

# **Economic and Social Obligations of Women Street Prostitutes in Southern Mexico**

by

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## **Abstract**

Prostitution is increasingly a form of employment for women with limited formal education and schooling (United Nations 1995), and is on the rise in contemporary Mexico as a response to changing economic conditions (Chant 1997). Mexican prostitutes are widely viewed as “lazy” women who “enjoy working on their backs.” Yet an alternate view is that this job provides higher remuneration than other informal sector jobs. Using ethnographic data collected among *ambulantes* (literally, streetwalkers) in the non-industrialized Mexican provincial capital of Oaxaca City, this article explores women’s motives for prostituting, work conditions, nature of the local labor market, issues of violence and disease, and the stigma associated with prostitution. The findings from this study indicate that, although *ambulantes* are aware of the health risks, violence, and social stigma associated with this job and lifestyle, they consider prostitution an undesirable yet viable way to support themselves and to fulfill their roles as mothers.

## **Biography**

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## ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL OBLIGATIONS OF WOMEN STREET PROSTITUTES IN SOUTHERN MEXICO

### Introduction: Prostitution of Women in Developing Societies

In both cross-cultural and locally based studies, scholars have examined women's involvement in prostitution from perspectives that analyze, on the one hand, issues of power, coercion, and exploitation (Foucault 1978; O'Connell Davidson 1998), and on the other, the issues of agency and choice (Renaud 1997). Prostitution, "the commercial sale of sexual services wherein sex is treated ... as a commodity" (de Zalduondo 1991:22), is unique among other occupations held by women for its potential to generate a relatively high income (relative to other jobs of comparable skill level) and for the social stigma associated in most societies with a job considered "immoral." This discussion uses ethnographic data collected among women working as street prostitutes in Oaxaca City (population 400,000) – a Mexican provincial capital known for its cultural conservatism – to explore the motives of women who prostitute in a modern, urban labor market.

The starting point for this discussion is Ester Boserup's (1986[1970]) seminal study of *Women's Role in Economic Development*.<sup>1</sup> Boserup argued that modernization and economic development – specifically, the industrialization and capitalism of agriculture – benefited men as *de facto* household heads more than it did women. In her view, job specialization where schooling and training are required for gainful employment, coupled with patriarchal attitudes that emphasize women's reproductive and household roles, preclude women's full participation in the modern labor force. Lack of opportunity for employment in capitalist agriculture coincide with women migrating to and working in large towns and urban areas, where they are concentrated in low-paying, low-status jobs such as vending and domestic service. Focusing on conditions in Africa's Copper Belt, she argued that a "heavy demand ... for the services of prostitutes" is created by a variety of circumstances, including those where "ordinary women" keep away from the streets and unknown men (Boserup 1986:1000). Analysis of the links between prostitution, patriarchy, economic development, education, migration, and globalization continues in more current research.

Studies focusing on women prostitutes whose clients are military personnel incorporate the themes raised above (Enloe 2001). Although this type of prostitution involves exploitation of sex workers, in many instances these women – some of them migrants – choose this line of work as the most economically lucrative alternative to the local labor market (Law 2000). A related body of research examines the relationship between prostitution and tourism, an industry that is, for developing nations such as Mexico, a state sponsored form of economic development (Chant 1992). The perceived benefits of tourism include generation of revenue and economic stimulation that produces both income and tax monies that can be used to improve the local infrastructure. Another positive outcome is the creation of jobs for both skilled (sales, hotel professional hotel staff, tour operators) and semi- or unskilled workers. Prostitution is one of the many casual sector jobs (including cleaning, gardening, guiding and transportation services, and vending) found in tourist destinations, with women (and in some cases men) drawing their clients from local workers and/or the tourist population. Researchers have documented the exploitation of adult women prostitutes and minors of both sexes in the "sex tours" that operate across the globe, particularly in Southeast Asia (Barry 1995; Law 2000; Bishop and Robinson 1999).

