11.5%). Other adolescent sex workers want to become a professional (11.5%) or finish a study (56.2%). This last group consists mainly of older adolescents, while the younger ones aren't that interested in finishing a study (AMBAR, 2002: 114).

It is not necessary that a young sex worker wants to step out of the world of selling sex as soon as possible. It can possibly be a long term wish, while for the short term the development in sex work is desired. That can be the reason why according to AMBAR's research 49% of the minors in Caracas would like to stay in and 49% would like to leave sex work. The older, more than the younger adolescents tend to prefer

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<sup>5</sup> Short-term future is defined as the future in the first couple of months. Long-term future as more stable image of live in several years

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Nayive Reverón, 14-03-2008 - Caracas

leaving the business (AMBAR, 2002: 112). After having worked as a sex worker for some time, most want to leave, while the young ones want to focus on their new and well paying job first. Nayive Reverón, a journalist who wrote a book about sex workers, states that for some sex workers leaving the business is neither a short-term nor a long-term dream. Some have the goal to own their own brothel or to become the boss of the sex establishment they work<sup>7</sup>.

Whatever their dream is, the step to reaching this dream and seeing the fairy tale come true is a lot harder. For a large group having an ideal future image doesn't naturally mean thinking clearly about their realistic future<sup>8</sup>. But not all sex workers and realistic future perceptions are equal, which depends on their personality, the context they come from and their age<sup>9</sup>. Support for this thesis comes from Gledis Urbaez, director of a closed judicial institution for adolescent girls under the age of 18, of which some were involved in sex work. She believes the girls don't look at their future at all and they don't even think in the consequences their behaviour has.<sup>10</sup> This group mostly lives in the presents:

'Plans of people reach till the next day and mainly involve buying food. (...) Nothing matters anymore when you don't have a life task; there is no path for you to follow. (...) People don't see alternatives, because there are none.'<sup>11</sup>

'In situations of survival, like prostitutes, I believe that the future isn't that organized in their minds. Their perception of the future is very short. (...) They don't think in that. How am I going to think in study, in a relationship, when I need food? And when I don't sleep with people, I don't have money. (...) They start to make a scale of priorities within their reality.'<sup>12</sup>

Negative expectations about their future are the main reasons why many sex workers avoid the theme of future. When asked to talk about the future the sex workers verbally and nonverbally show their desperation. In many cases it isn't a theme that brings up joyful ideas about how their life could be, but depressing gestures and an unclear future plan. Laura, a sex worker of 25 is an example of this:

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Nayive Reverón, 28-03-2008 - Caracas

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Maximo Rondon, journalist and former worker in a strip bar, 08-04-2008 - Porlamar

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Nayive Reverón, 28-03-2008 - Caracas

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Gledis Urbaez, director of *Casa Hogar Cyrano Marcano Maraver*, 13-05-2008 - El Valle, Isla de Margarita

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Maura de Abraham, former first lady of Nueva Esparta, the state where Isla de Margarita is part of and former president of *Fundación del Niño*, 13-05-2008 - El Valle

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Nayive Reverón, 14-03-2008 - Caracas

'A friend of mine asked me to come and work in the strip bar where she worked. She wanted the best for me. After a while she convinced me. But after a month she left the strip bar, got married, graduated in business administration, she is probably an administrator now and I am still having the same job. I would like my life to be like hers. Who doesn't? (...) If my friend wants something, she just makes it happen. (...) I want to leave this work as soon as possible, because I don't like it at all. I just don't know what I can do instead. (...) I would like to study. (...) I always wanted to be a journalist, because then you can talk to many different people. (...) But I quit school after third grade and I think I can't study anymore. (...) I lack intelligence.'<sup>13</sup>

The pessimistic ideas about the future are often the consequence of negative experiences from the past. Having experienced so many hopeless situations, it is hard for them to have a picture of a different life they have never lived and maybe never even seen<sup>14</sup>. Future for many Venezuelans is therefore an empty word and living in the present is the most pleasant thing to do<sup>15</sup>.

The lack of hopeful ideas about the future can make long-term change-directed action absent<sup>16</sup>. Many adolescent sex workers accept their current situation and don't try to change it (Montgomery, 2001: 11). They often would like to change jobs, but believe they won't be able to find a profitable job besides sex work. And this is comprehensible, because within the boundaries of Venezuelan society, community and family, pessimism is often realistic. In many ways can fixed and dynamic contextual factors narrow young people's possibilities to act (section 2 of this article). But as personal situations differ, sex workers who have clear and positive future perceptions and purposefully arrange their lives to make these perceptions come true, exist too (section 4)<sup>17</sup>. Analyzing the future perceptions and prospects of adolescent sex workers particularly includes the relationship between the context and the individual.

There is a strong tendency among social and academic agents to portray especially under age sex workers as innocent victims of their circumstances, downplaying their capacities to act and look after themselves (Ansell, 2005: 222). However, the context doesn't leave them fully caged and tied up, but forms the spaces within which all adolescent sex workers can manoeuvre and structure their future. This valuable organizing by adolescents is called 'agency' and defined as the 'engaging with

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Laura, a sex worker of 25, 21-05-2008 - STD programme, hospital Porlamar

<sup>14</sup> Interviews with Nayive Reverón (14-03-2008) and Maura de Abraham (13-05-2008)

<sup>15</sup> Informal conversation with a German restaurant owner, who knows many sex workers, 16-05-2008 - Playa el Agua, Isla de Margarita

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Nayive Reverón, 14-03-2008 - Caracas

<sup>17</sup> Interviews with Edison, former sex agency worker on Isla de Margarita (17-04-2008) and Ibrahim Cortero, freelance social worker who worked for years for AMBAR in Caracas (02-04-2008)

environments in a dynamic way, making choices, defining their own roles and managing crises on the basis of their own interpretations of the changing world around them (Boyden, in Ansell, 2005: 223)'. Because many adolescent sex workers pessimistically or realistically believe radical action to change the long-term future is hopeless (section 4), it is also important to look to other, more small-scaled, manifestations of agency which *indirectly* affect future prospects. Agency is mostly shown in every-day and short-term directed practices, which influence the long-term future slumbering. Hereby, I distinguish between *practical* and *justifying* agency (section 3). The adolescent's power to negotiate its position within the contextual boundaries is dynamic and differs per situation and individual.

## 2 The Complex Worlds of Sex Workers

Adolescent sex work in Venezuela isn't an isolated phenomenon. The lives of young sex workers are undoubtedly influenced and reinforced by several social, economical and cultural processes. The analysis of the specific *contextual factors* is fundamental to be able to understand why adolescent sex work exists, but also why not all adolescents are working in the sex industry. Most contextual factors are fixed in the sense that adolescents are born in it or experienced it during their life, but cannot transform them for the positive. Exploring the socioeconomic situation wherein adolescent sex work prospers, increases the comprehension of the possibilities and difficulties for the future and agency in the later sections.

In Venezuela, a country with 40% of its people below the two dollar a day poverty line in 2005 (World Bank, 2007b) sex work is mainly caused by economic hardship (Reverón, 2006: 34). Strong corruption, impunity and extreme unequal distribution of wealth cause and reinforce this poverty. Despite Venezuela's famous oil reserve, the country is characterized by a very unequal class structure. The majority of the poor people escape to the large parallel informal economy as a way to obtain resources they can't obtain in another way. In 2006 the informal labour market was responsible for 47 per cent of the Venezuelan active labour force (Provea, 2006: 117). Young people, who are already working informally and on the streets, are at risk of being drawn into informal sex work (Márquez, 1999: 6). Impoverished adolescents and

families can employ livelihood strategies, like sex work, that place youngsters in difficult and vulnerable situations (Ansell, 2005: 194). In some poor communities, where jobs, land and other capital are absent, many people depend on the income of young sex selling people (Montgomery, 2001: 24).

Nonetheless, not every poor adolescent becomes involved in sex work and not every adolescent sex worker is poor. The relation between poverty and adolescent sex work is complex and multifaceted and is among others intermediated by gender norms and (disintegrated) family structures (Willis & Levy, 2002: 1417; Reverón, 2006: 34). *Matricentrismo* and *machismo* are two concepts that still describe Venezuelan gender roles. By *matricentrismo* is meant the 'abandoned' mother as the core of the family structure (Ventencourt, 1988: 62-65; Parrado, 2002: 800-801). After the conquest, the Spanish men having several families and women taking care of the children on their own became the Venezuelan standard (Márquez, 1999: 85). Still, children of one mother often turn out to have different fathers and single motherhood is a common phenomenon. Adolescents of single mothers with numerous children are at risk of sex work (Fundación, 1999: 25). Only 19.2% of the under age sex workers in Caracas live in a family with both parents (AMBAR, 2002: 53).

The adolescents have diverse personal backgrounds and form a heterogeneous group though. Some psychological conditions higher the risk for adolescents to become a sex worker. Abuse in the family and the community are significant precursors for entering sex work before the age of 18 (James and Myerling, 1977: 1). Being raped, sexually abused or touched in intimate places as a child can trigger the process of becoming a sex worker (Fundación, 1995: 70-72; Reverón, 2006: 34). In case of sexual abuse the abuser can try to keep the child silent by giving the child cloths, candy, other gifts or immaterial positive attention, like going to the cinema. By means of aiming attention to the child, abusers make sure they can continue their sexual illegal activities with minors. These children learn from very young that by letting other people touch and use their body they can obtain something. They adopt the mechanism that sex is a conditional activity that gives you advantages. The combination of different factors together with being abused during childhood can enlarge the idea that sex work is the only possibility<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with Julio Gamboa, former pastor, former adviser of adolescents and director of a State University, 23-05-2008 - Isla de Margarita

In this context of poverty, disrupted family systems and abuse in childhood various factors can contribute to the decision of adolescents to make money through sex work. Examples of family members or neighbours that are doing the same make up for the first factor: 'the story repeats itself'<sup>19</sup>. Furthermore, homeless adolescents, orphans and runaways tend to sell sex more often than other adolescents (Fundación ICI, 1999: 25). Of the adolescent sex workers in Caracas 16.3% claims to live on the street (AMBAR, 2002: 52). The odds are against the group of youngsters who meet one or more of these predictors in their lives as they have few economical, cultural and educational opportunities<sup>20</sup>:

'In this culture of poverty adolescent sex work is largely accepted. Because of the lack of resources and opportunities it isn't perceived as a problem. (...) They have simply nothing left to lose. It makes sense that poor adolescents choose the easy way out.'<sup>21</sup>

All the mentioned circumstantial criterions to a large extent 'happen' to someone and are hard to turn around. Now sex work-related predictors that depend more or less on the adolescents' own engaging with the world are illustrated. The phenomena of dropping out of school, adolescent motherhood, drug use and materialism indicate having some sort of influence over their own situation and consequently over their futures. This influence draws a distinction, but shouldn't be overestimated as the factors are strongly related to, among others, the socioeconomic situation and culture. First of all, adolescents who spend much time hanging around on the streets are at greater risk for sex work, just like adolescents with few years of education (Reverón, 2006: 34)<sup>22</sup>. In Venezuela, 35 percent of the youngsters between the age of fifteen and nineteen abandon school before obtaining a diploma (CEPAL, 2002: 89 and PREAL, 2003: 20). This percentage is much larger for those working in the sex commerce; in Caracas 90.4% of the under age adolescent sex workers aren't studying at the moment. Of this group 40.4% finished only three or less years of education (AMBAR, 2002: 48-49).

Secondly, adolescent mothers have a bigger chance to become a sex worker (Willis & Levy, 2002: 1417; Reverón, 2006: 34). In Venezuela teenage pregnancies is a common symptom, as it has the highest incidence of Latin America<sup>23</sup>. *Fondo de Población*

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with Maura de Abraham, 13-05-2008 - El Valle

<sup>20</sup> Idem

<sup>21</sup> Idem

<sup>22</sup> Idem

<sup>23</sup> Interviews with journalists Máximo Rondon (08-04-2008) and Nayive Reverón (28-03-2008)

*de las Naciones Unidas* (2003-2005) states that approximately 39% of the Venezuelan births belong to mothers under twenty. In Caracas 25% of the under age sex workers indicate that they have one or more children (AMBAR, 2002: 72). Young single mothers have to be economically self-sufficient, while employment opportunities for women are extremely limited (Ferguson, 1994: 58). This is an important reason why many women and girls see no other option than the sex business (O'Connell & Sanchez, 1996: 25).

The third contextual factor that can have effect on the step into adolescent sex work but also on the future of adolescent sex workers is drugs. Drugs is said to be a large problem among the Venezuelan population, with large supply from Colombia and demand from, among others, tourists. A part of the population of adolescent sex workers suffers addiction because of the access to cheap drugs. Of a group of 104 adolescent sex workers in Caracas 53.7% said to use one or more types of drugs (AMBAR, 2002: 95). For many different reasons adolescents can start to consume drugs on a very young age. Some of the adolescents ended up in the sex business to sustain their drug addiction, for others sex work made drugs accessible or simply necessary<sup>24</sup>.

Finally, many Venezuelans believe that adolescent sex work is also related to attitudes of young people on property. Materialism is to some degree part of contemporary Venezuela, where globalization, neoliberalism and high living standards for a small group in society cause the never-ending flow of products and changes in consuming behaviour. In a society where consumption is strongly appreciated, but poverty reigns, young people sometimes choose the short road to satisfy their material needs. By buying expensive products the adolescents can show their status to other adolescents (Montgomery, 2001: 99) and peer comparisons are fundamental in this<sup>25</sup>.

Specific combinations of the just mentioned relatively fixed and more manipulable aspects that can be part of adolescent sex workers' lives, don't draw a clear road from living quietly to sex work. Other, not mentioned, reasons can push boys and girls over the line and one reason can sometimes turn out to be enough to trigger the process. Complying with all the risk factors is no absolute certainty for becoming a sex worker, as other protective pull factors can be present as well. Furthermore, the different context factors influence lives and futures, but lives also influence the context in return. In sum, the situation of sex work is too complex to be able to fully predict it.

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<sup>24</sup> Interviews with many sex workers and social agents, among who Heisa Londoño, a social researcher and woman who is starting 'Alianza Nuevo Horizonte', nongovernmental organization for under and of age adolescent sex workers, 19-03-2008 - Caracas

<sup>25</sup> Interviews with Edison (17-04-2008) and Heisa Londoño (19-03-2008)

## Unravelling the sex business

The future of sex workers can partly depend on the relation between them and their *working surroundings*. Like elsewhere, sex work in contemporary Venezuela is nourished by informal and formal, local, national and international structures in society. Being able to comprehend to some extent the every day practices of adolescent sex workers, in the very first place means elaborating the dynamic and complex world of paid sex. This section presents the multidimensionality of selling sex by mentioning the practice of legalizing and at the same time criminalizing this job. The clientele is another facet of the contextual diversity which brings it own dynamics with it.

Adolescent sexual work as a broad term can be used to describe paid sexual activities with adolescents<sup>26</sup>. In this article 'sex work' isn't only operationalized as paid sexual penetration, but also as other activities, like paid lap dances and stripteases. The lines within sex work are very blurred and dynamic (Farley, 2004: 17) and it can be hard to define what is and what isn't. The interviewed population in its total participates in different forms of sex work, but the common divisor is the presence of actual penetration. Under age and of age sex work is integrated in many different contexts and levels of the Venezuelan society. There are few cases of under age sex work found in the official denouncement statistics of Venezuela, but public actors, who are in contact with this group, perceive it definitely as one of the social issues the country has to deal with<sup>27</sup>.

All over the country youngsters perform sexual activities for money, material or favours. First of all, adolescent sex work takes place in many different settings in Caracas and other big cities. Secondly, there are many mine and country frontier areas, which are places where demand and supply of sex come together<sup>28</sup>. Adolescent sex work is also observed in little villages in for example the Amazon. Another important setting is where adolescent sex work and sex tourism have been reinforcing each other the last few years. The tourism sector in Venezuela has been given high priority in an attempt to rescue the country's economy from the deep and long-lasting recession. Only Isla Margarita has the infrastructure needed for Western tourism and consequently has to cope with a diverse spectrum of paid sex (O' Connell & Sanchez, 1996: 4). In sum, sex

<sup>26</sup> The focus on sex work means the disregarding of other forms of sexual exploitation like pornography. Also the trafficking and migration of Venezuelans to other countries with the objective of sexual exploitation elsewhere aren't subjects of analysis. It doesn't say this isn't happening, but including this would need a totally different analytic angle. These related themes can in many cases be interconnected with sex work, however.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Jesús Benavides, commissary of *Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas, Penales y Criminalísticas*, 25-03-2008 - Caracas

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Francisco of Human Rights Organization *Provea*, 27-02-2008 - Caracas

workers in Venezuela are hard to scrape together as realities of people in *barrios*<sup>29</sup> in coastal regions differ heavily from those of indigenous people in a jungle village.

