



Prostitution and Human Trafficking in Argentina

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Young People Against Prostitution and Human Trafficking:

The Greatest Violence Against Human Beings

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My subject is one of the ones we started discussing yesterday, trafficking and prostitution, and the line between them – if there actually is a line between the two and we can separate them. To begin with, I would like to give a definition of prostitution, which is paid sex, and tell you a little bit about what happens in my country.

In Argentina there is a law which does not prohibit prostitution, but it does ban sexual exploitation. In most of the constitutions in our countries there is something similar. In Argentina, as in many other countries, the client is not criminalized. Prostitution is considered to be a form of work. What is the definition of work in my country? Work is the performance of tasks that require physical or mental effort and that have as their goal the production of goods and services to meet human necessities. Therefore, work is an activity through which human beings earn their living and strengthen their identity as subjects in the social network. How then can prostitution be considered work, a job? Prostitution in itself involves the degradation of the human person, therefore there is no way in which prostitution can be dignified by work. In Argentina we say that work is a source of dignity, that it dignifies human beings. We heard many testimonies yesterday and many other people could have told the same story. No one had anything positive to say about his or her experiences in prostitution. I think it is important to understand that there is a distinction between prostitution and sex slavery. On the one hand it is exploitation by another person, trafficking for sexual exploitation, whereas in prostitution the woman is forced maybe by her social conditions, ethnic origins and poverty, lack of education – these are possible root factors that we talked about yesterday. And of course it is not acceptable – Monsignor Sánchez also mentioned this – to consider prostitution a free choice, a type of work, a job. As we said before, there are no schools, there is no education for sex work. Who would take one's child, one's daughter or sister to study prostitution? Therefore, this very idea of prostitution as a free choice is very hard to accept. There are situations that only the victims who experienced them really know. And I feel very responsible for being here, and talking about a situation of which I am not a victim. Certainly the situation is very complex. Maybe there are things I won't be able to explain as well as they should be explained. But I think that it is important to make that distinction, between prostitution that is forced by someone else and prostitution as a condition that is forced upon a person by social conditions. Prostitution is a social issue that exists in every country, every city – just as if it were another monument, another tree... it is quite "normal" everywhere: North America, Latin America, Asia... It is "normal" for a man to pay to spend a night with a woman and make that woman do whatever he wants.

I would like to tell you a little bit about what I have seen in my country. In the south of my country, Argentina, we have so-called "oil routes" and mining areas, like in many other countries such as Bolivia, Paraguay, Peru... Many people come to the South of Argentina to look for job in the most industrialised part of Argentina. Most of the workforce there is composed by men and sometimes they are exploited too. What we see in the South is that there are many brothels. There are entire blocks of brothels, with brothels one right next to the other. Everybody knows what is happening in there, from state officials to the people who live there, but they are indifferent to it and it is difficult to react to it. As long as it does not touch our own sister, our own family, it is ignored. We have known of the Ebola virus crisis since January. However, as long as it was in Africa we were not terribly worried, whereas when there was the first case in America everyone became very worried. I think this can serve as an example. Something similar happens with prostitution: as long as it does not involve our own home, our own circle, it is not so important.

I would like to give you a practical example. Let's imagine a scale of colors from white to black, with shades of grey in between. We could put "freely chosen" prostitution in the white section, while in the blackest black would be the victims of sexual exploitation. The first type is called "VIP prostitution", performed by women who are in the media, who officially may be models or showgirls something like that, but also practice prostitution. In Argentina we have so-called "books", pink catalogues advertising elegant nightclubs and featuring the photos

and contacts of these women who are available for hire by wealthy men. Their rates are in US dollars. These women are "happy" with what they are doing; they are making a lot of money. Their targets are high-income high-class men. In the light grey area we may find mothers who are working as prostitutes because of money problems: they need to support their family, and they may "choose" to do this. In my city, Villa María, there are streets that we could call our "Red Light district", with girls standing on corners. We imagine that no one owns these corners but you can't go and stand on a corner and decide to be a prostitute because the first day you might choose to do so whereas already on the second day someone will come and start exploiting you. Generally these pimps ask for protection money. I don't know whether a pimp can protect you or not, but generally speaking this is what they tell girls. They might ask for a part or all of their earnings, and offer security in exchange, some way of looking after them – I cannot imagine what it would be. But this is sort of the middle area, and then we have a darker grey area, in which, as our friends from Mexico explained, these women really have pimps, it might even be their husbands who exploit them. This example clearly shows us that it is the women who are criminalized, not the men, because they are the links of the chain that are visible, whilst the men do not appear.

My time is running out, so I will move on and say a little bit about a darker grey area. That's where we have the middle class girls who were deceived. Maybe they were deceived by their fiancés, or they were told they were going to be offered a good job, like being a model abroad. Lower-income people are more vulnerable, and the mafia exploits this vulnerability. For the middle class – and we have many such cases in Argentina – the deception is usually either done by the fiancé, or it is based on offering the girls work abroad as models or in public relations. Then we have a very dark area. Here we find the victims of sexual abuse and trafficked women, women trafficked for sexual exploitation who are in a condition of real slavery. Very often their families have been threatened, as we mentioned yesterday. There are numerous cases in which the girls' families were threatened. The girls are threatened with death, they are drugged, they are beaten and they are forced to do this every day.

What I am trying to point out is that if we really looked closely, I am not sure we would find so much difference between the VIP prostitution, higher-class prostitution, and the lower class prostitution. I am not so sure that the women are treated very differently, just because in one case they are being paid more and in the other less. We say that people make love when they have a real relationship. In this case, whether it is in a brothel, or on the street, or even in an elegant nightclub or five star hotel, I do not think there is any love, thus there is no real difference. Therefore, why is it that in our society prostitution can be considered an option for women? It is very violent for a society, with all the options it has for women, to consider prostitution. Why should the freedom to choose include an option that leads to degradation, to allowing one's body to be abused? Is it a desire? I do not think it is a matter of sex or passion. I think it is a question of power games. I really do not think there is any room for sexual desire, or very little of that. So what is happening to us as a society? Why do we think it is quite natural for someone to pay for sex? If the victim is a prostitute, is she really selling something? It is almost as if the prostitute no longer feels that her body is her own. She already hates it. Victims we have interacted with tell us very often that they feel guilty, impure, they feel their body is not their own. So I cannot really understand – and my NGO does not understand – how this can be a choice. And I do not see how society could have come to a situation in which it is just so normal and natural. I do not think it is traditional, just as I do not think forced marriage is a cultural tradition. I think that it is something that has been considered to be legitimate for far too long, but it is one of the worst forms of violence against women.

In my recommendations I have included as the first thing education about sexuality, as other friends said yesterday. We need relationships based on equality and freedom, not on power patterns or taking advantage of other people. And I think the government is responsible for this through its actions or missions, and the government must provide for the victims. We mentioned this with Alicia Peressutti and, of course, it is something we believe in very firmly. In Argentina the advertising of sex and of prostitution is banned, and of course there is some monitoring, but the mafias act very quickly to any progress that we manage to achieve. We talked yesterday about the police, which is a very controversial subject. We will be implementing a project next year to work with our local police. We have already contacted about 600 policemen and we will offer training on the subject of human trafficking. The focus is going to be on how to deal with the victims, not on the crime itself and its modus operandi. It is not simply a matter of filling a form or writing a description, it is dealing with a person's life, a life that has been totally degraded, a person who has been deprived of every right, and therefore it is very important that the police and the judiciaries start considering the victims for what they are, human beings. And we who have not been victims cannot even imagine what it meant for them.