A subset of these compelling studies focuses on the international trafficking in women, adolescents, and children, and disturbing accounts of the initiation of future sex workers through kidnapping, violence, coercion, and trickery (Barry 1995; McCaghy and Hou 1994; Muecke 1992). In many cases, these victims are perceived as economic liabilities by their families and forced into prostitution to supplement the natal household budget (Muecke 1992). Sadly, the exploitation of pre-pubescent and underage women, particularly virgins, is attributed to clients' fantasies of deflowering a virgin and their fears of contracting the HIV virus from a more experienced woman. Finally, research focused on delineating and suggesting solutions to the spread of this virus (Farley and Kelly 2000; Law 2000; de Zalduondo 1991) is another important component of research concerning forced prostitution.

The involvement of adult women in voluntary prostitution – a term used here to mean that it is not coerced by another individual – is most typically understood through analysis of the structure of the local labor market in which women make their choices. Thus, whereas some feminists argue in favor of women's "right" to engage in prostitution rather than other types of employment (Schrage 1989), radical feminist researchers more commonly emphasize that the decision to prostitute is made within the context of a sexually stratified marketplace where women lack the skills requisite for higher paid, higher status, and more secure forms of employment. Jaggar (1997:9) succinctly synthesizes the latter argument as one where, in light of "limits imposed by gender discrimination," women "turn to prostitution in consequence of their limited opportunities for other types of work." The "free choices" inherent in analyses of women's decision to prostitute are perhaps best represented in accounts of adult women prostitutes in Zaire and Kenya (White 1986; LaFontaine 1974). In Zaire, prostitution has been described as a "profit-making enterprise" (White 1986:273), and in Kenya as a strategy involving long-term social relationships with clients that urban women choose (LaFontaine 1974:90). Is a similar pattern present in Oaxaca City, Mexico?

### **Patterns of Women's Employment and Prostitution in Mexico**

Economic development in Mexico since World War II has coincided with growth of the petroleum and tourism industries and a decline in agricultural production. The widespread rural exodus during these decades corresponds with rapid urbanization and exponential increase in rates of international migration. Expansion of the education system through construction and staffing of rural schools (though the system remains urban-centric) and an increase from six mandatory years of schooling to nine has contributed to lower rates of illiteracy across the nation.<sup>2</sup> Even with these advances, rates of educational attainment vary across geographical regions, between Spanish and non-Spanish speakers, and by sex. Thus, although schooling has long been recognized as "by far the most important factor in bringing about changes in [women's] role and status all over the world" (Ward 1970:96), women – particularly rural women in indigenous areas – have the lowest rates of education and literacy in Mexico (INEA 1990; INEGI 2002b). Against this backdrop, Marta Lamas (1996) examines the continuing supply of, and demand for, prostitutes within the sexually segmented labor force, where women are underrepresented in government regulated, skilled jobs.

The growing numbers of women who have entered the paid work force (today 36% of all women) in response to economic crises of the 1980s and 1990s concentrate in the casual sector, most commonly as domestic servants and vendors (INEGI 2002b:322). Many of these workers are rural-born women whose low earnings make them members of the two-thirds of "immiserated"

Mexicans living in poverty (Cockcroft 1998:232-233). In light of these conditions, Lamas states the “incontrovertible fact” that “sex work” provides [uneducated] women with higher earnings than other jobs in the informal labor market (p. 47). She describes a hierarchy of sex workers with different backgrounds, earning potential, clientele, and lifestyles. She ranks *ambulantes* (streetwalkers) at the lowest end of the scale, observing that their meager earnings are well below those of high-income prostitutes who service their customers from “luxury apartments” (p. 34). She attributes lack of job choice to lack of schooling stemming from patriarchal social structures that place high value on women’s reproductive roles.