The youngsters' daily working experiences are shaped by the location in the country, but also by their workstation. Venezuela has a national legalization policy on sex work from the age of 18 (O'Connell & Sanchez, 1996: 4). As a consequence, adolescents under 18 who sell sex are criminalized much more than their clients. In practice the legalization of adult sex work means that an informal sector exist alongside a formal sector (1996: 11-13). A number of brothels and strip bars are formally registered, while the informal sex circuit is many times more integrated in society. Countless informal brothels or strip bars, possibly disguised as restaurants or karaoke bars<sup>30</sup>, escort services and sex hotels<sup>31</sup> are spread over Venezuela.

The line between formal and informal sex establishments isn't as sharp as it seems. Informal brothels have also arrangements with the police and when discussing it with sex workers the fact whether a sex establishment is formal or informal doesn't seem to be of importance. Adolescents under the legal age of 18 are treated the same in both types of sex establishments, as their work is relatively separated from the world of adult sex work. In formal *or* informal strip bars, brothels and sex agencies only adults work, because of the great juridical risk the exploitation of minors brings along<sup>32</sup>. Only sporadically cases are found of minors who are hired to work in a sex establishment.<sup>33</sup> My experience has been that the division between formal and informal sex establishments isn't solid, which doesn't mean there is no difference nor that informality as a concept should be neglected; it is fundamental when analysing independent sex work.

More interesting is namely exploring the distinction between work under a superior in a tangible (either formal or informal) sex establishment and independent and informal sex work in public places. Under age sex workers don't generally work in establishments, but as independent streetwalkers. The street is where the adult world meets that of the minors and where the latter learn from the former. Young and old

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<sup>29</sup> Poor neighbourhoods in urban regions

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Catarina, a sex worker of 38, who works in a as restaurant disguised brothel (28-05-2008 - Porlamar) and observation in Isla de Margarita

<sup>31</sup> Hotels where people sell sex; comparable with a brothel with the difference that clients can stay for the night

<sup>32</sup> Interviews with various people, among who, Edison (17-04-2008) and Maximo Rondon (08-04-2008), both former workers of sex establishments, and sex workers

<sup>33</sup> Conversations with sex workers, taxi drivers and a former sex agency worker in Isla de Margarita and people from the national security services in Caracas and Isla de Margarita

people who independently sell their services to local men and tourists in night clubs, bars, resorts, hotels, beaches or streets form part of the other side of the informal sector (O'Connell & Sanchez, 1996: 14-16). In other public places, like harbours, supermarkets, shopping malls, cinemas and truck stations adults and minors also search and seduce clients<sup>34</sup>. This informal circuit is diverse, multilayered and very dynamic and features of the clientele, sex workers and working conditions differ heavily from that in sex establishments. Some even believe you need a special 'profile' to be a streetwalker<sup>35</sup>.

The parts of Isla de Margarita where tourists provide the main source of local income offer a clear example of the plurality of informal sex work. It is found to be interconnected to transport, bars, restaurants and hotels<sup>36</sup>. Taxi drivers bring tourists to sex workers and vice versa and receive commissions from both sides<sup>37</sup>. Restaurant waiters can call a friend to connect tourists with sex workers and some waiters leave with a client after their work. Also hotel entertainers, shop sellers and hotel cleaning ladies can be involved in selling sex. Furthermore, men can find sex workers on Margarita on web pages and massages on the beach or in salons can come with sex<sup>38</sup>.

For sex workers who work in a sex establishment as well as for those who work independently, the composition of local and foreign clients frames their possibilities and limits. The majority of clients are local men, foreign tourists and businessmen form a relatively new and wealthy consuming market (O'Connell & Sanchez, 1996: 26), but also national tourism is of great importance for adolescent sex workers. The combination of clients determines to a large extent the different characteristics of sex work in Caracas and Isla de Margarita. On the tourist island adolescent sex work is mostly visible during holiday periods and presents a lot of dynamics, while in Caracas it is considered as more stable throughout the year. Because people can in specific periods easily earn large amounts of money in sex tourism, adolescent sex work on Margarita is generally temporary. However, the island not only has a sex tourism working setting for adolescent sex workers, many also work in the island's local market<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> Interviews with Ingara Marrodán, a social researcher of sex work and sex tourism in village Playa el Agua on Isla de Margarita (23-05-2008), the Tourist Department of Municipality Antolín del Campo, Isla de Margarita (16-05-2008) and Edison, a former sex agency worker (17-04-2008)

<sup>35</sup> Interviews with Ibrahim Cortero (02-04-2008) and Luis Costa, director of the 'Coalition Against the Trafficking of Women', which isn't in active service at this moment (04-04-2008)

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Ingara Marrodán, 29-04-2008 – Porlamar

<sup>37</sup> Interviews with taxi drivers, Isla de Margarita

<sup>38</sup> Interviews with Ingara Marrodán, a waiter on Margarita and the Tourist Department of Municipality Antolín del Campo, Isla de Margarita

<sup>39</sup> Observations and interviews with various sex workers

## Colouring the individuals

Fortunately, Venezuela is an interestingly diverse country where people of all ages, backgrounds, colours, cultural traditions and religions unite. Although many actors avoid painting sex workers as people with their own age, origin, nationality or in other words *identity*, they are a varied group like any other. Seldom are they talked about in terms of being a parent, a child, a sibling or a Venezuelan citizen. Sex workers are often essentialized as one homogenous group of people trapped in the world of selling sex. Drawing only a contextual macro-image lacks the uniqueness of every person and its experiences and because of this, it is now necessary to focus on the individuality of adolescent sex workers.

In this section it is shown that adolescent sex work relates to different individual factors in multiple ways. Later in this article, the relationship between the individual features, agency and future, will be clarified. I will now briefly describe the fixed individual factors that were found to be the most important ones; successively gender, skin colour, origin and religion. Beauty, which has an important position in Venezuelan life, and age are also of significance, but don't need further explanation here. I also focus on the direct and non-fixed surroundings of the individuals; personal relationships stop, start, are subject to change and can heavily influence adolescent sex workers' lives.

To start with, there is often an assumption that adolescent sex work refers only to girls, but during the field research two other *gender* groups were identified as well; male sex work (heterosexual or homosexual) and transgender sex workers. The group of male heterosexual sex workers makes a living through providing gigolo services to mainly female middle-aged tourists in exchange for food or gifts, rather than money (O'Connell & Sanchez, 1996: 12, 22). On the popular beach of Margarita's Playa el Agua the '*perros de la playa*' or 'beach dogs'<sup>40</sup> are a famous phenomenon. These 'dogs' are mostly very young men who are picked up on the beach by foreign women for company and sex. The women often stay with the same boy for how long the vacation lasts and incidentally return to Margarita to meet him again; there are cases known of foreign women marrying these beach boys. Many boys come from other countries, like Argentina and enjoy their loose 'job'<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> The informal name that people use to refer to male sex workers with foreign female clients working on beaches

<sup>41</sup> Informal conversation with German restaurant owner in Playa el Agua (16-05-2008) and interview with Ingara Marrodán (23-05-2008)

However, another group of male sex workers works for the needs instead of for the amusement. This group, who lives in severe circumstances, is more likely to turn to homosexual sex work (O'Connell & Sanchez, 1996: 12, 22). The chances are big they aren't homosexual, but perform homosexual activities because they see no other solution for survival. Homeless often under age boys are a risk group for this type of sex work<sup>42</sup>. Venezuela deals with a different type of homosexual sex work as well. This group does have a homosexual preference and likes to experiment with that. For example, young boys who have an older 'friend' who seduces, 'teaches' and 'rewards' them, often in the form of cloths and other products<sup>43</sup>. Male homosexual sex work is more hidden and seen as harder than female sex work, because of the double taboo and stigma<sup>44</sup> that rests on it (Agustín, 2008: 69)<sup>45</sup>. Finally, there is a substantial and rather visible group of transgender sex workers in Caracas as well as in Margarita. These girls, who used to be men but who almost all preserve their male genitals to collect more money, operate on the streets and are informally called '*perras de la calle*' or '*female street dogs*'<sup>46</sup>.

Furthermore, *skin colour* can make a difference in future perspectives of adolescent sex workers. Venezuela maintains very visible racialized inequalities but holds a public image about racial equality. On the one hand, foreign tourists are said to prefer brown skinned girls, and on the other hand, locals have other preferences as whitening through marriage with lighter skinned men is viewed as a way of social mobility by many sex workers (O'Connell & Sanchez, 1996: 13, 21, 23-24). Some writers argue that skin colour is fundamental in sex work (1996: 23), but personal preferences of clients are very distinct and depend on more than only colour<sup>47</sup>.

In adolescent sex work another personal segment that shapes adolescents' lives is *origin*, or the place an adolescent lives in and comes from. Hereby, the moving from the country side to the city and from country to country come into play. Many adolescent sex workers (64.5% of the minors in Caracas) live in the same house as one or more family members (AMBAR, 2002: 53). A non-negligible group (22.9%) in Caracas comes

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<sup>42</sup> Interview with Leonardo Rodríguez, coordinator of *Don Bosco: Project Atención a niños en situación de calle de la área metropolitana de Caracas* (27-03-2008)

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Heisa Londoño, 19-03-2008 - Caracas

<sup>44</sup> Stigma is regularly described as a disadvantaged social status which produces a devalued social identity in a particular context. Stigmatized people are perceived atypical from the normative expectations (Miller and Kaiser, 2001).

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Ibrahim Cortero, 02-04-2008 - Caracas

<sup>46</sup> The informal name that people use to refer to transgender street sex workers. Interview with transsexuals (01-04-2008), Yonathan Mateus, volunteer of *Ases de Venezuela*, an organization that promotes sexual health among homosexuals and transsexuals (24-03-2008) and observations in Porlamar

<sup>47</sup> Interviews with sex workers

from other parts of the country to work here anonymously however (2002: 47). Many young people migrate from rural areas to urban centres to escape from economic hardship (Kleinpenning & van Lindert, 1997: 56-58). More than urbanized locations, living in rural settings levels with living in greater poverty (Sorajjakool, 2003: 28). Now, because of gigantic migration flows 97 percent from the approximately 26 million Venezuelan inhabitants live in urban areas (Schnell-Anzola, et al., 2005: 25).

Nationality matters when exploring the youngsters' origin. Venezuela is home to an estimated one million illegal migrants from Colombia alone and also from other Latin countries large numbers of people migrate to Venezuela. Therefore, perhaps more than five per cent of its population is without legal or civil rights (O'Connell & Sanchez, 1996: 4). Sex work and nationality are said to be interrelated, as economic hardship is the most severe among these immigrants<sup>48</sup>. The group of sex workers who comes from other countries is not that large though<sup>49</sup> as the number of 2% of foreign teenagers in Caracas shows (AMBAR, 2002: 47). This small percentage can partly be attributed to the fact that it is much easier for adults to travel transnationally than it is for under age girls.

The last fixed individual identity marker that to some extent frames the futures of adolescent sex workers is *religion*. Two religions turned out to be of meaning; Christianity and *Santería*<sup>50</sup>. According to Heisa Londoño, a woman who is starting 'Alianza Nuevo Horizonte', a nongovernmental organization for adolescent sex workers, nearly all sex workers go to masses and are very religious people. Most brothels have Christian pictures on the walls and a *Santería* altar. In the poorer multicultural neighbourhoods *Santería*, a religion with African characteristics, is very popular and many girls who work in brothels come from these neighbourhoods.<sup>51</sup>

Individual fixed predictors are of mayor importance for the way into sex work, but also for the adolescents' ideas about and prospects for their future. Here, I also wish to concisely present the dynamic environment of the individuals, their personal relationships. First of all, social networks are essential for the step into the sex industry; girls undertake working mostly because they know somebody in the circuit or because they have been persuaded to initiate the job. Most common is that the convincing actor

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<sup>48</sup>Interviews with Heisa Londoño (19-03-2008) and Yonay Cartaya, social researcher of the *Dirección Nacional de Prevención del Delito* (11-03-2008)

<sup>49</sup> Interviews with different people, among who Edison (17-04-2008)

<sup>50</sup> The eclectic spiritual practice *Santería* is present in many Caribbean countries. *Santería* pretends to merge a catholic-based cult with African religious rites as devotion for a range of saints.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Heisa Londoño (19-03-2008) and observations in brothels in Caracas

is a friend<sup>52</sup>. According to the research *AMBAR* (2002: 104) did, 74% of the adolescent sex workers in Caracas entered the world of selling sex by way of a female friend.

Intimate personal relations can have different functions for adolescent sex workers, such as mental support. Many adolescent sex workers commence and continue to work together with a friend. Of the under age sex workers in Caracas 37% claims to work with a friend (*AMBAR*, 2002: 104). Often, the closest social relations don't support the adolescents because of simple ignorance or lack of interest. Of the youngsters in Caracas 37.5% say their family doesn't know how they make their money, while a large part does live together with one or more family members (2002: 64 & 53). In other cases these people can stimulate or demotivate sex workers to work<sup>53</sup>.

Also professional relationships have to be mentioned here. First of all, groups are especially important among sex workers in the informal circuit, like in the world of streetwalkers. For example, almost all transgender sex workers have a '*jefa*', who is the leader of the group and deal with practical matters. But group processes can also influence work in tangible sex establishments. Secondly, some (mainly female) street workers have a pimp, but the classic figure of the pimp as a man who controls the movements of workers is unknown to many<sup>54</sup>. Other kind of intermediaries may be conventional (and are often women) and workers who give money to friends or lovers aren't so different from other relationships in which one partner gives money to the other (Hart, 1999: 68; Cheng, 2002: 15). Pimps can also be people who know many clients, sell drugs and protect sex workers, but this image might be too heroic. Some sex workers claim to be hit and attacked by their pimps.<sup>55</sup>

Insiders in the sex industry can make lives of sex workers difficult, but some also help to bring about positive solutions for their workers (Agustín, 2008: 186). A former worker of a sex agency on Isla de Margarita, weakens the frequently heard claim that all intermediaries within the industry are undoubtedly exploiters. He shows that the protection and wellbeing of the girls were the primary issues of the agency. By means of

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<sup>52</sup> Interview with Edison, 17-04-2008 - Porlamar

<sup>53</sup> Observations on the street and interviews with many people, among who Nayive Reverón (14-03-2008), Edison (17-04-2008) and Denis Ochoa, psychologist of Department of Human Rights, Ministry of Exterior Relations (18-03-2008)

<sup>54</sup> Interviews with pimps, sex workers, Yonathan Mateus (24-03-2008)

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Lowing González, administrative coordinator of *Ases de Venezuela* (24-03-2008) and results from a questionnaire *Ases* was carrying out among transsexual sex workers during the period of this research in Caracas.

control and selection of clients, job evaluations, social support and the protection of the reputation of the girls, the agency tried to take care of them as well as possible<sup>56</sup>.

### 3 Agency in the Labour Sphere

The fixed and dynamic contexts factors, described above, form the spaces within which adolescents can manoeuvre and construct their lives. In this section the active bending of current working structures to optimize labour conditions is shed light on. Whether someone can powerful control these conditions partly depends on the contextual and individual factors. The negotiation of their position within the working society indirectly influences their long-term future. To understand the active taking of initiatives by sex workers, it is necessary to begin with their *step into* the sex industry.

Adolescent sex workers are not passive creatures who are all forced into the sex world by evil Mafiosi. Agency is an important argument in the famous discussion on forced or chosen entrance into sex work that has its roots in the abolitionism/ liberalism debate. In Venezuela this battle is still going strong with the abolitionists having more followers. A typical abolitionist view is put forward by Willis and Levy (2002: 1417) 'children [who they define as anyone under 18] cannot consent to being prostituted, because (...) children do not have the requisite capacity to make such decisions'. Abolitionism denies the presence of choice, decision-making skills or in other words 'agency' of 'child sex workers' and talks in terms of 'victims'. Sex work as a whole is to be eliminated and taking the adolescents serious as a party equals approval of forcing and sexually exploiting them. A more liberal perspective comes from researchers who focus on the fact that most minors claim to make the decision to become sex workers themselves (Pettman, 1997: 105). They believe abolishing sex work is an unrealistic idea and improving the situation of the adolescents is more constructive.

Force and choice are relative and can go hand in hand. I believe that in some situations force, in most choice and in others a combination of the two can be reasons for an adolescent to start selling sex. Virginia, a girl of 14 years old (see box 1) is said to be convinced by a criminal to enter sex work. With lover boy techniques the girl was trapped in sex work. But, at the other hand the girl seems to have her own influence on the situation as well, as her family assumes she will fall in the same pattern again as

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<sup>56</sup> Interview with Edison, 17-04-2008 - Porlamar

soon as she will get out of the juvenile institution she is in. Lisa, her aunt complains the girl is very rebellious and doesn't communicate with her family<sup>57</sup>. It is not a complete coincidence that she is one of the girls that is trapped into sex work. When taking the well-known stereotype of forced adults, it also becomes clear that force is relative; most female migrants who are labelled 'victims of trafficking' and work in the sex industry state they came to Europe knowing that their work would have a sexual component (Agustín, 2008: 30).

