



Pimps and the Spiral of Violence and Subordination that Women are Subjected to in the Context of Prostitution

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Good afternoon.

I would like to stand up for a few minutes because of the situation my country is currently going through.

My name is Ixchel, I come from Mexico, a country that is immersed in violence. This violence is structural and affects all aspects of our life. The worst part of the violence that we are experiencing is not obvious, like the media make us think. The worst part is the normalization of violence, which in turn leads to silencing what happens, what is hidden, what we do not see.

Violence against women is the first form of violence in Mexico and it is also the violence that is spoken about less, and in this stream, this torrent of violence against women we find prostitution and trafficking for sexual exploitation. Therefore, I think it is important to define violence here and to bring its name into the open.

I would like to tell you a little bit about the studies that I have conducted with Oscar Montiel Torres, who is sitting behind me. He focuses on the basic structure of sexual exploitation, the pimping system, whereas I have been working for five years now with women in prostitution, doing grassroots work with them to understand how they ended up in that situation, the power structure, and how these situations are reproduced in sexual exploitation.

The first part of my presentation is about pimping and what happens in Tlaxcala, a small state in Mexico. In this state, some communities train pimps to select, recruit and exploit women. Oscar Montiel has defined this process, which is composed of several different stages:

- First, the men are taught the practical value of sexual exploitation, to be able to recruit, transfer, and then exploit women.
- In the second phase they go to public places and try to hook up with women, seduce them, and deceive them. These places might be public parks, cafes, bars located in different states of the Republic – very much in Mexico City, Vera Cruz, Puebla, but now they have expanded their operations to the whole country and recruit migrant women coming, for instance, from Guatemala and Honduras.
- Then they take these women, they remove them from the places and the people they know, and they establish a sort of marital relationship with them and start living in Tlaxcala, so that the women become economically and emotionally dependent on them.
- They then move them somewhere else, which may be the capital, which may be cities along the borders in the north, closer to the United States. They exploit their economic fragility and convince them to be sexually exploited with the idea that they will help these men and that this is a way of building a future for themselves. This is how they begin to sexually exploit and sell these women.
- Fourth point: Once sexual exploitation has begun and the women are subjected to it, they are exploited in different places. The capital, Mexico City, is where most women are exploited. Other cities include Tijuana, Puebla, and other places on the border where huge profits are made, especially cities in the US.

It is important to understand how the power system of pimping works. It is a practical paradigm of the power structures to which women are subjected. The relationship between the pimp and the woman in prostitution is based on canceling the autonomy of women. The pimps have a plan when they recruit. They adapt their recruitment strategy and domination based on information they obtain from the women. They build a future based on the social, cultural and family aspirations of these women. This is the basis of the power they use

to exploit them. This relationship is at the center of sexual exploitation. Oscar Montiel Torres defines it as a primary act of power on behalf of the pimp to cancel the autonomy of the woman and subjugate her into sexual exploitation. The basis is a power of domination that can be physical, psychological, or entailing death threats, which may be real or symbolical, or power built on the false promise of a better future. This is supported by a system of network and alliances built by them in a dynamic process of adaptation. Pimps develop a very practical way of sexual exploitation that is based on the following points through which the pimps build their identities as men who live by exploiting women.

There are four different points that pimps list when they explain how to exploit women:

- The first point is that they have to know how to move, that is, how they interpret the recruiting, transfer and exploitation of women – they know how to get about, they know how to move.
- The second one is that they know how to speak in a very persuasive and convincing manner. They are good with words, they know the specific slang that is used. They know how to sweet-talk the women and make them fall into their trap, maybe fall in love with them.
- The third point is emotional coercion, which they define as “killing their own feelings”: they have to be aware and in control of their emotions because they need to disconnect from what they feel for the women they are conquering, deceiving and then exploiting, in order not to feel guilty. They cannot allow themselves to feel anything, so that they do not feel guilty because of the violence they are perpetrating on these women.
- The fourth point is a special form of awareness they use to identify and exploit the vulnerabilities of the women: they understand their body language, their emotions, and their cultural origin and find their weak spots in order to exploit them.

The pimps of Tlaxcala have a *modus operandi* that takes advantage of these women’s feelings and emotions. There is physical violence but they tend to prefer verbal, psychological, symbolical domination as an answer to the exchanges that affect them. Women’s rights’ associations, organizations of women in prostitution, and higher moral and legal pressure in Mexico and in the United States are crucial. The basic structure of sexual exploitation and the processes used by the pimps have adapted to the systems of society, communities and families. This has led to the fact that a number of municipalities in the south of the state of Tlaxcala are specialized in ‘producing pimps’. There is a generation of pimps that has transformed the whole culture, which has allowed pimping to become a lifestyle. It is a job handed down generation to generation; it is a very dark side buried within Mexico. How do you de-mythologize pimps? How can you avoid criminalizing entire communities, understanding that the creation of a myth has the function of distracting, creating a smoke screen and paralyzing through fear?