The reality that Mexican women do not achieve either the same levels or types of formal schooling as men of comparable socioeconomic background, age, and place of residence (INEGI 2002b) is attributable to, as in other parts of Latin America, patriarchal notions about women’s roles as adult wives and mothers who work without remuneration in the home. Women who study are thought less likely to marry, either because they have the economic means to support themselves or are considered to be less desirable wives, in that they are potentially more independent and less submissive than women who lack schooling (Kelly and Elliott 1982), or because their reputations are tarnished by their proximity to unrelated men when they are away from home studying, as Bourque and Warren (1981) report in South America. This latter notion may also apply to Mexico. Castillo (1999:13) suggests that “*el fantasma de la prostitución* (the phantom of prostitution) ... hovers over women who wish to define themselves in any realm other than the domestic.” In rural Oaxaca specifically, Susan Jeffrey (1980) found that women’s education was tied to immorality and prevailing notions of “good” and “bad” women.

### **Sexuality, Chastity, and Prostitution in Latin America**

As noted above, Mexican negative attitudes about prostitution and prostitutes are shaped by the patriarchal “Madonna/Whore” paradigm, a widely held attribute of Latin American women’s roles (Castillo 1999; Jelin 1991). In brief, this polarized construct idealizes the “good woman” who fulfills herself through motherhood, sexual chastity, supervising or performing household activities, and religious piety. The sanctified *mujer abnegada* (a long suffering, self-sacrificing woman) sacrifices her own desires and needs for the good and welfare of her husband and children. The opposite of this venerated woman is the *mujer mala* (bad woman), who rejects the idealized role of wife and mother, and who has liberal sexual mores. Interestingly, researchers argue that as many as 80% of Mexican prostitutes are mothers (Arrom 1985; Castillo 1999), while many prostitutes epitomize the concept of the *mujer mala*.

The importance of motherhood in defining the “good” Latin American woman is also related to a construct of *marianismo*, which Evelyn Stevens (1973) describes as entailing veneration of the Virgin Mary and expectations that women will exhibit moral piety and sexual chastity. The Virgin has held a pivotal and unique social and religious position in Mexico. The Virgin of Guadalupe, known as simply *la Virgen* to many Mexicans, is both the patron saint of Mexico and a symbol of nationhood arising from Mexico’s 1810-1821 struggle for independence from Spain. At the same time, the Virgin of Guadalupe also epitomizes the “good” mother, in contrast with *la Malinche*, an indigenous slave given to Hernan Cortes during the Conquest of New Spain. La

Malinche served as both Hernan Cortez’s translator and mistress during the conquest of New Spain, and has become a symbol of both treason and sexuality for many Mexicans. Tuñón Pablos (1999:21) contrasts the symbolism of these “good” and “bad” women in contemporary Mexico:

Guadalupe also expresses another feminine myth, one that is somewhat opposed to Marina [Malinche] although complementary to her. The treacherous woman – the sexed prostitute who, despite being an Indian, attains Spanish status – confronts the pure religious woman, who, based on Christian faith, cares for her people, even though this meant adopting the religion of the conqueror. The Virgin-Mother is, even today, the repository of the nation's devotion: she watches over her sons and daughters, although she excludes sexual meaning from all procreation.

The distinction between modest or good women and *auanimine* (the Nahuatl word for a happy woman or prostitute) is reported to pre-date the Spanish conquest. In her comprehensive *Women in Mexico: A Past Unveiled*, Julia Tuñón Pablos (1999:11) cites Spanish priest Bernardino de Sahagún's 16<sup>th</sup> century description of a prostitute: "A whore is a public woman and she has the following: she goes about selling her body, she begins from an early age and does not stop [doing so even] when she is old, and she goes about as [if she were] drunk and lost... She also has the custom of ... going around strutting like a shameless, dissolute, wicked, vile and bad woman." In the early years of the conquest, prostitution was viewed as a "necessary evil" and "complement to marriage" caused by a high ratio (3.5:1) of women to men in Mexico City, and a "dearth of well paid occupations for women" (Tuñón Pablos 1999:33). In an effort to limit the number of women working in brothels, poor girls (who were increasingly cityward migrants) were encouraged to enter convents or to marry. Yet prostitution appealed to a number of poorer women as some women earned a high income from it. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, enough prostitutes had "sufficient economic resources to enjoy a place of privilege" that breached a formal decree that prohibited these women from dressing and acting in public like "wives of gentlemen and persons of quality" (ibid:33).