Although I believe there definitely exists some degree of agency in the decision to become a

**Box 1: The story of an under age sex worker**

*Virginia, a girl of 14 years old living on Margarita who lost both parents lives with her grandparents and aunt. Lisa, her aunt is 34, has four studying children, of which the oldest is 18 and the youngest 11, and works as a sex worker. She sells naked pictures of herself. The household of this family who has lived their whole life on the island can be considered as very poor. They live in a little village where under age sex work is a large problem. The aunt claims to know at least 6 girls between 13 and 15 in this village who are working as sex workers. For years the girl has seen many strange men her aunt brought home. Three months ago the girl disappeared for some days. She was found together with a man who sells drugs and can be considered a lover boy; she fell in love with him and he convinced her to have sex for money. She wasn't completely forced into sex work by her lover boy however. The only thing that in some way forced her into this is the poverty she lives in. For three months already she has been in a closed shelter home and now she can visit her family every now and then for a couple of days. Lisa hasn't much hope for her niece however: 'I think she will fall in the same thing again. She doesn't like to study, disappears a lot and doesn't listen to her grandparents or me'. Source: Interview with Lisa, sex worker and aunt of Virginia, 27-03-2008, and Brahimir Salazar, director of FundaOriental, 29-04-2008.*

sex worker, this agency is relative and depends on context factors. Contextual macro-factors like poverty can easily create and subsequently sustain sex work. Temporary financial crises can have a disproportionately severe and long lasting negative impact on minors (Hilary et al. in Ansell, 2005: 53), but also adults can suffer from it. I talked to an older sex worker who lost all the properties she had in a notorious tragedy in 1999. During this catastrophe mud slid down the mountain and took everything that was on it, inclusive tens of thousands houses of mainly poor people living high up this mountain. For the last nine years she has been saving money from selling sex until she can get a loan to start a little business<sup>58</sup>. Sex work becomes the easiest way out of short term economic shocks, and is then extremely difficult to leave (Montgomery, 2001: 76).

Social relations, like family members or neighbours can indirectly trigger the process of initiating sex work (País, 1998: 35-36):

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Lisa, a sex worker of 34, 14-05-2008 – bakery Porlamar

<sup>58</sup> Interview with older sex worker, 25-03-2008 - brothel Caracas

'I believe I chose to work in sex work because of my youth. My youth was very difficult. I lived in a very bad neighbourhood and my brother was en still is a criminal. (...) My brothers and sisters all come from different fathers.'<sup>59</sup>

Because of a more sudden crisis Sofia and her sister started to work in the sex commerce. She describes that she and her sister suffered many psychological problems in her parental house. When she was 18 they were both thrown out of the house. 'They didn't want us around anymore.'<sup>60</sup> Also direct stimulation of adolescents by close social networks occurs, for instance in cases where family members work together with the adolescents (9.6% of the minors in Caracas; AMBAR, 2002: 105) or pimp younger familiars.

Also personal factors can determine the decision to step into sex work, such as gender. Men with a homosexual preference *and* sex workers have a more isolated position in Venezuelan society, which creates a smaller step from the first to the last. In addition, some boys decide to become a transsexual to be able to earn more money in sex work, while others become a sex worker because they are a transsexual. For transsexuals taking the step into the sex industry is many times more likely than for girls or boys who aren't transsexual and many don't see what other kind of job would fit them more. Transsexuals form an isolated group and people expect them to work in a space outside society. Because of prejudices it is hard for them to come across a 'normal' job which makes their future prospects problematic as well. A modest luck is that a reasonable number of the transsexuals choose sex work because of curiosity<sup>61</sup>.

But the personal motivation and decision-making of adolescents shouldn't be denied. In the majority of the cases the contextual situation is the main accelerator for adolescents to sex work, while a smaller group decides they want to be a sex worker against all odds. For example, there are cases of persons from the middle class who decide to become sex workers out of internal motives of curiosity, sensation-seeking or the desire to be self-supporting<sup>62</sup>. Generally, the entrance in the sex industry is undeniably driven by the combined action of societal and personal characteristics.

Despite of differences in contexts and personalities, none of the teenagers and adults passively concedes with their circumstances, but struggle to take control over decisions (Montgomery, 2001: 90). Ingara Marrodán, a social researcher of sex work and

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<sup>59</sup> Interview with Catarina, 28-05-2008 - hospital Porlamar

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Sofia, a sex worker of 19, 29-04-2008 - street Porlamar

<sup>61</sup> Interviews with Heisa Londoño (19-03-2008) and Yonathan Mateus and Lowing Gonzalez (24-03-2008) and interviews with transsexuals in Caracas

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Nayive Reverón, 28-03-2008 - Caracas

sex tourism in village Playa el Agua on Isla de Margarita, believes that both groups are very well capable of making decisions about starting sex work. Also minors consciously begin to ask money for sex and actively search for clients<sup>63</sup>. Estefanía, an older sex worker who works in a night club, shares this opinion:

'Teenagers know everything about sex work. Girls of 16, 17 themselves decide they want to work in it. (...) They don't want to study or work. Girls of 14 years old beg me to take them to my work. (...) These girls have a strong personality.'<sup>64</sup>

A woman of 35 years explains how it all started:

'I was 14 years old and saw that an aunt of mine worked at night and always had money in her purse (...) and didn't kill herself working like my mama. So one day I asked her to take me to her work and she said no, many times, until a day I dressed up and said to her: 'today yes, aunt'. (...) [After many times] I started to realise that my aunt earned more for being with men in the bed than for the liquor she served and it seemed easy to me, as I was younger and more beautiful than her. Nights later I said to her that I wanted to go with one of those men to bed and that they would pay me well, she asked if I knew what I had to do and I answered that I had done it with friends and classmates on the terrain behind school a lot of times. So she said 'do what you want', and I watched a drunkard in the bar, I approached him and he was ready to go. I thought as he is very drunk it will be easy. I always thought I was smart, but the ugly one used me and didn't pay me.'<sup>65</sup>

The first experiences may be negative, in many ways under age sex workers try to integrate in the adult sex world; for instance cases of minors with false identity cards have been discovered to work in resorts for tourists<sup>66</sup>. Not only do most of them actively integrate into the sex industry, they also have -to some degree- a hand in their work.

### Just another job

The active role under age adolescent sex workers play in their own lives is often largely overlooked (Montgomery, 2001: 69), but it is very important for them to have some sort of control over their circumstances (2001: p. 90). Adolescent sex workers don't passively undergo their current working situation, what is for example shown in the fact that most of them have rejected clients for different reasons (Agustín, 2008: 63). I even want to take it one step further: sex workers actively deal with their work like people in other sectors

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Ingara Marrodán, 23-05-2008 – Porlamar

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Estefanía, an older sex worker of 36, 21-05-2008 – hospital Porlamar

<sup>65</sup> Citation from a brothel sex worker in Caracas, País, 1998: 81-83

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Ramon Mago, coordinator of the *Dirección Regional de Prevención del Delito* in Isla de Margarita (23-04-2008)

deal with theirs. And the sex industry wherein people sell services to buyers is actually in various ways comparable with other fields of activity (2008: 60-65).

Many sex workers realistically see their job like any other. In this way it can't be evaluated as different or less worthy: 'one can be a secretary or a sex worker' and like many other jobs: 'everything is hard when you do it for the first time, but you can get used to everything'<sup>67</sup>. And just as a secretary can be a mother and climate activist at the same time, selling sex doesn't complete someone's identity. They like to be seen as more than a 'sex worker' as they see sex work as something they *do* and not as something they *are* (Montgomery, 2001: 91). Here, I demonstrate the diversity of ways in which adolescents professionally and pragmatically manage their current working surroundings, or show *practical agency*, just like people do in other working spaces.

First of all, sex workers have their own discourse and practical way of survival. (Montgomery, 2001: 91). This applies in the first place to groups of sex workers, in this case on public places:

'It is a community, like any other. They make their own state; there are hierarchies, norms, (...) unwritten rules; things you can and can't do. When you enter the group, you are taught the rules. About where you should walk and where the police will arrest you. Practical rules.'<sup>68</sup>

Sex workers show their control adopting specific jargon, traditions, morals and rules. 'I haven't been opened yet' means for example that someone hasn't had her first clients yet. A tradition in some brothels is beating the walls and asking the brothel for many clients that day. They have collective 'morals', such as abstaining from work on Eastern and Christmas. Some norms are only valid under certain conditions; 'you can't steal, only from drunkards'. Adapting to the collective standards is appreciated and rewarded:

'You can earn respect by being beautiful, fulfilling rules, not stealing things and clients; than you will be respected at a certain moment and they will recommend each other to clients and lend out clients. Everyone knows with who he can work and with who he can't.'<sup>69</sup>

Rules are not only hold within the group, they can also be personal. Common rules they hold are no kissing and no anal sexual intercourse<sup>70</sup>. Before they start to offer their

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<sup>67</sup> Interview with Patty, a sex worker of 22, 28-05-2008- hospital Porlamar

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Ibrahim Cortero, 02-04-2008 - Caracas

<sup>69</sup> Idem

<sup>70</sup> Interviews with Ibrahim Cortero (02-04-2008), Yonathan Mateus (24-03-2008) and sex workers

services, they explain their personal working rules. If a client doesn't follow the rules, they might correct him. Magali says she hits the clients who don't behave as they should<sup>71</sup>. Maria states:

'I tell them I only give normal services and do certain kinds of positions. If he doesn't want to listen or he treats me bad, I give him his money back and leave. (...) This is my work and they have to respect that.'<sup>72</sup>

Many claim to be the one who makes the rules and is in command of the relation between her and her client. They all have their own way of showing this power however:

'From there on, the one who revenged herself on men was me, so I mistreat them by swearing at them when I take them to the bed and now they do pay me well.'<sup>73</sup>

It looks like the power they have in the working relations, gives them something to be proud of and to make their self-esteem grow. Next to the functionality of it, it is a way to construct the perception of their work in a positive way.

Secondly, girls and women who work as independent '*damas de compañía*' or 'ladies of company' or 'escort girls'<sup>74</sup> commonly control their work in a professional way; they give their phone number to people they perceive as harmless, put advertisements in local newspapers, have personal business cards that they hand out, set their own prices and have personal earning targets. By controlling the circumstances as much as possible they can protect their own safety and income. Many have fixed working hours and clearly separate their personal life from their work<sup>75</sup>. Maria tells me that if clients approach her during the day, beyond working hours, she tells them she would like him to leave her alone because she wishes to enjoy her day just like anyone else<sup>76</sup>. In these moments she refuses to be treated as the 'sex worker', but as just another Venezuelan citizen. Essential to notice however is that escort girls of company like Maria are often blessed with a more beautiful exterior, which makes it easier to refuse clients and be the leading figure in the relation. This individual factor makes their desperation smaller

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Magali, a sex worker of 28, 25-03-2008, brothel Caracas

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Maria, a sex worker of 21, 14-05-2008– hospital Porlamar

<sup>73</sup> Citation from a brothel sex worker in País, 1998: 83

<sup>74</sup> (Escort) girls who offer a broader packet, like conversations or company of clients during dinners, etc. They are part of an escort agency or work on their own account.

<sup>75</sup> Interviews with Ibrahim Cortero (02-04-2008) and different sex workers, among who Maria (14-05-2008)

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Maria, 14-05-2008– hospital Porlamar

than that of less attractive girls who might be less selective and professional for economic motives.

Age and necessity can also determine professionalism. For example, the young 'beach dogs' work in a less established and looser way than female sex workers. The boys don't have fixed prices and are less 'professional' in their work than the female sex workers. For them sex work is a matter that occasionally comes along as just another way to obtain food and material and not that much as an actual job. Some of them don't mind doing this work and as they aren't paid, selling sex is more something to spend the time with than a real necessity. The same can be said for a group of homosexual sex workers. Of this young and very informally working group a considerable section is bisexual, likes experimenting and searches for new sensations<sup>77</sup>. In general, these boys come from a less desperate situation than the girls (O'Connell & Sanchez, 1996: 12, 22) and their future prospects are better, in the sense that changing jobs and arranging life are easier.

Thirdly, the strategies that adolescent sex workers have developed are another clever form of manifesting practical agency (Montgomery, 2002: 69). Many adolescent sex workers have developed strategies and techniques to be able to make (more) money. Teenagers have for example invented creative ways to let potential clients know that they work as (illegal) sex workers. Under age girls in a village close to Valencia write the price they charge on the bottom of their shoes and change sitting position when necessary, so that men are able to read it. The fact that they work in the world of sex can in some locations also be filtered through to clients by carrying school books under their arms<sup>78</sup>.

Fourthly, working 'tricks' involve as well the optimal adaptation to circumstances. First workers search for a work place where money abounds<sup>79</sup> and subsequently, they actively adjust to this. They dress and behave in the most appropriate way for the context in which they work<sup>80</sup>. Some make strategic cloth choices, like Maria who explains how she operates in a strip bar:

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<sup>77</sup> Informal conversation with German restaurant owner in Playa el Agua (16-05-2008), interviews with Ingara Marrodán (23-05-2008) and Heisa Londoño (19-03-2008)

<sup>78</sup> Interviews with Edison (17-04-2008), Ingara Marrodán (23-05-2008) and Lowing González, administrative coordinator of *Ases de Venezuela* (24-03-2008)

<sup>79</sup> Interview with Lowing González (24-03-2008)

<sup>80</sup> Interview with Ibrahim Cortero, 02-04-2008 - Caracas

'I don't put on very sexy cloths, because I want to look sexy being myself. I do this on purpose, so men want to know what is underneath my cloths. They like to take my cloths of. On the contrary, the girls who put on very sexy cloths already give away everything they have.'<sup>81</sup>

Distinguishing herself from other workers is a tactical step Maria undertakes to enlarge her clientele within the possibilities of the location. Adolescent sex workers don't only adapt to the setting, they also fit to the patterns of clients. Many adolescent sex workers know exactly in which seasons the tourists from different countries come to visit Margarita. Two girls in a strip bar told me they arrived a week ago on the island, but they were thinking of moving to another place again, because at that moment tourism in Margarita was at its lowest. They adjust to the (periodical) developments that their potential buyers show in search for lucrative commerce.

Furthermore, moving from place to place is smart for another reason. On a daily basis adolescents are actively involved in trying to improve their status and to assert their identity (Montgomery, 2001: 111). Being a new sex worker strongly helps girls and boys to earn respect and money. After a while clients are 'bored' of the sex workers they visit and start losing their respect for them. To keep their status and to gain enough money, many sex workers change group and location every now and then. The adolescent sex workers are aware of the importance of being new on the street or in the bar and many consciously move from city to city to stay 'the new sex worker'.<sup>82</sup> This result is in contrast with the findings of Montgomery (2001: 107) who researched under age sex work in Thailand. Here adolescents try to climb up the ladder by being a sex worker in the same setting as long as possible and becoming a pimp of children. This difference is probably due to the fact that adolescent sex workers in Thailand have to construct their status in a different way as they work in the neighbourhood or village where their family lives (2001: 10), while adolescents in Venezuela are generally searching a place away from their family.

On the sixth place, beside simple adaptation to clients' patterns and preferences, sex workers also create their own clientele in accordance with their preferences. The clients are not the only searching actors and many authors forget that the young sex workers also actively 'pick up' clients. They visit places where their preferred client groups are to be found and aim at specific persons. As motives and circumstances differ, some adolescent sex workers aim at the local market, while others work in the setting of

<sup>81</sup> Interview with Maria, 14-05-2008 - hospital Porlamar

<sup>82</sup> Interview with Heisa Londoño (19-03-2008) and various sex workers

sex tourism or combine the two working settings. Having a preference for clients from a specific country is common. The choice and targeting of clients depends on several factors, like the degree of necessity and colour of the skin. For example, the needy 'homosexual' group can't afford to passively wait for female clients like the beach boys, because this comes down to receiving food or products and not the stable money they lack<sup>83</sup>. Next, the value assigned to skin colour or human types differs per context. Knowledge of this can stimulate people to move to specific contexts and strategically 'apply' their skin colour (Agustín, 2008: 7).

In this fashion every individual fulfils its own desires and opportunities. Personal preferences for informal or established segments of the sex industry can also lead to optimizing personal job conditions. Some sex workers prefer working independently as this gives them more liberty and less loss of money to third parties. Some consciously choose a job in a sex establishment for security reasons and others combine the two<sup>84</sup>. This preference is among others determined by gender differences. Female sex work is the only type that is for a part organized and formally structured. Women have the option to choose between an informal or established job, while boys have to find their clients independently in any case (Montgomery, 2001: 77; Shaw & Butler, 1998: 188).