Primo Levi once wrote, “Monsters exist, but they are very few, they are too few to be really dangerous. What is really dangerous are ordinary people”. With this idea in mind, I will now turn to the sexual exploitation of women in prostitution. In many cases it goes well beyond the pimps – I speak about women who are in prostitution even though their pimp severed their relationship, or other women who enter into prostitution without a pimp. There are some interviews I conducted with women in prostitution, and studies, which can help us understand the aspirations of these women, their desires, what they were based on, and how they created a sort of spiral that led them into a situation that keeps them subjugated, that keeps them under the control of prostitution. This is because the whole system goes well beyond the pimps. The system of pimping, as Oscar Montiel Torres said, is made up of a number of people – the owners of the hotels in which they stay, the cafes, the pimps’ family, taxi drivers, the police who turn a blind eye in the areas in which pimps work and recruit women, and of course the clients... it is a whole network. Therefore, the pimps are not the only cogs in the pimping system, nor are they the only people involved in the exploitation of women. We could add to Oscar’s definition because there are also shopkeepers, for instance, who sell personal toiletries, condoms, the clothing they need. And there are also some women controlling the prostitutes: they guard them and watch over them. And also health centers, where women are treated for sexually transmitted diseases or where they may be treated in cases of physical violence, or abortion practitioners. And the lack of preparation in terms of gender issues, of understanding violence, human rights, on the part of those who provide these services... or the actual collusion with authorities so that some cases are never reported or filed by police. In addition, some NGOs take an approach that is determined by the funds they need for their projects rather than the actual situation of women. All of this contributes to keeping the pimping system standing.

What leads these women to be sexually exploited? First of all, we have to understand the vulnerability that they start with: family, social, cultural, emotional, economical, educational, all linked to women’s subordination in this patriarchal system, which creates inequality and women’s frustration and resignation. Education is based on sub-gender ideology that damages a woman’s autonomy: they have very low self-esteem, they are not independent, they have a great need to be acknowledged by others.

In order to understand this, I would like to mention a short testimony of a woman called Esmeralda, who is 38 years old.

“I ended up doing it on my own, for economic reasons. Most of the women I work with here do it either because they are forced to or because they are very poor. In my case it was the latter. I went to one of the women who did it who seemed friendlier, and I asked her how things worked. I said ‘I need to work, I have a child’. She said to me ‘Come tomorrow. If you don’t want to come too undressed, come with normal pants and shoes with heels that are neither too low nor too high. Things will start slowly and you’ll see that a lot of prostitutes can work’. The following day I didn’t want to get up. I didn’t want to think that the following day I was going to have to stand there and do that. But I had to. I went there, and she was waiting for me. I said, ‘Do you know what? I’m nervous’. And she said ‘It’s normal. If anyone asks you anything and tells you to go to a hotel with him, just do it. Don’t cry’. So I did that. They see you as someone new, a new face, a new body, so I worked a lot that day. The following day I couldn’t even stand up, I was wounded and hurt. The day after that I didn’t want to do it again, but I had to pay my rent, my baby’s milk and diapers and I was doing well, I had many clients. I thought I could do it for a few months, save a little bit so that I could have some small savings to use while I looked for another job. But I continued to live here and do this”.

So in this case she was not forced by any pimp: she ended up doing it on her own, but the fact that she asked how the system worked, how things worked, means that not having a pimp does not mean that women are free from exploitation. This shows that Esmeralda learnt from other women what to wear and how to behave, so she conformed to this pattern of sexual domination by men. And the interaction amongst these women shows that there is a sort of transmission of knowledge and experiences linked to survival mechanisms. “Esmeralda is the new one, she needs to be taught”. The other women gave her what they thought was good advice. They thought they were helping her, but this reproduced the whole system. Concerning the reasons that led Esmeralda into prostitution, she said it was economic difficulties, the need to keep her child. She spoke of the shame she felt and the social stigma that being a prostitute means, a stigma that became a sort of stain that disgusted her. This enables us to see the health of prostitutes as part of a wounded, suffering body.

She said “a new face, a new body” because they saw her as new merchandise, in other words, an object to be used by others, a normalization of violence that they justify by defining it as a sacrifice that has to be done in order to be able to care for others.

Esmeralda thought prostitution would be a short-term thing, that she could save up some money and find another job, but then she realises how much time has gone by since she entered in prostitution.

Now, I cannot read you the whole testimony due to time constraints. In a few words, the paper explains how this whole system of violence is assimilated and reproduced by women. They say that women are responsible for machismo because they educate boys. But this is yet another myth: no woman is responsible for machismo. However, women learn the patriarchal logic and reproduce it, because that is all they know. In the same way, they learn the system of pimps and prostitution, and reproduce it; there are no other explanations for it. This is what is happening today in Mexico. Women are being criminalized and punished, the “madrotas”, women who are pimps, previously were prostitutes. Most of them are victims from the very beginning; they just reproduced the same logic with other women. There are women who have been punished and have been in jail for 30 years for women trafficking, when what these women did was not exploit the victims but allow men to hide behind them. They were simply ‘operators’ who would go and collect the money from the prostitutes working in hotels and take the money back, so they would get caught. But the real master is behind the scenes, and these women end up in jail but do not declare what happened behind their backs, because of collusion between the authorities and the pimps, who are hidden and protected. We do not see this. In the same way, we do not see that this system is becoming more and more sophisticated. For instance, prostitutes no longer only wear skirts, because women with short skirts are immediately recognized. Instead, they wear pants and if a police officer arrives, the pimps say, “These girls aren’t exploited, they’re clients of this bar”. So many of the rules and laws introduced by the government never reach the root of the problem. Therefore, we do not call for the abolition or prohibition of prostitution, we need to work towards the *eradication* of prostitution. We need to understand that prostitution is a form of extreme violence against women and that it has to be pulled out from its roots. How can that be done? We need to work on it, we need to speak about it, we need to listen to these stories, share ideas and thoughts from the various areas of the world and branches in which we work to discuss what can we do, how can we transform this reality. However, if we do not understand the basic problems, we do not really understand prostitution. We can prohibit it, we can ban it, we can have laws that ban trafficking... but if we do not change the social relationships that lead to it, that are the foundations and bases that enable this subordination and exploitation of women to go on, if we do not understand why it happens, we will never ever be able to change anything.

Thank you.

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