The polarization of women as virtuous wives/mothers or prostitutes continued throughout the colonial era in Central America. McCreery's (1986) analysis of prostitution in 19<sup>th</sup> century Guatemala City indicates that enduring codes of honor and shame introduced by Mediterranean conquerors both created a need for prostitutes and determined the composition of this population. Because mores prescribed that elite women remain chaste prior to marriage, the "ladies of Guatemala" stayed in their houses (p. 334) to preserve their virtue and reputation. A sexual outlet for unmarried (and some married) elite men was available with prostitutes in brothels. In general, prostitutes lacked property and were denied socially recognized claims to honor or shame (p. 335). Street prostitutes who serviced lower class men were recruited from among the poor or otherwise marginal populations and lived a life of misery and shame (p. 339). Prevailing attitudes during the colonial era and well into 20<sup>th</sup> century Guatemala held that "prostitutes could not be raped, and violence against them was an occupational hazard" (Forster 1999:62).

Prostitution was legalized in Mexico in 1867 (Arrom 1985:32), and prostitutes were categorized for tax purposes according to their "place of work ... and their personal traits (attractive, average figure, homely)" (Tuñón Pablos 1999:78). Registering of prostitutes is considered an attempt to control venereal diseases (Barry 1995:242), a concept introduced into Mexico by the French in the 1870s (Bliss 1999:15). During the Porfiriato (1876-1910), 12% of women living in Mexico City were registered as prostitutes, and thousands of others worked illegally (Tuñón Pablos 1999:77). In the decades after the Mexican Revolution, Mexico's health officials' attempts to curb the spread of syphilis, "sexual promiscuity," and "indecorous" conduct among Mexico City's citizenry "found that greater blame for immortality should be imputed to both registered prostitutes and *clandestinas*." This latter group of unregulated, clandestine prostitutes included

up to 15,000 women, including thousands of teenage girls left orphans by the Mexican Revolution. These were girls with little or no schooling began working in informal sector jobs, such as waitress or domestic servant, and occasionally accepted money from co-workers in exchange for sex before entering into this lifestyle on a more regular basis (Bliss 1999:16).

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, lifestyles of prostitutes – often romanticized – have been themes of Mexican art, literature, music, film, and television (Castillo 1998; Lamas 1996; Monsiváis 1980). Prostitutes continue to play a role in the sexual awakening of some young men, particularly among the upper classes (Gutmann 1996; Castillo 1998), yet are viewed with contempt by “decent” members of society who place a high premium on unmarried women’s virginity. Using a specific example from a working class neighborhood in Mexico City, Gutmann (1996:83) quotes a father who pointed out the apparel and demeanor of prostitutes to his daughters so that they would know “the difference between a normal woman and a prostitute.” Similarly, Higgins and Coen (2000) report that Oaxacans *not* involved in prostitution consider prostitutes to be lazy and immoral, though Levine and Sunderland Correa (1993) indicate that working class women in Cuernavaca may understand the necessity of prostituting, though they cannot condone it.

## Research Focus and Methods

To recap, earlier studies and ethnographic accounts of prostitution indicate that women’s motives for entering into prostitution vary according to socioeconomic origins, skill levels, and social and economic obligations. Within Mexico, *ambulantes* are identified as the most marginal and vulnerable population of prostitutes (Lamas 1996). Yet factors that motivate women to choose this type of prostitution remain in dispute, and a number of questions emerge regarding ways that women justify their involvement in an occupation that is almost unanimously condemned by those who neither buy nor sell sex. Do women prostitutes, as Lamas (1996) has suggested, view prostitution as (in simple terms) an “easy job” with a flexible schedule that provides both higher salary and greater *libertad* (freedom) than other jobs in the informal labor sector? Do they enjoy this type of work? Or is prostitution a shameful last choice job alternative available for women who lack the formal education and training required for employment in the formal labor sector? This study follows Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) suggestion that researchers focus on local notions of sexuality and the labor market that determine women’s choices, and takes into account Sylvia Chant’s (1991:135) observation that “*demand or opportunity for female economic activity* does vary according to the nature of the city-wide economy” (italics in original).