Thus, in manifold ways sex workers adapt to the context and are able to optimally use the possibilities the sex world offers them, hereby making use of different markets<sup>85</sup>. Maria, for example, has worked a year as an escort girl in different urban regions in Venezuela, before she came to Margarita. She planned to work here for some months, but preferred to settle on the island, also because sex tourism made her income grow drastically. Now she works independently while at the same time she dances in a nightclub. She has foreign and local clients and doesn't only focus on tourism<sup>86</sup>. Just like people from other occupational groups adolescent sex workers aren't helpless people, but find their way around the working structures.

Finally, a logic form of practical agency is making work endurable, possible or even pleasant, usually with others. Because the first paid sexual relations are seen as the most frightening, many young people prefer to share this experience with another

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<sup>83</sup> Interviews with various sex workers, Edison (17-04-2008) and Fidela Agreda and Rudy Ordaz of the Municipality Antolín del Campo, Department of Tourism (16-05-2008)

<sup>84</sup> Interviews with various sex workers and Ingara Marrodán (23-05-2008)

<sup>85</sup> Interviews with various sex workers, among who Maria, a sex worker of 21 years old (14-05-2008)

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Maria, 14-05-2008- hospital Porlamar

person who is also new in the business. For adolescent sex workers it can be calming to do something forbidden or criticized together<sup>87</sup>. As well, the physical and psychological support the group offers to the sex workers is usually more valuable than the competition within:

‘There is competition, but also a lot of solidarity to a certain extent because they know what the other is doing there. They kill each other, but if anyone from the outside world wants to attack someone from the community everyone comes to help. It is everyone against the world. The stranger is kept outside, the group is being protected and information is strongly kept inside the group. It is just like everywhere else.’<sup>88</sup>

Friends and groups can also be of help in passing the working hours. In Margarita I observed a group of roughly ten young female sex workers who moved altogether from a night club to another bar in search for clients. In this way they combined working with having a night out with a group of friends, which transforms their job into something more pleasant and socially accepted. Some also work at night and visit the places where they have travelled to for work during the day<sup>89</sup>. Agustín (2008: 10-48) believes many women migrate to other countries to work as sex workers, but also to be a tourist in new places. Labelling them as ‘trafficked victims’, instead of ‘flux and flexible labourers’, ignores the fact that these travellers are ordinary human beings working to overcome specific problems. She argues that sex workers, just like other people who travel for work, also work to travel.

### **Justifying ‘immoralities’**

Agency serves not only practicalities, but also mental discrepancies of young sex workers. Montgomery states that no-one enjoys it or feels that it is a good way of life. In different circumstances or better opportunities, many would undoubtedly leave (2001: 7). In this study, this can be partly confirmed. There are various sex workers who perceive their work as a hobby they like to do, like a number of male and transsexual sex workers. There are those who enjoy the sex in sex work at least some of the time (Agustín, 2008: 64). For many having sex with strangers isn’t seen as something pleasant

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<sup>87</sup> Interview with Heisa Londoño, 19-03-2008 - Caracas

<sup>88</sup> Interview with Ibrahim Cortero, 02-04-2008 - Caracas

<sup>89</sup> Interview with two girls in a strip bar who travelled a lot for reasons concerning work *and* fun, 17-05-2008 - Porlamar

though. In AMBAR's (2002: 107) research with adolescent sex workers in Caracas it appears that many (47 %) feel really bad because of their job.

The discrepancy between these unhappy feelings and negative attitudes, caused by ideas in society about morality, at one hand and their attitude-discrepant behaviour in the form of sex working at the other produces a unpleasant mental tension. Adolescents become motivated to reduce this cognitive tension by active justification of their choices concerning work. Giving their work explanation and value is absolutely necessary (Festinger, 1957, in Brehm et al., 2002: 206-207). It can be ambiguous which exact motives are hidden behind thoughts and expressions, but it is important to signalize the possibility of multiple reasons behind saying one and the same thing.

*Justifying agency* is for most adolescents fundamental as a method to deal with the selling of sex. Many of them use the Venezuelan context as a justification for the way they earn their money, although most don't want to be treated as victims of their situations. With a sad face a girl emphasizes times in Venezuela are difficult and unemployment is high. There is just no other option than sex work<sup>90</sup>. For Magali, a divorced woman of 28 years with four children, not being able to live from a minimum wage is the reason why she has been working in the same brothel for the past ten years<sup>91</sup>. Laura says: 'someone needs the money. Everything is expensive, isn't it? What can you do?'<sup>92</sup> In this manner working in the sex business can be attributed to external factors while sex workers are immune for blame. This perceived dependence of the context<sup>93</sup> clearly hampers their initiatives to change the future.

The personal context can be put forward defending their work against social stigmas. An informal sex worker tells me that the hours of study are only combinable with work at night, as she has to go to the university during the day. Emphasizing sex work as the only possibility to pay for her study, she uses working hours as an excuse for her work to the outside world. The flexible schedules and independence of the work can be justifications, but also *are* in fact attractive to and empower many. Therefore, some prefer selling sex above other jobs (Agustin, 2008: 63).

I found other ways in which Venezuelan adolescent sex workers actively transform ideas about their livelihood into something acceptable and in some cases even

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<sup>90</sup> Informal conversation with sex worker in brothel in Caracas

<sup>91</sup> Interview with Magali, 25-03-2008 - brothel Caracas

<sup>92</sup> Interview with Laura, a sex worker of 25, 21-05-2008 - hospital Porlamar

<sup>93</sup> The perception of a problematic situation may in the interviews partly be exaggerated for social desirability reasons

appreciable as well. First of all, Montgomery (2001: 89) discovered that adolescent sex workers in Thailand try to give meaning to their work, by saying not only that they chose sex work, but also that they fulfil their familial obligations. 'Prostitution, for the children [who she perceives as anyone under 18] themselves, is not an issue of morality versus immorality, but of turning a socially unacceptable form of earning money into a way of fulfilling their familial obligations (2001: 157)'. Also during the field research in Venezuela it appeared that young girls emphasize the economical support of their baby or parents instead of how they are able to support them. Catarina, like others, stresses her being a good mother and in this way dismisses ideas about immorality of sex work:

'People will always say: 'she is a prostitute', but I feel good inside and that is what is important. I made sure my three children received good education and they are doing really well now. Nobody can accuse me of not raising my children well.'<sup>94</sup>

Being able to maintain children gives a feeling of pride and dignity and also raises social status<sup>95</sup>. The question how to achieve this is of secondary importance: 'first I thought of having a house and paying for me and my son, who is very important for me, and in the second place of what to do to obtain this'<sup>96</sup>. Also Catarina perceives it very pragmatic: 'when you don't have diapers and milk for your children, you are so desperate that you will do anything to earn money'<sup>97</sup>. Ibrahim Cortero believes: 'maybe they aren't proud of what they do, but they are about what they obtained with what they do, when they look at their children who are professionals.'<sup>98</sup>

Secondly, next to stressing family obligations Venezuelan girls point to their personal survival and to the commodity of money. The question whether familial *or* personal needs are prioritized depends partly on the origin of adolescents. The need for adolescents to support their family materially is generally larger when this family lives in a poorer rural area. On the contrary, urban adolescent sex workers can invest their money more in themselves. In any case, sex workers explain their job in terms of earnings. Sex workers give meaning to their work by saying it is a necessity or an opening to an easier life<sup>99</sup> -and through pointing to this necessity and rejecting those

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<sup>94</sup> Interview with Catarina, 28-05-2008 - hospital Porlamar

<sup>95</sup> Interview with Edison, 17-04-2008 - Porlamar

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Patty, 28-05-2008 - hospital Porlamar

<sup>97</sup> Interview with Catarina, 28-05-2008 - hospital Porlamar

<sup>98</sup> Interview with Ibrahim Cortero, 02-04-2008 - Caracas

<sup>99</sup> Interviews with various sex workers and other people, among who Edison (17-04-2008), Ibrahim Cortero (02-04-2008) and Maura de Abraham (13-05-2008)

who work for other reasons, some can better accept their choices<sup>100</sup>. They can manage to work in a difficult industry by emphasizing the only thing that makes it really worth doing for:

‘God has to understand that what I do is out of necessity. I know I am doing something bad and that makes me feel bad, but I need the money’<sup>101</sup>.

‘People say it is making ‘easy money’, but it isn’t easy at all to have sex with people you don’t know and don’t like. (...) When I am with someone I normally close my eyes and think of something I like. And I think of the moment it will all be over, when I receive my money. I do it all for the money. How am I going to survive without it?’<sup>102</sup>

By focusing on the money and not on the owner of the money, they can keep their work up. In the research of AMBAR (2002: 106) with 104 under age adolescent sex workers in Caracas 26.9% of them even indicated to like their job because of the money they earn with it. ‘They enjoy themselves making money and living the easy life’<sup>103</sup>. Money can compensate for much of the mental discrepancy between attitudes and actual working behaviour (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959, in Brehm et al., 2002: 207-208). Some even bless the fact they ended up in this business:

‘I never planned to do this work. A friend of mine talked me into it. (...) The first time was very difficult; I was insecure about undressing and letting somebody touch me. (...) I am now working for one year and two months. (...) If I would have known the amount of money you make with working as a lady of company, I would have started working like this a lot earlier. (...) I ask money for everything I do and earn more than a doctor. I have sex for the money, not for the person. Afterwards I leave, I never see him again, but I still see his money. (...) Who they are doesn’t interest me, only the money does. If they treat me well they can call me again.’<sup>104</sup>

The money isn’t just an ‘excuse’ for working in the sex industry; from a pure economic perspective, sex work indeed is a rational choice (Montgomery, 2001: 99). Catarina’s<sup>105</sup> statement demonstrates these logics clearly: ‘every problem has a solution and this is the solution to our economic problems’.

<sup>100</sup> Different sources, f.e. the interview with Estefanía (21-05-2008 – hospital Porlamar), who rejects the fact that many young adolescent sex workers ‘work more for their looks than for the necessity.’

<sup>101</sup> Citation from Bonelli et al, 2001: 94. Latin migrated woman in Spain

<sup>102</sup> Interview with Sofia, a sex worker of 19 years old, 29-04-2008 – street Porlamar

<sup>103</sup> Interview with Edison, 17-04-2008 - Porlamar

<sup>104</sup> Interview with Maria, 14-05-2008 – hospital Porlamar

<sup>105</sup> Interview with Catarina, 28-05-2008 – hospital Porlamar

Thirdly, an obvious way in which some adolescent sex workers show their agency is through their deliberate rejection of terms and labels attached to them. Especially a group of informal under age adolescents refuses to use the words 'sex worker' or 'prostitute' and identify themselves as such (O'Connell & Sanchez, 1996: 11; FundaICI, 1995: 74). The concepts that sex work involves are relabelled; clients are friends or guests, the payments tips or gifts (Montgomery, 2001: 91). Many adolescents claim to work without a pimp and explain him as a friend who helps them when they need it. Euphemisms are abundant in the informal business. In Venezuela many call themselves simply 'friend' or 'lady of company'. Vague explanations and code language can be used to describe their work<sup>106</sup>: 'I leave with friends and they invite me and they give me money sometimes'<sup>107</sup>. Some even see it as a favour they do to others:

'I don't know if this is *putería*<sup>108</sup>, what I do is offering a love service which helps to overcome the routine where many couple have fallen into. (...) I love giving love because I love being loved.'<sup>109</sup>

To describe their profitable activities euphemistically, means calling the attention on acceptable aspects instead of the actual selling of sex. Furthermore, it is a way to weaken the idea that besides 'prostitutes' or 'sex workers' they have no other identities.

The labels but also the actual working settings are transformed into something natural. Many girls and boys walk around and work by socializing and actively getting to know potential clients. They are in places where many people can be found, like around '*bodegones*<sup>110</sup>' or on beaches. They generally know many people, flirt with them and leave with clients. Many treat them as friends and for outsiders it looks like a normal situation of people meeting each other and having a drink. Nevertheless, it is actually a well planned disguised act of earning money. By talking about friends having a drink on the street, taking a bite in the nearby bakery and afterwards passing by someone's house, who might even be of their same age, they don't feel like 'real sex workers'<sup>111</sup>.

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<sup>106</sup> Interviews with various sex workers and informal conversations with pimps

<sup>107</sup> Citation from a under age sex worker in Venezuela, FundaICI, 1995: 75

<sup>108</sup> The live of 'whores'

<sup>109</sup> Citation from an under age sex worker, FundaICI, 1995: 75

<sup>110</sup> Liquor shops which are often places where people gather and socialize

<sup>111</sup> Observations and informal conversations with sex workers and others on the streets of Porlamar

Talking in terms of 'friends' is something many hold on to. Sex workers don't only treat clients like friends; many really perceive them in this way. Sofia explains her 'work':

'I have a friend who pays for my study. (...) He pays my study and in exchange he is my friend. (...) Yes, I have sex with him. (...) I don't like having sex with him, but what can I do? I need to finish my study. (...) Yes, I have more friends who help me.'<sup>112</sup>

For them this is a way of dealing with their work and constructing a new and lighter version of sex work. They don't like others or themselves to see them as sex workers and prefer bringing their work to an amicable level. When a pimp presents me to a girl of whom he says she is an under age sex worker, the girl says: 'What? But I am not like that. I am not that kind of girl'. Afterwards the man tells me:

'She definitely is one. Many are still in denial. 'Am I or am I not?' They are beginning and not sure yet in which direction their lives should go. They don't see themselves as whores, but they definitely are. (...) That girl only does it for the drugs. That's why she thinks she isn't a whore.'<sup>113</sup>

The reaction of the girl shows clearly that many adolescents don't perceive themselves as sex workers and that the labels they use are very powerful. Young adolescents are conscious of the social stigma which surrounds sex work, and for them to be called a 'prostitute' or 'sex worker' is a great insult and deeply hurtful (Montgomery, 2001: 91). Also, some try to escape from the identity of 'sex worker', 'prostitute' or 'stripper' by seeing their profitable activities as a temporary means to climb out of economical difficulties (Agustin, 2008: 72). Laura emphasizes the temporality of her activities, although she works for quite some time already: 'I am new in this job; I'm working since a year now. (...) But it is temporary.'<sup>114</sup> Also, many are keen on downplaying the importance of sex work in their lives; 'it's only my body' (Montgomery, 2001: 91). In many ways they can change the perception of their work and so reduce the internal discrepancy between cognitions and behaviour.

In the fourth place, when sex workers do accept their work as it is, many find it fundamental to focus on the variety of competences needed for it. Adolescent sex

<sup>112</sup> Interview with Sofia, 29-04-2008 – street Porlamar

<sup>113</sup> Informal conversation with a drug dealer/ pimp I knew well, 24-05-2008 – street Porlamar

<sup>114</sup> Interview with Laura, 21-05-2008 – hospital Porlamar

workers stress that one should not think it is an easy job. Their work contains much more than undressing and having sex (Agustín, 2008: 61). Knowing how to entertain men physically as well as psychosocially is necessary and sometimes they just have to be interesting company to restaurants or parties.<sup>115</sup> The need for personal growth in the job is significant and heightens its value. Maria, an escort girl tells me:

‘You have to know what to say and keep the conversation going. Sometimes men only want to talk and then we only talk. I just do whatever he desires. For this job you must know how to treat people. Men sometimes tell me about their marriage problems and I try to give them advices. I say: ‘give her flowers or chocolates, spoil her; that is what women want’. They ask me for advice about their wives, because I am a woman as well.’<sup>116</sup>

Catarina considers herself as the ‘ugly duck of the brothel’. She has enough clients however because clients really like to talk to her. She adapts herself to every client and is able to converse about politics, sport or the marriage problems of the clients. According to her, she is a psychologist to many clients. She believes it is a job in which you need different kinds of qualities<sup>117</sup>.

Another competence which is said to be important is creating a relationship of perceived mutual loyalty. Sex workers prefer to have steady clients, because these clients are seen as a positive and stable factor in their lives and a lucrative way to make money<sup>118</sup>. To have steady clients and to make clients recommend them to other men, adolescent sex workers treat their clients as friends (Agustín, 2008: 62)<sup>119</sup>. Maria told me:

‘Men are sometimes a bit nervous and scared when they come to me, because it is their first time. I always try to make them feel comfortable. I treat them as my friends. I talk to them, we make jokes and try to make them forget the situation. Then the chances they come back to me are bigger (...). That is what I want: steady clients. (...) With steady clients you feel more secure, because you already know them and know how they behave.’<sup>120</sup>

Developing various capacities is a strategic choice of making a business pay better, but also a way to upgrade the job status. And, perceiving the working activities from a more

<sup>115</sup> Interview with Edison, 17-04-2008 - Porlamar

<sup>116</sup> Interview with Maria, 14-05-2008 - hospital Porlamar

<sup>117</sup> Interview with Catarina, 28-05-2008 - hospital Porlamar

<sup>118</sup> Interviews with sex workers, Ibrahim Cortero (02-04-2008) and Edison (17-04-2008)

<sup>119</sup> Interview with Ibrahim Cortero, 02-04-2008 - Caracas

<sup>120</sup> Interview with Maria, 14-05-2008 - hospital Porlamar

positive side diminishes mental clashes with morality (Festinger, 1957, in Brehm et al., 2002: 207).