This ethnographic study examines the social and economic responsibilities, local notions of sexuality, and working lives of *ambulantes* (streetwalkers) in Oaxaca City. This provincial capital is known for cultural conservatism, but is currently undergoing rapid tourism-driven economic development. The data were collected between 1996 and 2000, when I interacted with and observed *ambulantes* who worked during the daytime on a street I call Calle Iguana, and in visits to *ambulantes’* homes that at times included interactions with their relatives. Additional data were collected in the summer of 1997, when permission was granted to conduct interviews at the Centro de Atención y Control de Enfermedades de Transmisión Sexual (Center for the Care and Control of Sexually Transmitted Diseases, or CACETS). This clinic is run by Oaxaca City’s municipal government, and sex workers are required to report weekly to CACETS for mandatory physical examinations in order to receive validated work permits.<sup>3</sup> Information obtained in interviews and conversations with clinic personnel and other Oaxaqueños not involved in prostitution is used here for contextual purposes. Data collected through informal conversations

and formal interviews with two dozen *ambulantes*, and observations on the street and in the clinic form the basis for this discussion. All interviews were conducted in Spanish and are translated into English. Pseudonyms are used to protect women's privacy.

The *ambulantes* contacted were asked about their natal backgrounds, education and work histories, current living situations, household structure, and experiences as prostitutes. Issues addressed in this paper are based on the data collected and focus on the women's economic situations, including questions such as: What are the women's education levels and marketable skills? What are their working conditions like? How much income do they generate, and what expenses do they have? What are their short- and long-term plans and goals? Have they considered alternatives to working as prostitutes? Also, women's social relationships and responsibilities are explored, including their living arrangements and status as wives, mothers, children, and siblings. What goals and dreams do mothers have for their children? How do they reconcile their roles as mothers and prostitutes, or is this an issue they are concerned about at all? Overarching questions that underpin this discussion include: How do these women perceive their position as prostitutes within Oaxacan society? In what ways, if any, does this affect their decision to prostitute? Answers to these questions not only give us greater insight into a little studied area of Oaxacan life, but also speak to larger issues of women's employment options in developing societies.

### **Socioeconomic Conditions in Oaxaca**

With a population of 3.4 million inhabitants, Oaxaca is the largest state in southeastern Mexico (Figure 1). More than 60% of the state's population lives in rural communities (INEGI 2002a), though outmigration from economically marginal communities has been widespread since the mid-1980s (DIGEPO 2000).<sup>4</sup> As a provincial capital, Oaxaca City is the hub of economic, political, and religious activities in the state. Cityward migration has been the main source of exponential growth and increasing diversity of Oaxaca City's population, which is officially reported as 400,000 in the 2000 census (INEGI 2002a). Lacking the industrial base of central and northern Mexico, employment in the urban area revolves around tourism and the public sector. Poorer residents of Oaxaca City, including cityward migrants living in the *colonias populares* (ad hoc communities) on its outskirts, often conceptualize society as divided into just two strata: *los ricos* (the rich) and *los pobres* (the poor). In the 1970s, "the rich" included wealthy professionals with enough money to live on, and everyone else was considered "poor" (Higgins 1971). The federal and state governments segment earners into income level groups based on earnings in proportion to the federal minimum wage. In Oaxaca, this translates into a tripartite stratification scheme including a small (i.e., less than 9%) elite (comprised of households whose heads earn at least five times the daily minimum wage) and a growing middle class representing 36.2% of households that earn between two and five times the minimum wage. Household earnings of at least twice the minimum wage are deemed the minimum needed for economic survival, and at the bottom of this hierarchy is an "informal sector proletariat" comprised of the more than 45% of workers who earn less than twice the minimum wage (Murphy and Stepick 1991). The dozens of Oaxacans I spoke with in 2002 said that "no one can survive on less than 100 pesos a day" – an income that is, significantly, nearly three times the minimum wage – though, in reality, tens of thousands of formal and informal sector workers do not make the minimum wage. One survival strategy used in households headed by men, women, or two or more adults earning a minimal wage is to place multiple family members in the workforce.

Another solution is for parents to finance the education of one or more children at the post-secondary level. Increasing *credentialismo* (employers' demand for proof of studies) has made this level of schooling all but mandatory for permanent employment that provides a secure (albeit at times low) salary and short- and long-term benefits (e.g., salary advances, vacation, sick and maternity leaves, health and life insurance, and mortgages) (Portes and Sassen-Koob 1987). The schooling required for formal sector jobs follows guidelines established by the federal Secretary of Public Education. Although six years of primary and three years of secondary school are mandated by Mexican law, families in rural areas and of lower socioeconomic strata do not have full access to the education system due to lack of schools in rural communities. Poor families' need for children's labor exacerbates this problem, keeping children out of school in order to work. The average level of schooling for adults across the state (five years) is considerably below the national average of eight years. Twenty-one percent of Oaxaqueños – of whom the majority are rural, indigenous women – remain illiterate (INEGI 2002a).

Oaxacan women comprise one-third of the state's paid workforce (INEGI 2000a), typically working in jobs that provide neither the same degree of responsibility nor income as men (INEGI 1995). These women include the proportionately small (less than 3%) numbers of university educated professional women and tens of thousands of others who concentrate in *carreras cortas* (literally 'short careers' that do not require a professional degree).<sup>5</sup> The majority of working women who have never attended school or completed only a few grades are restricted to jobs such as domestic service (Howell 2000), food vending (Chiñas 1995), craft production (Cook and Binford 1990; Stephen 1991), *lavandera* (laundry woman), and prostitution (Musalem, n.d.) that typically build on skills learned in the household.

Roles of both men and women are currently expanding in response to changing economic conditions and social mores (Higgins 1990; Higgins and Coen 2000; Howell 1999). However, women typically retain primary responsibility for household chores, whether unremunerated in their own homes or as paid labor for others. Moreover, despite relaxation of rigid sexual mores among some youth, a sexual double standard persists among more conservative residents – women's sexual restraint is valued at the same time that a man's premarital and extramarital sexual activities are tolerated. Young women who aspire to a "good marriage" are advised to remain virginal until marriage and to reject the advances of *macho* men who would use and abandon them. Women who do not conform to local ideals regarding decent behavior are often described as "loose" or "bad" women or *putas* (literally, whores).

Prostitutes are always lumped into the "bad women" category. Attitudes about the class of the woman who prostitutes were evident in opinions volunteered by Oaxaqueños of both sexes, all ages, and diverse social class backgrounds when they learned about my research interest regarding *ambulantes*' lives. Oaxaqueños not involved in prostitution identified women working on Calle Iguana as aprons, braids, and [often] plastic shoes. These women were contrasted with younger, more overtly sexual women who prostituted in dance clubs, bars, and brothels and "dressed like whores" in costume jewelry, mini-skirts, and skimpy tops. Furthermore, "decent" Oaxaqueños characterized *ambulantes* as either substance abusers with loose morals who could not support their habits in any other way, or as promiscuous women who were the sole support of a slew of children with different fathers. Rarely did anyone feel sympathy for these women, although occasionally someone described a prostitute's child as a *pobrecita* (poor thing). Although Oaxaqueños from all walks of life told me that they thought women prostitute because "they like

it,” *ambulantes* I contacted and interviewed expressed a dramatically different perspective on their own lives.