To conclude, many adolescent sex workers give meaning to their work by evaluating their clients. A popular conversation subject between (adolescent) sex workers is their clients and their defects. Clients and their bodies are thoroughly being evaluated. One girl even taped all of her services to laugh about it afterwards with her colleagues<sup>121</sup>. Sex workers often look and talk down on the clients' girlfriends or wives as well, because they feel they know a different side of these men. This evaluating and making fun of clients and their partners can give the youngsters a feeling of power over their lives; it is not something that is just happening to them, but something they can give their opinion about. In that way they construct their working experiences and self-perception positively.

Furthermore, adolescent sex workers can see themselves as superior to other girls (not in the business) as they gain a lot of money and feel desired by men. 'Other girls' may be portrayed as unsound hedonists. Patty explains:

'It is just my work. It is not like girls who have sex with many different men for pleasure. I am not like that; I just do it as a job. I separate these things. I separate pleasure from work.'<sup>122</sup>

Workers can justify their work by specifically stressing that having sex with many different men for a higher goal, the money, is qualitatively different from having sex for simple pleasure (Montgomery, 2001: 122). By downward social comparisons with girls outside the sex industry the ones inside can heighten their self-esteem and valuation of their work (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993, in Brehm et al., 2002: 81).

By empowering lives through their influence on the current labour situation, they indirectly control their own long-term future prospects. And feeling that you have your life in your own hands can influence perceptions about the future. Through exerting practical and justifying agency in many different ways, adolescent sex workers optimize socioeconomic (f.e. by gaining as much money as possible) as well as psychosocial (f.e. by preventing emotional problems caused by social stigmas) conditions for the short-term future, and in that manner for the future on the long term.

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<sup>121</sup> Interview with Edison, 17-04-2008 - Porlamar

<sup>122</sup> Interview with Patty, 28-05-2008 - hospital Porlamar

## 4 Tackling Futures Radically?

The majority of adolescent sex workers is aware of its current situation (FundalCI, 1995: 74) and, as we observed, actively control this on the short term. Youngsters also have a certain perception of the contextual and individual possibilities and difficulties life has in store for them. This perception of contextual tools or obstacles determines the implementing of agency to better the *long-term* situation. The awareness of the context and the way someone acts upon this awareness for the sake of realizing their personal long-term ideals depends on the person and his situation. For example the economical background matters; sex work coming from a necessity rather than a sexual experience predicts more difficult future prospects and perceptions, in the sense that *possibilities* in life might be further out of sight. Like set forth in the first section of this article: it is hard to be aware of possibilities for the future that you have never seen in your life. Agency for radical long-term changes is commonly based on successful experiences from the past, which are in the case of many sex workers from disadvantaged backgrounds, often missing.

Many want to leave the sex business (FundalCI, 1995: 74), but the fact that a large group of adolescents are working for a long time in the same or in various working areas in the sex industry<sup>123</sup> is evidence that a part of them fatalistically and pessimistically accepts his or her situation (Montgomery, 2001: 11), or doesn't know how to change jobs (FundalCI, 1995: 74). Almost all sex workers think about their future in some time, but not everyone does something to actually influence it. This can be caused by simple absence of awareness or of motivation for awareness of the existing possibilities for their future. The most obvious example of this are the large amounts of money adolescent sex workers can make, but spend very fast. As Patty puts it:

‘They say that money that enters fast, goes out fast as well. It is true. I spend almost everything I earn. I just like to live comfortable. I buy new cloths and all kinds of things.’

There are few young sex workers who save their money, while it can be possible to have enough money to buy a house after a year of work. They mainly invest on the short term, instead of making their life goals reality. Patty doubtfully endorses this: ‘saving

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<sup>123</sup> Interviews with Ingara Marrodán (23-05-2008) and Edison (17-04-2008)

money is difficult. Everything is expensive, isn't it?' Some adolescent sex workers live in expensive hotel rooms (AMBAR, 2002: 52), because of their dynamic life styles. They are said to live a luxurious lifestyle; eating in expensive restaurants and partying in upper-class night clubs. In this context, status through products is very important<sup>124</sup>. Catarina believes 'the girls loose themselves in the magic of money'<sup>125</sup> and Estefanía, who works on Isla de Margarita says:

'I have bought different terrains and I live very comfortable. I wanted to move on. But I think that there are five more women on the island like me. (...) Adolescents just want money for drugs and parties. The teenagers are crazy. They don't think. (...) Those guys like to live in that way.'<sup>126</sup>

Understanding the context and acting upon this knowledge in favour of the long-term future depends partly on age. Under age adolescent sex workers are said by many different persons to live a 'wilder' life than the adults, to live in the moment and to lack a stable future perception. In the contrary, adult sex workers believe they have a more conscious idea of the contextual and individual possibilities life and future carry. Nevertheless, different spending patterns and degrees of opportunity awareness are also seen among people with other professions.<sup>127</sup>

The focus on other aspects shows that knowing how to really change lives can be present, but not always enough to spontaneously change futures. For instance, to stop performing paid sex activities is not something you just decide to do one day, but has antecedents and happens for a reason:

'You have to think in the future. You can't make progress without plans and without them you've got nothing. (...) I would like to become a butcher or to own my own taxi company. I would also like to buy my own house. (...) When this will be happening I don't know. When God wants me to.'<sup>128</sup>

Patty, who has a child and doesn't study, is aware of the importance of thinking about the future and has pretty clear future ideals. This doesn't mean that she follows her own plans immediately and it looks like she is waiting for external help to change her

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<sup>124</sup> Interviews with different sex workers, Heisa Londoño (19-03-2008) and Edison (17-04-2008) and an informal conversation with a German restaurant owner (16-05-2008)

<sup>125</sup> Interview with Catarina, 28-05-2008 - hospital Porlamar

<sup>126</sup> Interview with Estefanía, 21-05-2008 - hospital Porlamar

<sup>127</sup> Interview with Ibrahim Cortero, 02-04-2008 - Caracas

<sup>128</sup> Interview with Patty, 28-05-2008 - hospital Porlamar

situation. Her ideal for the future isn't that easy to achieve and she probably perceives few contextual possibilities to seize for improvements of life.

The step from being aware of the context to taking long-term focused action is large. For example, many girls are very realistic when thinking about beauty. They know it isn't timeless and that working as a sex worker won't be profitable for ever. But they don't have a clear image of another possible long-term future situation that can also be sufficiently paying. Therefore, they don't try to change quit the job in time, but to improve their physical appearances<sup>129</sup>, since beautiful girls often earn satisfactory and are seen as more successful sex workers (Montgomery, 2001: 92). Although physical appearance is something rather static, sex workers maximally try to manipulate it. Many spend a large part of their earnings on plastic surgeries and expensive beauty treatments: 'I always try to look attractive so I am a girl who draws attention. For that I spend a lot of money on cloths, make-up and so on'<sup>130</sup>. Generally, beautiful sex workers, who are mostly young, can implement their physical advantage strategically in their work to quicker fulfil long-term future dreams, while less attractive workers are forced to invest more in this personal factor for the short term<sup>131</sup>.

However, in specific cases transforming long-term dynamics becomes simply necessary and inevitable. Plans and a clear image of familial socioeconomic future prospects are made by most young mothers. For the rather large group of sex workers that has children, denying the family's future isn't an option and agency is redirected. The mothers want their children to go to university -many succeed in this goal- and have the future they don't see for themselves. Their future lies in the future of their children<sup>132</sup>. The everyday routine of having children can replace long-term personal future dreams:

'I think it is filthy when a client doesn't pay me and that night I want to leave this, but the next day in the morning when you see the shoes of the kids all worn out, you start thinking again, and the night comes that quick that everything goes on like it was. The dreams you have during the day when you see the beautiful people on the street, or in the soaps on the television at 2 in the afternoon; you think of many things. Don't think I am not that melted to not realise which life I lead, but what do I do when those dreams I have during the day end every night and die in the morning when my boys are ill and I don't

<sup>129</sup> Interviews with Catarina (28-05-2008) and Ingara Marrodán (23-05-2008)

<sup>130</sup> Interview with Maria, 14-05-2008 - hospital Porlamar

<sup>131</sup> Interview with Raúl Figueroa, director of *Amare* (*Asociación Margariteña de Ayuda, Respaldo y Educación en SIDA*), specialized in the prevention of HIV and AIDS on Isla de Margarita (08-05-2008)

<sup>132</sup> Interviews with various sex workers with children and Maximo Rondon (08-04-2008)

have money to take them to a private clinic. Look, besides, those dreams are dead because I am not able to do anything else and at these ages I am not going to learn'.<sup>133</sup>

For women who have more children is it more difficult to transform their own future. A female prisoner I talked to has a friend with ten children who works in a brothel for economical reasons. There is no man who takes care of the family, because the different fathers of the children were all clients. Her friend believes she doesn't have much choice and that she should be proud; the ten children all have professional jobs<sup>134</sup>. Giving birth to children can cause or reinforce the cycle of sex work, but is also a motive to move forwards and build a future for their family.

There is definitely a group of sex workers who 'continues to hope, dream and work their way out of the cycle of poverty and sex work' though (Montgomery, 2001: 11). As every case is different, those who started courses and who are hair dressers now or worked hard and built a house for their family, shouldn't be forgotten<sup>135</sup>. Ibrahim Cortero cites a sex worker: '*Can you give me a lot of condoms, because I am building a house and boy, do you have any idea how much a bag of cement costs?*'<sup>136</sup> Who little by little will work herself out of the situation and who won't, is hard to define. Nayive Reverón believes that:

'In their psychological state there has to be something that good and motivating, better than prostitution that takes them out. (...) They need a more creative visualization than reality; something that moves them. (...) To change reality they need to break through the fear for something they don't know.'<sup>137</sup>

Besides internal processes other predictors for radical change-directed action exist. First of all, adolescent sex workers who study to build a future will more probably make drastic economic future changes than non-studying workers. They are using the possibility to fulfil their dream of becoming a professional and being able to support themselves financially without selling their bodies. A large group of sex workers who temporarily comes to Isla de Margarita do so to be able to pay for their study<sup>138</sup>. Adolescent sex workers are very aware of the importance of studying. Many adolescent

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<sup>133</sup> Citation from a brothel sex worker in Caracas, País, 1998: 83-84

<sup>134</sup> Interview with prisoner from post-prison for female treatment *Fabian Rulio*, Ministry of Justice, 26-03-2008 - Caracas

<sup>135</sup> Interview with Edison (17-04-2008) and Ibrahim Cortero (02-04-2008 )

<sup>136</sup> Interview with Ibrahim Cortero, 02-04-2008 - Caracas

<sup>137</sup> Interview with Nayive Reverón, 14-03-2008 - Caracas

<sup>138</sup> Interview with Edison, 17-04-2008 - Porlamar

sex workers without a diploma don't see good occupational alternatives for their work, mainly because of the lower wages and lack of experience<sup>139</sup>. Starting a new study is not as likely for every sex worker; although many young adolescent sex workers aren't studying (only 9.6% of the under age ones in Caracas), in theory they have an advantage over the older ones herein. For many older sex workers, commencing a new study is a big step and some can't get used to the discipline this demands. And if they finally finish their study it is tough finding a job being of a higher age<sup>140</sup>.

However, studying doesn't always mean that the future is clear and plans are certain. Magali is studying law, but still has 6 years of study to go. She would like to become a lawyer later on, but it is hard for her to imagine doing something else than what she does now. But little by little she is trying to work herself into another life<sup>141</sup>. Most are aware of the fact that everything can change and that the future isn't something certain. Valentina of 21 perceives the future as something a little bit too uncertain to hold on to her plans:

'I want to leave this as soon as possible. (...) I am going to finish my study in one year. I am almost done. Then I want to go to Spain to work as a professional nurse there, because that is what I wanted for a long time already. But many things can still change. Maybe I will get pregnant in some months. And then Spain won't be happening anymore. I will see how things go, but this is the plan for the moment.'<sup>142</sup>

Secondly, social relations can have a strong influence on futures, but sex workers also use grassroots networks to their own advantage (Agustín, 2008: 43). Some groups of sex workers can function as a stimulator of agency for socioeconomic future changes. In a house that was part of a clandestine sex agency on Margarita, all the sex workers who lived there worked hard to be the first to earn 50.000 *bolivares fuertes*<sup>143</sup>. This was the game they played. They all worked to reach the goal of collecting this amount of money, going home and making their dreams come true. When achieving the goal, almost all girls did go home. In this way the group and their game were positive factors in the

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<sup>139</sup> Interview with Francisco Espert Soro, director of FundaICI (or *Fundación Instituto de Capacitación e Investigación para el Recurso Humano que Atiende a Menores en Circunstancias Especialmente Dificiles*), the perished organization that researched and elaborated under age sex work in Venezuela, 13-03-2008 - Caracas

<sup>140</sup> Interviews with different sex workers and Heisa Londoño (19-03-2008)

<sup>141</sup> Interview with Magali, 25-03-2008 - hospital Porlamar

<sup>142</sup> Interview with Valentina, a sex worker of 21, 17-05-2008 - strip bar Porlamar

<sup>143</sup> Around 10.000 euros at the time of interview

fulfilment and active stimulation of their future dreams<sup>144</sup>. Competition over status between the young girls was converted into something constructive on the longer term.

Thirdly, the socioeconomic and emotional future can be influenced when the possibilities offered by another social network, their clientele, are seen. Ingara Marrodán believes most sex workers who work in the context of sex tourism hold on the dream of marrying a foreign man. They hope to be able to start a happy and wealthy life and be someone desired in a first-world country (Agustín, 2008: 46)<sup>145</sup>. A former worker of a sex agency on Margarita says this possibility is a realistic one; various girls from the agency went with a client to a foreign country. This did not only happen because of influence from the foreigners. The sex workers in tourist locations are aware of this possibility to improve their future and many actively try to increase it. They try to be as sweet and nice as possible to their clients and to build a relationship with them. Girls who lived in this sex agency sometimes secretly sneaked out to get to know clients in a more friendly setting<sup>146</sup>. In this manner, they consciously bypassed intermediaries in the sex industry who could prevent them from changing long-term dynamics. Through small steps they try to transform life drastically. Workers who creatively use clients for other objectives are known as well:

*'There are few who come from other countries. They have another mind (...) they have done it for a long time already and do it for the money. They work longer, like 9 months and than you never see them again. They keep on going to other countries. They climb up and may find an opportunity, and well, enter Europe. That's what they want. (...) Searching opportunities, waiting for a man who falls in love with them to take them for example to Spain, until they have their residence to work there on their own account and throw out the type. (...) And they went.'*<sup>147</sup>

For those who want to quit their job in the sex commerce, it often seems that they see no other way than finding a man who can support them first, which is also shown in the fact that women are inclined to start selling sex again, when the relation ends. Therefore, the active creation of intimate relationships with clients for the purpose of fulfilling long-term future desires, is known in all sections of the sex industry. Proud Magali tells me she is actively dating one of her clients, who is a pilot. She has set her hopes on this rich man who can take care of her so she can stop working as a sex

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<sup>144</sup> Interview with Edison, 17-04-2008 - Porlamar

<sup>145</sup> Interview with Ingara Marrodán, 29-04-2008 - Porlamar

<sup>146</sup> Interview with Edison, 17-04-2008 - Porlamar

<sup>147</sup> Idem

worker<sup>148</sup>. Maria of 21 specifically points to the respect her fiancée and his family have for her work, while at the same time she clarifies somewhat proudly that when they are married, she will give up this job because he wants her to<sup>149</sup>. Consciously passive, she lets him change her socioeconomic future at a young age, as he will be supporting her, and also makes sure matters of stigmatizations over her past won't be raising. By means of a variety of apparently small-scaled actions can sex workers try to change their lives radically.

### **Fight or flight**

Next to the awareness of possibilities, also societal and personal *difficulties* are interrelated with long-term future and agency. Adolescent sex work is a consequence and can at the same time be a cause of 'bad luck' in life. But the adolescents can realise which problems sex work causes and struggle to have effect on them. This power to fight back is partly determined by contextual and individual criterions. The role the realistic consequences of adolescent sex work play in the adolescents' perception of their future and how and when they manipulate them, is now discussed.

Sex work can, in specific cases, be considered as physically and psychologically harmful work with long-lasting negative consequences. Physical problems that affect adolescents in sex work are the greater risk of catching diseases, like HIV/AIDS (Montgomery, 2001: 100). It depends on the group and the location if adolescent sex workers are aware of the risks of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD) and AIDS. In general very few people in Margarita are interested in information on safe sex and STD. The taboo on this subject is very large and because of the size of the island people are afraid that they will be subject to gossip when they go to a health check-up. People on the island say: 'little village, large hell'<sup>150</sup>. Contextual factors like stigmas and prejudices can thus win from something important like sexual health. But having sexual health as a priority depends on different aspects as well, like age and necessity. Moreover, working in a group on the street can for example stimulate this priority<sup>151</sup>.

Interest for and thus active influencing of the physical future can be absent. 56.7% of under age adolescent sex workers in Caracas admit they don't use any method of contraception (AMBAR, 2002: 79). And therefore indicates 16.4% of this group to have

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<sup>148</sup> Interview with Magali, 25-03-2008 - brothel Caracas

<sup>149</sup> Interview with Maria, 14-05-2008 - hospital Porlamar

<sup>150</sup> Interview with Raúl Figueroa, 08-05-2008 - Porlamar

<sup>151</sup> Interview with Ibrahim Cortero (02-04-2008) and Heisa (19-03-2008)

had one or more STD. But opinions differ about the use of contraception and the prevalence of STD such as HIV among Venezuelan sex workers. This is probably because another large group of adolescents *is* aware and tries to protect health and hygiene<sup>152</sup>. Maria says she always checks the penis of clients on infections before having sex<sup>153</sup>. Estefanía states about under age sex workers: 'These girls have a strong personality and know how to discuss the use of condoms with their clients.'<sup>154</sup> It is however somewhat harder to negotiate condoms for young girls and boys as clients may have more authority and power in these relationships. Controlling condom use, just as starting to have paid sex can develop gradually.<sup>155</sup>

The involvement of young people in sex work can also psychologically be a risky business. Among others, substance abuse is a cause, just as it can be a psychophysical consequence (Willis & Levy, 2002: 1419; Finkelhor & Browne, 1985: 1). The accessibility of drugs can grow for sex workers, as they can convince each other to use it and various clients pay more money for sex workers who drug themselves<sup>156</sup>. Some, especially those on the streets, turn out to be heavily addicted and don't see themselves change lives soon, while others only use it on occasions<sup>157</sup>. Drugs and the social pressure to consume can strongly influence long-term future prospects and agency of adolescent sex workers. For short-term survival, the need for drugs can also augment, especially to be able to forget or feel strong enough for their job (AMBAR, 2002: 97). For instance, many heterosexual boys believe they have to be drugged to have homosexual paid sexual relations<sup>158</sup>. Hereby, active coping with problems is present, but rather inadequate, since negative psychological effects of sex work are reinforcing each other:

'Problems I see the women suffering from are depression and fear for loneliness. They believe they need the drugs to be able to handle these problems and to be happier.'<sup>159</sup>

The discrepancy between drugs as the short-term solution for current inner struggles and the attack on their long-term wishes is a complex consequence of the dependence on

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<sup>152</sup> Interviews with Lucinda Fernandez, doctor and coordinator of the STD programme in the hospital of Porlamar (08-05-2008) and Yonathan Mateus (24-03-2008)

<sup>153</sup> Interview with Maria, 14-05-2008 - hospital Porlamar

<sup>154</sup> Interview with Estefanía, 21-05-2008 - hospital Porlamar

<sup>155</sup> Interview with Ibrahim Cortero, 02-04-2008 - Caracas

<sup>156</sup> Interview with Catarina, 28-05-2008 - hospital Porlamar

<sup>157</sup> Interview with Ibrahim Cortero, 02-04-2008 - Caracas

<sup>158</sup> Interview with Ibrahim Cortero, 02-04-2008 - Caracas

<sup>159</sup> Interview with Catarina, 28-05-2008 - hospital Porlamar

it. The financial problems the need for drugs would cause when changing their work makes radical life transformations difficult. It is hard for many to admit they have an addiction which handicaps their agency however. Therefore, many deny the enormous influence drugs have on their lives and think about the future as something they can still solve later in life<sup>160</sup>. The severities of the addiction and personal relations, among others, have effect on future possibilities and the presence of long-term focused action to overcome drugs problems.

The phenomenon of stigmatization is an important psychosocial difficulty that can influence the future of adolescent sex workers. Various intellectuals claim to observe a double moral in Venezuela on the subject of sex work. On multiple levels, like that of the state, the media, the NGO world or the family, stigmatization operates (Agustín, 2008: 179; FundaICI, 1995: 67). The discourse of the 'immoral prostitute' is rather embedded in society and is even bigger for homosexual males. On a personal level, various sex workers have experienced clients who treat them normally when being inside the brothel and shout names at them when walking on the street<sup>161</sup>. The sex workers have created ways to deal with these prejudices among others, by looking down on or ignoring those branding. A transsexual once told a volunteer of *Ases de Venezuela*, that she has heard so many insults that she now has 'the skin of a snake and the back of a turtle'<sup>162</sup>. They use agency to cope with stigma's that attack their current and future mental state.

More radical solutions for prejudices about sex work are sometimes necessary. Because of stigmatization many sex workers are fearful they won't be able to find another job when they leave sex work. This makes economical opportunities for the long-term future smaller and therefore, many of them live a double life. Depending on living and family circumstances, some do this by simply moving to another city, while others leave their home in a working uniform to let nobody know what kind of work they actually do. Using pseudonyms is also a common feature for identity protection at work. By consciously keeping their work a secret they can protect themselves from societal or familial rejection in the future. In many cases nobody around the adolescents knows how they are making money (FundaICI, 2005: 67). Karina of 24 says: 'my family and my whole village see me as the neat girl, so I don't want them to know how I earn

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<sup>160</sup> Interviews with Ibrahim Cortero (02-04-2008) and Yonathan Mateus (24-03-2008) and observations

<sup>161</sup> Interviews with Nayive Reverón (14-03-2008), Ibrahim Cortero (02-04-2008) and Nury Pernía, director of AMBAR (29-02-2008)

<sup>162</sup> Informal conversation with Yonathan Mateus (01-04-2008)

money.<sup>163</sup> Trying to uphold personal and family reputations can be a smart move for the psychosocial and socioeconomic future, but this doesn't make it easy. The consequences of living a double life are multiple and can involve stress and anxiety<sup>164</sup>.

Next to the stigma that the outside world puts on sex work, the work itself can leave its traces on the adolescents' psyche. Because of negative sexual experiences, like dominance, many develop forms of expressing sexuality, quite distinct from the paid sex which they perform. The most obvious one is the high incidence of lesbianism among the young sex workers (Montgomery, 2001: 120). Estefanía states almost all of her colleagues are experimenting with lesbian activities<sup>165</sup>. They do not identify themselves as lesbians and these relationships are unstable in the long term, but they do temporarily offer a safe space to explore a sexual part of themselves that they can't explore in another way. Without replacing their view that future involves a husband and children of their own, they appear to create a way of having more satisfying sexual experiences by turning to their own gender (2001: 121). This emotional and to some extent rational reaction to their difficult experiences shows their agency. And experiencing sexuality as positive and private gives them something to build their future mental health on.

## 5 Social agents; Veiling or Blaming Agency

Adolescent sex workers struggle to control their future. But when long-term future dreams are unattainable eagerness to fight might be insufficient to change contexts radically. In this section the relation between governmental, non-governmental and clerical organisms –or *social agents*– in Venezuela and adolescent sex workers are analysed. In manifold ways can social agents have direct and indirect impact on the sex workers' futures and agency. Possible as well is the absence of this impact due to disinterest, inefficiency, fixation on matters of secondary importance or directing on a limited population of sex workers. Moreover, the relation is twofold; sex workers adopt an attitude towards social actors that serves themselves, as they do with all contextual factors.

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<sup>163</sup> Interview with Karina, a sex worker of 24, 17-05-2008 – strip bar Porlamar

<sup>164</sup> Interviews with Edison (17-04-2008), Heisa Londoño (19-03-2008) and Patty (28-05-2008).

<sup>165</sup> Interview with Estefanía, 21-05-2008 – hospital Porlamar

For a start, many adolescent sex workers (60.6% of the under age ones in Caracas) don't want someone to help them change their lives. It is important to consider that because of several situational and personal reasons not every adolescent sex worker tries to quit her job as soon as possible. Many often prefer to remain in the industry; they usually complain of working conditions, not the fact that the work is sexual (Agustin, 2008: 34-35). It can be said that as far as the long-term future is concerned, stepping out of the business is what is desired by many sex workers. However, analyses by social agents of adolescents' future dreams and the way to it are fundamental.

Many social support isn't that well received anymore by sex workers as it used to be in some cases. The social workers of traditional rescue, rehabilitation and reintegration programmes -or, what Agustín calls 'the rescue industry'- have less and less work to do (2008: 184). For example, Sister Maria of the Christian legion *Legión de Maria*, has gone to brothels to talk with sex workers for over 50 years already. She tries to convince the girls to leave the brothel and come to stay in the shelter house of the *Legión*. She says the possibility a girl will cease to work in a brothel because she had a conversation with her, is minimal. The shelter home she manages is empty. In the past it was less effortful for sisters to persuade sex workers to move to the religious homes. Maria believes this has to do with the economic difficulties Venezuelan people have on the one hand and the enormous increase of money that is flowing in the sex work business on the other hand<sup>166</sup>. Because of contextual factors religious institutes aren't able anymore to change futures of sex worker as drastically as it did in the past.

I now argue that this unpopularity of social interference cannot only be attributed to context factors, but also to poorly handling these factors. Individual motives and sex workers' power over life are also largely brushed aside. Being able to support sex workers in their struggle for improvement is naturally impossible without knowing their current living situation and their own image of a better future. Essential for organizations and the government is listening to the voices of the sex workers themselves and intervening in their lives in dialogue with them. 'Intervention becomes oppression if it is executed without consent by advocates on those for whom they claim to speak (Montgomery, 2001: 13)'. The tendency to see adolescents as unknowing or uncomprehending is firmly rooted in both the governmental and the NGO worlds.

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<sup>166</sup> Interview (31-03-2008) and informal conversations (25-03-2008) with Sister Maria of Legion de Maria in Caracas, who has the religious mission to help adult brothel sex workers and educate them spiritually

Social helpers consistently deny the agency of large numbers of sex workers by theoretically and practically striving for management and control (Agustin, 2008: 8).

In general, NGO's are better able than governmental organisms to integrate the individual situations of adolescent sex workers in their programmes, because of grassroots characteristics. Within the Venezuelan NGO circuit the weight on words and thoughts of sex workers is extremely diverged, owing to ideological differences; for many years abolitionist and liberal social agents have been opposing each other in a heated debate about the approach of adolescent sex work. The advocates of liberalism and human rights view are better in perceiving the adolescents as valuable sources of information. They believe that even the least advantaged individuals have some power over their destiny and that individuals are creative (Agustín, 2008: 183). Of the Venezuelan liberals above all *AMBAR* (see box 3 in the last part of this section) believes the individual stories and acting of the girls are very important to be able to offer them help. The director claims to know almost every 'sex worker'. Other organizations may also have a more precise idea of what is going on in the lives of the adolescent sex workers, but economical and human resources often aren't providing enough to go deeply into the life of every individual.

However, the majority of politics and programmes tend to take away the agency of sex workers. The large group of Venezuelan abolitionists doesn't treat them as agents that make decisions and have influence on their own lives. Therefore, they perceive them as entities to talk about instead of to talk to. This albeit participation is a tool that can be used to facilitate agency, even for young minors: 'participation and the language of children's rights presupposes and encourages their agency, the expression of their self-defined needs and interests (Roche, 1999: 484)'.

The willingness to give sex workers space to participate in programmes that benefit their own future depends on the manner in which sex work is approached. Abolitionists, by whom sex work is seen as a violation of society's sexual norms for women, have a deep reluctance to view entry into the sex industry as anything other than a coerced decision. Because of this coercion abolitionists decide that sex workers have no possibilities to prove agency and participation in interventions. Luis Costa, director of the 'Coalition Against the Trafficking of Women', which isn't in active service at this moment, paints a typical abolitionist image of sex workers as 'forced', 'abused' and 'victims':

'They are defensive and waiting until someone mistreats them, because how many men sleep with her? Six, seven, eight? She is part of the deal and has to do what the clients and the owner say. (..) You can imagine how they are left behind after 15 minutes? Look at this: the relation is like this: man, power, man, control, woman, vulnerable, woman, body, woman, victim. (...) Often they can't leave, because they are part of an organization.'<sup>167</sup>

Many commentators deeply believe that selling sex can never be work (Agustín, 2008: 58). Francisco Espert Soro, director of FundaICI, the perished organization that used to be one of the most important in the field of 'child sexual exploitation', is an advocate of this believe. He clearly patronizes the 'victims':

'Calling it sex work is like giving it the status of a profession. I am against every form of sexual exploitation. (...) Exploitation means abuse and slavery. (...) It seems to me something terrible that someone has to sell himself or that they make him do it. You know that there are organized groups of the Maffia who manage the forced prostitution? (...) People are normally convinced to do it. (...) In the case of children there can be adults who drug them to keep them manipulable and physically punish them when they don't bring them money.'<sup>168</sup>

But adolescents don't let abolitionists take their agency away from them. They take responsibility for their work and decisions, but that disqualifies them from the institutions' sympathy for being pitiful and innocent. Those who do not fit the image of lacking possibilities to choose and manoeuvre are condemned and labelled as an exception to the rule: 'I met one who really liked her work. She experienced a great satisfaction with all her clients. She was like a nymphomaniac, which is an abnormality.'<sup>169</sup>

In sum, most key actors in civil society as well as in the government still hold traditional visions on the experiences and agency of sex workers. It seems that this applies more to governmental and religious social workers though, since the abolitionist civil society is now shrinking. Lately, the emphasis on sex workers being helpless is also in Venezuela increasingly replaced with liberals' understanding of their agency. Liberalism believes 'sex work' is a real job and only by treating sex workers like all working agents can they respectfully be listened to and subsequently helped. Ibrahim Cortero, who worked for organization AMBAR for a long time, has a pretty realistic perception:

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<sup>167</sup> Interview with Luis Costa, 04-04-2008 - Caracas

<sup>168</sup> Interview with Francisco Espert Soro, 13-03-2008 - Caracas

<sup>169</sup> Idem

'I am not against prostitution. If I can't give them something else, I can't be against their work. Who am I to say they should take another job? Maybe I wish they wouldn't do it, but that isn't the problem. (...) We should see it as work like any other. It is a way to make money. (...) But they should see that there are other ways to make money as well. They are human beings who are doing work that can be very difficult, but it is work. It isn't for fun, it isn't a vice, it isn't an easy job, it is just a job. The government and church say it is bad and so on, but forget that they are human beings and earn respect.'<sup>170</sup>

The common liberal view is that of women who to some degree choose and influence their lives and who shouldn't be treated differently than other people who work to survive. Less empowered or simply poorer people, are not by definition passive victims.

Nevertheless, in practice are most (abolitionist *and* liberal) projects based on assumptions and stereotypes about sex workers and their work. Practical help must come on the back of correct knowledge and empirical research, of which there is currently very little (Montgomery, 2001: 13). In fifteen years two Venezuelan organizations have carried out three quantitative researches about adolescent sex work. These studies especially seem to be called in as a means to an end. But research could predict the impact of social programmes. Long term influence on the futures of adolescent sex workers is difficult to achieve when the practical problems of adolescents are not solved (Montgomery, 2001: 8). For instance, the failure rate of rehabilitation programs that give training in learning skills is very high, because sex workers refuse to accept the enormous income drop (2001: 118). A transgender sex worker in Caracas says done courses in hair dressing and computer techniques haven't caused radical job changes, because she believes 'you just don't earn enough to live from another job'. Other practical disadvantages are: having to listen to a boss who pays you badly and the difficulty to grow in a business<sup>171</sup>. Comprehension of these possible negative outcomes is needed for developing more successful projects and preventing repetition of mistakes.

### **Putting the theory into practice**

Unverified ideas about the agonies of sex workers lead to inadequacy or absence of social interventions in the country. First I show the shortcomings in the *governmental* policies and than the inefficiency of civil society's programming. Ignoring the individual and contextual circumstances, social agents treat sex workers as a homogenous category and support them in an everything but meaningful way (Montgomery, 2001: 9). The

<sup>170</sup> Interview with Ibrahim Cortero, 02-04-2008 - Caracas

<sup>171</sup> Interview with transgender sex worker, 01-04-2008 - street Caracas

equalizing idea of people, who have literally no life after sex work, are identified only by their work and don't live in grey areas, is commonly adopted, but absolutely unrealistic.