### **Profile of Research Population**

Officials at Oaxaca City’s Health Department estimate that as many as 2,000 women routinely prostitute in various venues, including exotic clubs, brothels, escort services, cantinas (bars serving a predominantly male clientele), and on the streets. Approximately 400 of these women are registered to work as *ambulantes* on designated streets (Mayoral Figueroa, 1996:11), and there is agreement that these numbers are rising with increasing cityward migration and rising inflation in the urban area. To protect privacy, the government does not allow researchers to see registration records that contain prostitutes’ ages, number of children, and places of birth. However, personnel told me verbally that the characteristics of the larger population coincide with patterns that emerged in my interviews and results from others’ surveys conducted elsewhere in Mexico (Gomezjara and Barrera 1992; Lamas 1996; Uribe et al. 1996) and in Oaxaca in the 1980s (Musalem (n.d.) and mid-1990s (Mayoral Figueroa 1996). These studies indicate that prostitutes are a diverse population but consistently identify street prostitutes as the population with the least education and lowest income. In Oaxaca, *ambulantes* are typically poor Spanish-speaking cityward migrants from villages in the state or neighboring Chiapas. Though they range in age from 18 (the legal age to register) to mid-60s, the majority are between the ages of 20 and 40. They are typically single mothers with sole economic responsibility for up to eight children (normally fathered by different men). Male partners are rarely present; those who are in the household know of, and often support, the women’s activities by driving them to work, or helping solicit customers, as Lamas (1996) and Gomezjara and Barrera (1992) report in Mexico City and Veracruz respectively. Violent arguments stemming from alcohol abuse and conflicts about the women’s sexual activities may accompany arguments between sex workers and their partners and relatives (Gomezjara and Barrera 1992).

### Women’s Backgrounds

The women who agreed to be interviewed range in age from 18 to 62, although the majority are between ages 35 and 45. All women contacted were fluent in Spanish, and no one said she had indigenous origins. Most came from rural communities distributed throughout Oaxaca, where their parents eked out a meager living through subsistence agriculture or manual labor. The exception was a woman born in a *colonia popular* to a single mother, with whom the *ambulante* worked in ambulatory vending from early childhood. “I’m from a poor family” was a typical response to questions about the natal household. The age at which cityward migrants first came to Oaxaca City was determined by a number of variables, including size of community of origin and opportunities for employment there or in larger cities, marital status and motherhood, and living conditions within the natal household. The women who came to Oaxaca City at the youngest ages came as teenagers to work as domestic servants; at times women who first came to Oaxaca City did so after the disintegration of a marriage.

When I interviewed them, *ambulantes* typically lived in communities within half an hour (by bus) of downtown Oaxaca City, including the *colonias populares* that ring the city and small villages just beyond the city limit. Some women over the age of 40 have obtained lands (either through purchase or invasion) in less desirable areas within and outside the city limits, and are slowly constructing homes as resources allow. In all but one case, the women were mothers of from one

to six children. In no family (averaging three children) did all the children have the same father. Each mother claimed to know who the fathers of each child were, though only two lived with the father of any child. Each pre-menopausal woman said she currently used contraception – in the form of tubal ligation, oral contraceptives, or condoms. The mothers lived in homes they had obtained with at least some of their children, including, in two households, adult children and their children. The two *ambulantes* who are grandmothers had at least one of their grandchildren living with them.

Few women had studied beyond the third grade, and most are barely literate. Many of these women said that their parents took them out of school so that they might help around the home or to start contributing to the household budget. For example, 35-year-old Teresa, a mother of three, explained that her own mother had taken her out of school at the end of the third grade so that they could sell *tamales* together. Others reported that they had dropped out of school because, “I didn’t like it” or “I didn’t want to study.” Below, I discuss in more depth their observations about how lack of studies affects employment opportunities.