Yet, the Venezuelan government continuously points to the image of adolescent sex workers as hopeless victims in a large criminal world to feel absolved of the need to make financial provisions or offer other support. It seems that the legality of adult sex work legitimizes leaving this theme undiscussed, while the existence of minors selling sex is largely denied by stating that statistics (of the hidden 'exploited victims') are missing. The Venezuelan government denies her responsibility (Fundación, 1999: 139; AMBAR, 2002: 119) and emphasizes the role of parents and communities instead. Nonetheless, without state interference adolescent sex work cannot adequately be elaborated. Depending on the adolescents' desires, the state could create alternative occupational opportunities, offer psychological assistance or protection or give support in other ways (Willis & Levy, 2002: 1420-1421). Significant as well is giving respect and socially inclusion for the sake of empowerment of sex workers.

The governmental bodies show effort to intervene, when the case matches the profile of the victimized sex worker; that is when it involves international or national networks of adolescent sex work, pornography with minors or trafficking of women or girls. The large international attention for this theme puts pressure on the Venezuelan national and local government to take action and reveal shocking incidents. Although in two years the governmental organism CICPC has received reports of only 16 cases of human trafficking in Venezuela<sup>172</sup>, the international responsibility of Venezuela has moved the focus away from local sex work to trafficking even more.

Because almost none of the Venezuelan sex workers' lives fit into the international stereotype of having the grand tragedy of abused innocence, they sadly won't be approached or thought of.<sup>173</sup> Their experiences simply aren't shocking enough. If their existence isn't denied for a change, the agency they manifest is tactically misused to justify the absence of support. Three main justifications are given for the government's withdrawing from responsibilities: in the first place can informal adolescent sex work present itself in the common situation of a man and a woman walking on the street, which is hard to identify. In the second place, it is unclear who to criminalize and 'attack'. Clients and legal adult sex workers are generally left alone, because they are hard to find or denounce. There often aren't adults dominating others,

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<sup>172</sup> Interviews with Jesús Benavides, commissary of *Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas Penales y Criminalísticas (CICPC)* (25-03-2008) and other officials of the Venezuelan government

<sup>173</sup> Interview with Ibrahim Cortero, 02-04-2008 - Caracas

like in the cases of traffickers. Thirdly, demographical patterns showed by informal adolescents, who come to Isla de Margarita to temporarily sell sex and return home or spread all over the country afterwards, make reaching them more difficult<sup>174</sup>. The sex workers in grey areas, who independently and creatively survive by any means possible, are blamed for that and rarely talked about by the government.

These practical difficulties aren't enough to justify the lack of responsibility taking in the phenomenon of sex work; Ingara Marrodán argues that the local government of Isla de Margarita purposely chooses to play such a limited role in the lives of sex workers. It has detailed knowledge about the situation around adolescent sex work and sex tourism, but doesn't make a plan to interact and support these adolescents. Ingara Marrodán says that 'people keep their eyes closed, because they know that doing something about it, means starting a too big a job. Nobody wants to be in charge.' Brahimir Salazar, director of *Fundaoriental*, an organization on Margarita who works with adolescents: 'the problem of under age prostitution on Isla de Margarita is large but silenced, because it suits nobody to solve it'. Maura de Abraham believes:

'It looks like it doesn't matter if teenagers work as sex workers as long as nobody talks about it. If people don't know what is happening, then everything is fine and the government doesn't talk about it either. But if I want to build a house for under age sex workers, the government will stick its nose in it right away. They want to check everything I do. (...) For the government there are simply no interests to do something for adolescent sex workers. (...) Therefore only some independent people who are interested in the theme try to improvise something.'<sup>175</sup>

Due to the enormous amounts of money flowing in this industry and the many people who are gaining by this situation, the local government keeps his eyes closed<sup>176</sup>. That the economic benefits beat the focus on the youngsters' futures, can be harrowing in cases where sex workers need social support.

There are some ways in which the Venezuelan state demonstrates its attempts to tackle the subject. However, because of the difficulties and unwillingness of the local and national governments to adequately deal with sex work, is the government's main focus prevention<sup>177</sup>. This is demonstrated through too centralized<sup>178</sup> policies on

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<sup>174</sup> Interview with Ramon Mago, 23-04-2008 - Parlamar

<sup>175</sup> Interview with Maura de Abraham, former director of the '*Fundación del Niño*' and former first lady of Isla de Margarita, 13-05-2008 - El Valle

<sup>176</sup> Interview with Ingara Marrodán, 23-05-2008

<sup>177</sup> For example, a multi-social commission of governmental organisms recently developed a five year prevention plan against 'sexual exploitation of minors (2007)'. This theme didn't have priority in the past and the *Consejo Nacional de Derechos de Niños y Adolescentes* considers it as a big step forwards.

especially under age sex work and through indirect prevention; it is unrealistically believed that it will disappear as the 'Venezuelan government will eliminate its main risk factor, poverty'<sup>179</sup>. Hereby, its direct influence on the futures of those who are already involved in adolescent sex work is zero (Montgomery, 2001: 37).

Minors who are already illegally selling sex can now benefit from a newly developed legal structure<sup>180</sup>. The *Ley Organica para la Protección de Niños y Adolescentes* or LOPNA and the judicial and therapeutic trajectory that supports this law are recent positive developments in the governments fight against crimes against minors. Clients and intermediaries are now officially criminalized, but almost nothing is done to enforce the laws on under age sex work (Willis & Levy, 2002: 1420). The possibility exists for under age adolescent sex workers to fight their situation which takes away a bit of the impunity that exists in Venezuela. Nevertheless, the number of registered denouncements of adolescent sex work to the *Consejos* is nil, because of fear, economical dependence on the job and the lack of faith in the police, as they often steal the minors' earnings, abuse them (AMBAR, 2002: 100-101) and charge high quotas to let them work<sup>181</sup>. Here the agency of minors is overrated since practical problems aren't covered for.

The government has also direct hard hand methods to influence adolescents' lives: it turns the stereotype upside down and makes criminals of 'victims'. It criminalises the provider side instead of the demand side of under age as well as adult sex work. First of all, in the exceptional occasions that minors denounce or are being denounced, the chance exists that they end up in a closed social agent. Ingara Marrodán believes it doesn't help to lock minors away from the societal system; when they return they will behave like they did before they entered the social agent<sup>182</sup>. Secondly, the

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<sup>178</sup> Interview with Ramon Mago, coordinator of the *Dirección Regional de Prevención del Delito* and one of the few governmental officials who criticizes his own system, 23-04-2008 - Porlamar

<sup>179</sup> Interview with Zoraida Gonzalez, sociologist of *Consejo Nacional de Derechos de Niños y Adolescentes*, 04-03-2008 - Caracas

<sup>180</sup> Since 1999 a new law, the LOPNA, has been in force. The rights of adolescents have more priority and there are now national rules and descriptions of 'sexual exploitation among minors'. With the introduction of the LOPNA a clearer structure has been developed. In every municipality in Venezuela a *Consejo de Protección de Niños y Adolescentes* and a *Consejo de Derechos de Niños y Adolescentes* can be found. Here adolescents or adults can denounce crimes against minors and receive basic psychological support. After a person has come to denounce a crime, the organism *Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas, Penales y Criminalísticas* (CICPC) starts an investigation and the officer of justice is called in.

<sup>181</sup> Interviews with Marlene Rivera, lawyer of a *Consejo de Protección de Niños y Adolescentes* Municipality Arismendi, Isla de Margarita (28-04-2008) and Jennifer Arevalo, promoter of the *Consejo De Derechos de Niños y Adolescentes Caracas* (25-03-2008)

<sup>182</sup> Interviews with Ingara Marrodán (23-05-2008) and Brahimir Salazar, director of *Fundaoriental*, an organization on Margarita who works with adolescents (29-04-2008)

sending of police and national security troops to arrest both under age and adult sex workers, is another attempt to eliminate informal sex work by blaming those showing agency through selling sex. Here, the local government senselessly tries to get adults and minors from the street and in this way change their lives on a very short term. Also, the local government is many times milder to the demand side; that of Isla de Margarita made handouts for tourists once with the warning that they should check the sex workers' pink sexual health carnet<sup>183</sup>.

A more liberal policy is implemented in the area of the health of sex workers. The Ministry of Health treats them as human beings with a job like anyone else, donating condoms to different NGO's for the prevention of STD's. Likewise, adult sex workers can make use of the *Sanidad's* medical support. Only around 15 workers per week are coming to each local department of the Ministry of Health, that are stationed in all municipalities, for their monthly check-up. They have a carnet that shows they are clean of STD's, which they can show to clients. The sex workers have to be older than 18 to receive this free medical support<sup>184</sup>. At the other side, *AMBAR* argues that the practice of carnets is discriminatory: sex workers are labelled and the carnets have become an excuse for the police to trouble the women.<sup>185</sup>

In conclusion, as the government doesn't have successful projects to constructively approach adolescent sex work and the adolescent sex workers aren't exactly crying out for applying the few possibilities the government offers them, the government doesn't achieve in interacting with them or changing their existing status in its country. Ambiguous is the double message of arresting and locking them up like active criminals at one side and giving medical support at the other.

### **Rescuing victims vs. handing out condoms**

While the government mainly uses unrealistic images to withdraw from responsibilities, some *nongovernmental actors* jump in to fill the gap the government leaves. To start with, there are very few nongovernmental agents who know something, let alone lay hands on the theme of sex work. Interest for the under age ones is even smaller, because of their 'official absence'. Abolitionist nongovernmental actors cling to the idea of sex

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<sup>183</sup> Interviews with Ingara Marrodán (23-05-2008) and Fidela Agreda of the Municipality Antolín del Campo (Playa el Agua), Department of Tourism (27-05-2008)

<sup>184</sup> Interview with Teodora Orta, social worker in *Sanidad* in Caracas (12-03-2008) and participatory observations in a *Sanidad* in Porlamar

<sup>185</sup> Interview with Omarliz Faria and Gisela Guillen of *AMBAR* (28-03-2008) - Caracas

workers as 'victims' in the sense that they should be 'rescued' through the total elimination of the exploiting structure<sup>186</sup>. 'The conceptualizing of a class of victims mandated a class of rescuers as well as the helping practices exacerbated the stigmatizing of victims (Agustín, 2008: 186)'; social programming reproduces the classic 'sex work' discourse. The 'Sisters of the Good Shepherd' in Caracas, who work with former adult sex workers, take their work very seriously:

'The therapy phase demands the highest economical inversions, because the damage and lesions that the victims manifest need time to heal and are often incurable. Our goal is to rescue them physically, mentally and spiritually –said the Sister [from *Hermanas del Buen Pastor* or Sisters of the Good Shepherd].'<sup>187</sup>

For religious actors saving souls was and is seen as appropriate and dignified work which gave them a 'point for themselves on some heavenly tally' (Bartley, 2000: 33). Clearly, the identity and job of social workers depend on the existence of a group of people they have to save (Agustín, 2008: 186). They maintain their work and status by pinning down to alienated perceptions about 'trafficked' and 'exploited' sex workers. However, unless other realities of sex work are acknowledged, any help or assistance is rendered meaningless.

At the other side, liberals believe sex work is impossible to abolish and sex workers need

#### **Box 2: NGO AMBAR, the 'soap'**

*For years the typical liberal nongovernmental organization AMBAR has given intensive reintegrating help to under age girls that they find working on the streets. With meetings, short training programs and individual counselling, the multidisciplinary team of a psychologist, lawyer, street workers and trainers tries to offer them other labour opportunities in life (f.e. work in hotels, hair salons or craft work) and psychological assistance. The girls receive support in groups of around 20 people during three months and individual help for two months. After that the organization starts an 18 months follow-up trajectory. The workshops are partly adapted to the preference of the girls; f.e. pie-baking was cancelled because of lack of interest. Opinions about the results of the programmes differ. AMBAR also devotes itself to more general achievements, as social security and a trade union for adult women. Ibrahim Cortero, who worked for years in AMBAR states they made him realise the importance of respect. 'AMBAR perceives sex workers as human beings and looks at their work next. Many sex workers in Caracas recognize AMBAR as they regularly meet them on the streets. They are happy with them. However, they are losing ground because they started to focus on many different themes. It broadened its tasks to human rights and fighting for legal justice and has forgotten a bit about the individuals.' But AMBAR has a rough time defending their ideology from other critics and gossips as well. The fact that some staff members, including the director, have been sex workers themselves causes a lot of consternation among abolitionists. Many social agents accuse the organization of stimulating under age sex work and some even believe that behind AMBAR's working space there is a secret brothel. Some state the active lobbying for 'sexual exploitation' has made it easier for minors to work in the sex industry as well (País, 1998: 71-72). 'AMBAR has as objective publicizing the sex business as a viable and secure alternative in moments of economical crises (1998: 68)'. Although sometimes their motives are indeed rather ambiguous, AMBAR is the only institute in Venezuela who for years has been there for sex workers and who knows the workers' own desires and possibilities. They are also extending to other parts of Venezuela.*

<sup>186</sup> Interviews with different people, among who Francisco Espert Soro (13-03-2008)

<sup>187</sup> Cited from Reverón, 2006: 24

support like any other work group. However, these more modern ideas don't always lead to more developed programmes in the Venezuelan practice. Only *AMBAR* (see box 2) and *Ases de Venezuela* pursue to some extent the so much needed multidimensional focus (Willis & Levy, 2002: 1421). Because they don't have the resources to offer alternatives, *Ases* focuses on improving health, human rights and security of sex workers. Their goal is to create a 'zone of tolerance', like in Argentina, where they can't be harassed by the police anymore<sup>188</sup>. However, in practice most liberal projects don't take it further than benevolently distributing condoms or talking about HIV/AIDS. In Venezuela narrow one-sided ways of dealing with adolescent sex workers are often implemented, which fail to address the breadth of the subject. Often sex work is a side issue, as *Ases'* main focus is sexual health and emancipation of the homosexual population. Other reasons for this failure are linked to more general and now mentioned problems NGO's in Venezuela face.

That the majority of social agents continues to spend time and energy trying to win the moral debate, leads to the failure of material help and social inclusion of people who sell sex (Agustín, 2008: 186-187). But it cannot be won either way; both sides believe their view is truthful and ethical. As a consequence, 'in Caracas every organization strives for being the protagonist and the leader'. Raúl Figueroa, director of a NGO on Margarita believes it has become more important which organization is in the picture than what their activities are<sup>189</sup>. For this it's questionable whether any initiative achieves to do something constructive for the adolescent sex workers.

The two perceptions are so fundamental and so opposed that alone they explain why the traditional debate is still going on in Venezuela. Hence, the hostile

**Box 3: Another possibility**

*Instead of approaching adolescents as 'victims' or 'sex workers', it is important to realise that there are other tackling possibilities also. In some cases results may be better when institutes explicitly don't aim on the work of adolescents and leave the eternal abolitionist / liberal debate as it is. Don Bosco is an institute that doesn't mention this theme if the under age street boys don't bring it up themselves. This means that giving psychological support to help them deal with their past as sex workers isn't a priority. The organization has a very positive influence on the boys' future in many ways however. It strongly influences the boys' lives, as getting them off the streets and absorbing all of their time, causes absence of necessity and time to sell their bodies. And because the strong stigma that lies on boys selling sex can seriously attack their future prospects, ignoring this theme eases society's acceptance of the boys. Source: interview Leonardo Rodríguez, coordinator Don Bosco; Project Atención a niños en situación de calle de la área metropolitana de Caracas.*

<sup>188</sup> Interview with José Fuentes, director from *Ases de Venezuela*, 24-03-2008 - Caracas

<sup>189</sup> Interview with Raúl Figueroa, 08-05-2008 - Porlamar

rivalry has even led to the personal disliking of people, which strongly dominates the collaboration between social agents. Ibrahim Cortero claims that, independent of their ideology, organizations rarely share experiences with each other and their mutual interests are ignored. Almost without references of the others, social agents work in their own static way with their own narrow target group (f.e. transsexual sex workers in the case of *Ases de Venezuela*). For this reason, every organism has to start from scratch and efficiency is hindered<sup>190</sup>. Also in the literature a lack of cooperation among grassroots organizations and governmental bodies at both the local and national levels have been found (Ribando, 2007: xi).

Next to ideological crashes, a more practical problem in the world of nongovernmental organizations in Venezuela is the missing of long term support and continuity within programs. Many initiatives have been developed, but were never adopted or were cut short halfway the process. The problem is that the funding of projects is often unstable, conditional or offered once-only<sup>191</sup>. Hope is given to adolescent sex workers by offering for example alternatives for sex work, but half way the process the sex workers are left alone and are forced to return to their old working activities. The continuity problem is also caused by the fact that many voluntarily working people of NGO's decide if the work is done or not. For personal reasons the help is very unstable and can stop any time. Volunteer Yonathan Mateus of *Ases de Venezuela* has a personal preference for a specific the group of transsexuals and therefore female and male sex workers are ignored. He is the only volunteer who meets streetwalkers; it doesn't appeal much to the others, because of the danger and time of the day<sup>192</sup>. In this case the fact that the work is voluntary contributes to the quality and stability of the help offered.

The poverty of continuity and economic and human resources is responsible for the narrow reach of nongovernmental projects. Some elaborating adolescent sex work can be discovered in Caracas, but outside the capital adolescents have to help themselves. In solitary regions of the country with few possibilities and recourses for people to organize themselves, projects for this group are absent. Because of geographical characteristics a large part of the country is hard to reach and there exists a

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<sup>190</sup> Interview with Ibrahim Cortero, 02-04-2008 - Caracas

<sup>191</sup> Denis Ochoa, psychologist of the department Human Rights, Ministry of Exterior Relations, 18-03-2008 - Caracas

<sup>192</sup> Informal conversation with Yonathan Mateus, 01-04-2008 - street Caracas

lack of social support in for example the mine and frontier regions<sup>193</sup>. The contextual factor geographical accessibility thus determines the role institutes play in the futures of adolescent sex workers.

Social support for this group of Venezuelan adolescents turns out to show many defects. A poor approach of individual situations and practical problems; the unrealistic portraying of the target group; patronizing, negating or blaming attitudes towards them; and the pursuing of personal gain more than altruism are all reasons for many sex workers to escape from contact with 'rescuing' agents and solve their own problems.

### Closing the Discussion

The desire to be independent, make money and travel is not limited to a certain socioeconomic or age group. Just as 'post-modern', first-world individuals, search poor people for possibilities to optimize their lives and those of their families. Their options are many times more limited, but this can't be said of the creative managing of these options. More than non-poor people are they challenged to avoid or turn around contextual and personal difficulties. I don't argue that survival through selling sex is something to promote, but that it can be a logical reaction to certain circumstances. Although many commentators don't want to accept the aspect of choice in both minors and adults' step into the business, workers argue it is just like taking a job as a secretary.

If adolescents indeed see their job as any other and are happy with it or if they claim this to protect themselves against social stigmas and inner discrepancy, depends on the case. In either way shouldn't they be blamed for their way of life nor patronized. Like those who believe they fulfil more 'dignified' professions, choose sex workers rationally between the few labour possibilities they have. Consequently, they arrange their labour spaces within the broad and multidimensional range of sex commerce to better conditions for the short-term future, adopting innovative strategies and professionalism and relating to clients and colleagues cleverly.

Next to practical adjustments to their work, do sex workers construct rationalisations for doing it. Justifying agency can come forward in many ways; by blaming the context, downplaying or upgrading the importance of their job, re-labelling activities or devaluing other actors. Often, the good earnings and familial obligations are

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<sup>193</sup> Interviews with different NGO's

argument enough to withdraw from any internal or external conflict. Whatever the way is to legitimize their job, they strive for stressing that sex work is their job and not their identity. Emphasis on their flexibility, rather than a static identity, allow people of this low-prestige job to represent something else than victims.

Through the active creation of optimal economical and mental circumstances adolescents structure their working lives and through this, they influence their futures positively (Elchardus, 1999: 38; Zimbardo, 1994: 8). Also, having control over their lives is necessary for the feeling that life can be coped with (Montgomery, 2001: 100), which affects future perceptions. The adolescents taking control is easier to observe in the direct labour situation than in actions that change the long-term future, as everything related to future plans is scrupulously evaded by many. Still, pressure from the inside or outside can trigger sex workers to seize contextual opportunities within their reach and pursue their future desires. While large steps often determine the current situation, the long-term future is handled with less drastic and more cautious methods.

The presence and awareness of contextual opportunities and the degree in which adolescents are able to manoeuvre around contextual obstacles and prevent negative consequences of working in the sex business, predicts the success in fulfilling future dreams. I do not wish to play down on the physical, psychological and social problems many sex workers experience in their work. Abuse by and dominance of clients, intermediaries or police and mental and behavioural difficulties cannot be explained away. However, workers in the sex business actively try to cope with problems at work like others do with theirs. Difference is, the coping of others isn't denied and forgotten, but rather stimulated and assisted.

Despite of the abovementioned evidence for sex workers taking lives and futures in their own hands, social workers by and large accept the 'prostitute' discourse –and the prostitute as victim- as fact, not as social construction (Agustín, 2008: 7). In just the past twenty years, numerous of academics and social agents have centred on a single issue: whether selling sex can ever be acceptable and a job freely chosen, or must be conceived as violence and exploitation. The battle over homogenising terms ('victim', 'criminal' or 'sex worker') still appears more important than adolescents' unique personal interpretations. In fact, much of the efficiency has been taken away by the battle over dominating the 'social market'. The government gives mixed messages about sex workers being victims *or* criminals, or retreats from any responsibility at all. For these reasons, sex workers very rarely 'make use' of social support. Acknowledgement

of the desires of those being 'helped', admitting that agency can be expressed in a variety of ways and acceptance that the constructions of 'social problems' can change, can strongly benefit the world of the 'helpers'.

Only pointing at social agents' failures signifies ignoring the efforts a group of Venezuelan social agents -voluntary or paid- has made. I highly value their attempts to call attention to those selling sex to the world, but I do not agree with the static images of sex workers upon which these agents base their interventions. I also regret the practical problems others face in their fight for human rights. It is essential that governmental and nongovernmental social agents start realizing sex work isn't the problem; the stigmatizing ideas about it they reproduce, which reinforce socially exclusion of sex workers and give them their 'right to rescue', are.

The article's aim was to give a comprehensive and exploratory insight in how adolescent sex workers consciously deal with their own pressing background and manipulate complex and intervening contexts for betterment of their wealth, health and happiness, on the short and long run. I have tried to let 'real' sex workers speak. Most of them do not consider themselves victims and wish to show that they do the job that many won't and can't do. Not at all do they present themselves as sad and passive and they know they face the same daily struggles as many other people. I believe pragmatism is perfectly shown by Ibrahim Cortero, when citing a sex worker: 'I just come here at night to work. It can be that I don't like it, but it gives me my money'<sup>194</sup>.

Regardless of how much they need the money, what involves their exact future dreams and whether they prefer to sell sex or not, the adolescents' experiences are valuable in the support of their own empowerment. And while 'any absence of moral indignation is interpreted as 'promoting' the sex industry (Agustín, 2008: 59)', I wish to conclude saying the sex commerce is already included in Venezuelan society; it's now time for its employees.

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<sup>194</sup> Interview with Ibrahim Cortero, 02-04-2008 - Caracas

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## Annex: Research Activities per Category and Location

Table 1: Interviews carried out in Caracas

|    | <b>Interviewee</b>    | <b>Social agent</b>                                                   | <b>Function</b>                  | <b>Date Interview</b> |
|----|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1  | Francisco Martinez    | Provea                                                                | Volunteer                        | 27-02-2008            |
| 2  |                       | Defensoría del Pueblo                                                 | Coordinator                      | 27-02-2008            |
| 3  | Nury Perna            | Asociación de Mujeres por el Bienestar y Asistencia Recíproca (AMBAR) | Director                         | 29-02-2008            |
| 4  | Zoraida Gonzalez      | Consejo Nacional de Niños y Adolescentes                              | Sociologist                      | 04-03-2008            |
| 5  | Yonay Cartaya         | Dirección Nacional de Prevención del Delito                           | Social Researcher                | 11-03-2008            |
| 6  | Teodora Orta          | Sanidad                                                               | Social worker                    | 12-03-2008            |
| 7  |                       | Ministry of Health                                                    | Secretary                        | 12-03-2008            |
| 8  | Francisco Espero Soro | FundaICI                                                              | Director                         | 13-03-2008            |
| 9  | Nayive Reverón        | Hermanas del Buen Pastor                                              | Journalist                       | 14-03-2008            |
| 10 | Sonia Orta Russián    | Centre for female treatment Fabian Rulio, Ministry of Justice         | Director                         | 14-03-2008            |
| 11 | Jossil Zambrano       | Fundación Caracas del Niño                                            | Coordinator                      | 17-03-2008            |
| 12 | Denis Ochoa           | Human Rights, Ministry of Exterior Relations                          | Psychologist                     | 18-03-2008            |
| 13 | Heisa Londoño Carreño | Alianza Nuevo Horizonte                                               | Researcher and project developer | 19-03-2008            |

|    |                                                |                                                                                               |                                                         |            |
|----|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| 14 | Yonathan Mateus/ Lowing Gonzalez/ José Fuentes | Grupo Ases de Venezuela, Asociación Civil                                                     | Volunteer/ Administrative Coordinator/ Director         | 24-03-2008 |
| 15 | Jennifer Arevalo                               |                                                                                               | Social promotor                                         | 25-03-2008 |
| 16 | Jesus Benavides                                | Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas, Penales y Criminalísticas                              | Commisary                                               | 25-03-2008 |
| 17 |                                                | Centre for female treatment Fabian Rulio, Ministry of Justice                                 | Three female prisoners                                  | 26-03-2008 |
| 18 | Leonardo Rodríguez                             | Don Bosco; Project Atención a niños en situación de calle de la área metropolitana de Caracas | Coordinator                                             | 27-03-2008 |
| 19 | Marta Aguirre & Xiomara Lionares               | Newspaper El Diario and Coalition against Trafficking of Women                                | Journalist and social worker                            | 27-03-2008 |
| 20 | Omarliz Faria & Gisela Guillen                 | AMBAR                                                                                         | Defender of children's rights and educative coordinator | 28-03-2008 |
| 21 | Nayive Reverón                                 | Hermanas del Buen Pastor                                                                      | Journalist                                              | 28-03-2008 |
| 22 | Sister Maria                                   | Legión de Maria                                                                               | Director of 'Casa Santa Clara'                          | 31-03-2008 |
| 23 | Ibrahim Cortero                                |                                                                                               | Freelance social Works                                  | 02-04-2008 |
| 24 | Luis Costa                                     | Coalition Against the Trafficking of Women                                                    | Director                                                | 04-04-2008 |
| 25 | Gladys Matriz                                  | Fundación Niña Madre                                                                          | Director                                                | 04-04-2008 |

Table 2: Informal conversations and participatory observations carried out in Caracas

|    | Type                                                | Social agent                                                        | Persons                                 | Date       |
|----|-----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|------------|
| 26 | Informal conversation                               |                                                                     | Hotel manager                           | 25-02-2008 |
| 27 | Informal conversation                               |                                                                     | Young man                               | 25-02-2008 |
| 28 | Informal conversation                               |                                                                     | Hotel manager                           | 27-02-2008 |
| 29 | Observation                                         | AMBAR                                                               | 6 under age sex workers                 | 05-03-2008 |
| 30 | Participatory observation and informal conversation | Legión de Maria                                                     | Sex workers in brothels                 | 25-03-2008 |
| 31 | Participatory observation and informal conversation | Centro Mayor de Ayuda Espiritual, Church Santuario de la Liberación | Mass in church/ father of church        | 26-03-2008 |
| 32 | Participatory observation                           | AMBAR                                                               | Sex workers on the street               | 28-03-2008 |
| 33 | Participatory observation and interviewing          | Grupo Ases de Venezuela, Asociación Civil                           | 5 Transgender sex workers on the street | 01-04-2008 |

Table 3: Interviews carried out in Isla de Margarita

|    | <b>Interviewee</b> | <b>Social agent</b>                                                          | <b>Function</b>                       | <b>Date Interview</b> |
|----|--------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 34 | Máximo Rondon      |                                                                              | Journalist                            | 08-04-2008            |
| 35 | Edison             |                                                                              | Former sex agency worker              | 17-04-2008            |
| 36 | Ramon Mago         | Dirección Regional de Prevención del Delito                                  | Coordinator                           | 23-04-2008            |
| 37 | Carlos Lemna       | Radio Exitos                                                                 | Journalist and candidate for mayor    | 24-04-2008            |
| 38 | Amador Martinez    | Security company                                                             | Director                              | 24-04-2008            |
| 39 | Antonia Aguiar     | Fundación del Niño                                                           | Coordinator Project 'Street Children' | 28-04-2008            |
| 40 | Marlene Rivera     | Consejo de Protección de Niños y Adolescentes Municipality Arismendi         | Lawyer                                | 28-04-2008            |
| 41 |                    | Zona Educativa                                                               | Coordinator                           | 28-04-2008            |
| 42 | Petrica Aquilera   | Universidad de Oriente                                                       | Sociologist                           | 29-04-2008            |
| 43 | Ingara Marrodán    | Universidad de Oriente                                                       | Social researcher                     | 29-04-2008            |
| 44 | José Gomez         | Consejo de Protección de Niños y Adolescentes Municipality Mariño (Porlamar) | Adviser                               | 29-04-2008            |
| 45 | Brahimir Salazar   | FundaOriental                                                                | Company administrator                 | 29-04-2008            |
| 46 | Sofia              | Street                                                                       | Sex worker (19)                       | 29-04-2008            |
| 47 |                    | Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas, Penales y Criminalísticas             | Lawyer                                | 30-04-2008            |

|    |                              |                                                                                              |                                                 |            |
|----|------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|------------|
| 48 | Raúl Figueroa                | Amare (Asociación Margariteña de Ayuda, Respaldo y Educación en SIDA)                        | Director                                        | 08-05-2008 |
| 49 | Lucinda Fernandez            | Programme S.T.D. (or Sanidad)                                                                | Doctor                                          | 08-05-2008 |
| 50 | Maura de Abraham             | Fundación del Niño                                                                           | Former director, former first lady of Margarita | 13-05-2008 |
| 51 | Rommy Marcano                | Hogares Crea                                                                                 | Director                                        | 13-05-2008 |
| 52 | Gledis Urbaez                | Casa Hogar 'Cyrano Marcano Maraver'                                                          | Director                                        | 13-05-2008 |
| 53 | Maria                        | Programme S.T.D.                                                                             | Sex worker (21)                                 | 14-05-2008 |
| 54 | Lisa                         | FundaOriental                                                                                | Sex worker (34)                                 | 14-05-2008 |
| 55 |                              | Consejo de Protección de Niños y Adolescentes Municipality Antolín del Campo (Playa el Agua) |                                                 | 16-05-2008 |
| 56 | Fidela Agreda & Rudy Ordaz   | Municipality Antolín del Campo, Department of Tourism                                        | Tourist promoter and Administrator of Police    | 16-05-2008 |
| 57 | Valentina (21) & Karina (24) | Strip bar                                                                                    | Strippers/ sex workers                          | 17-05-2008 |
| 58 | Aura                         | Fundación 8 de Agosto 1816                                                                   | Director                                        | 17-05-2008 |
| 59 | Estefanía                    | Programme S.T.D.                                                                             | Sex worker (36)                                 | 21-05-2008 |
| 60 | Laura                        | Programme S.T.D.                                                                             | Sex worker (25)                                 | 21-05-2008 |
| 61 | Ingara Marrodán              | Universidad de Oriente                                                                       | Social investigador                             | 23-05-2008 |

|    |               |                                                       |                                                                                                          |            |
|----|---------------|-------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| 62 | Julio Gamboa  | Aldea Universitaria Bolivariana in Espinal            | Ex pastor, ex adviser of a 'Consejo de Protección de Niños y Adolescentes' and director of a high school | 23-05-2008 |
| 63 | Fidela Agreda | Municipality Antolín del Campo, Department of Tourism | Coordinator                                                                                              | 27-05-2008 |
| 64 | Patty         | Programme S.T.D.                                      | Sex worker (22)                                                                                          | 28-05-2008 |
| 65 | Catarina      | Programme S.T.D.                                      | Sex worker (38)                                                                                          | 28-05-2008 |

*Table 4: Informal conversations and participatory observations carried out in Isla de Margarita*

|    | <b>Type</b>           | <b>Persons</b>                        | <b>Date</b> |
|----|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------|
| 66 | Informal conversation | Hotel worker                          | 08-04-2008  |
| 67 | Informal conversation | Taxi driver                           | 09-04-2008  |
| 68 | Informal conversation | Waiter                                | 12-04-2008  |
| 69 | Informal conversation | Taxi driver                           | 14-04-2008  |
| 70 | Informal conversation | German restaurant owner Playa el Agua | 16-05-2008  |
| 71 | Informal conversation | Pimp/drug seller 1                    | 23-05-2008  |
| 72 | Informal conversation | Pimp/drug seller 2                    | 24-05-2008  |
| 73 | Informal conversation | Under age sex worker                  | 24-05-2008  |