### Relationships with Men

Normally, *ambulantes* had entered into at least one *union libre* (common-law marriage) during their lifetimes; very few said they had been legally married, and only one woman (age 54) was legally married (in her case, for more than 25 years) when contacted. Because many Oaxacans refer to male partners in consensual marriages as “husbands,” I adopt this term here. Women who had divorced or separated from their former husbands gave a variety of reasons for doing so. The most common was that a man was “very macho,” a term used in a pejorative fashion to refer to men who were *mujeriegos* (womanizers), *borrachos* (drunkards), or *violento* (violent). Goya’s (age 36) description of her former legal husband is representative of other women’s complaints about the men in their lives:

He hit me. He had many other vices. He’s a drunk and a womanizer, and he smoked marijuana. Who knows what else he does?

Most of the women claimed that they were not involved in a steady relationship of any kind. Speaking of why she has never been involved in a long-term personal relationship, 43-year-old Lupe (the only *ambulante* who has no children) said,

I look at the men who are my customers ... Well, I call them men because they’re male, and they’re adults. But I don’t consider them men. What is a man? He is responsible. But these men don’t give their wives money for food to feed their children. They say they don’t have enough, but they find the money to come to me. I don’t consider this a man. They think they’re macho, but to me they’re irresponsible. I realized when I was young and I saw [how] my father [acted] that I never wanted to rely on any man.

Women with partners said that these men knew about the prostitution, especially in cases where they had met when the man solicited the woman’s services. Women no longer with their former husbands or partners said that at times prostitution had come between them. This was the case with 41-year-old Nanci, whose ex-husband (a mechanic) left her when he learned that she prostituted. She justified prostituting then, as she does now, with the words, “I do this out of

necessity. He gave me money when he had it, but usually he couldn't." This statement echoes a complaint commonly heard from prostitutes who almost unanimously described their current and former partners as *huevo* or *flojo* (both pejorative meaning "lazy men"), who cannot or will not provide for their children's welfare.

### Prior Employment

Before becoming prostitutes, the women had worked in menial, informal labor sector jobs, for example as vendors, domestic servants, cooks, and waitresses. On the whole, these jobs pay considerably less than the government mandated minimum wage (which has fluctuated between US\$3 and \$4 per day for over a decade); the minimum wage is considered to be at least half the minimal income level needed for survival (Murphy and Stepick 1991). The only woman who completed secondary school had earned the minimum wage as a store clerk for six months following her divorce. She, like all women contacted, complained that salaries paid to unskilled women in jobs other than prostitution are "just too low." As discussed below, economic need was the most frequent reason given for becoming and remaining a prostitute.

### **La Vida de la Calle (Life on the Street)**

#### Government Regulations

Oaxaca City's Department of Health recognizes four categories of sex workers: *ambulantes* (street walkers), *barristas* or *ficheras* (women who receive *fichas* [vouchers] for each drink a customer buys them at the bars known as *cantinas* where they work), women who work in *clubs* (as dancers in strip clubs, escorts for escort services, and as prostitutes in brothels), and male *homosexuales* (see Higgins and Coen 2000 for further information on this population). Each legally registered sex worker carries a permit with a corresponding letter (A, B, C, or H) explaining where he or she is authorized to work. *Ambulantes* and *ficheras* are the majority of sex workers in Oaxaca, and considered to be the lowest paid. In many cases, they are former club workers whose opportunities for work narrowed as they aged. Higgins and Coen (2000:168-171) report that transvestite prostitutes earn twice as much as *ambulantes* working on the same street. The researchers attribute this to the differences in services offered, the transvestites' higher income clientele (which includes male tourists), clients' attraction to the men's younger age and attempts to make themselves look sexy, and a labor market that privileges men's labor over women's.

Each registered sex worker carries a *libreto* (permit), which costs 10 pesos for women under the age of 50, and 5 pesos for women aged 50 or older.<sup>6</sup> All must comply with Health Department regulations so that government personnel (including police) do not hassle them as they work. These rules include getting weekly check-ups and scheduled examinations (for cervical cancer and venereal diseases, among other possibilities) and blood tests (including HIV). Workers who test positive for the HIV virus cannot hold a permit. Health Department inspectors randomly check for permits, and prostitutes caught working illegally are arrested if they continue to prostitute without obtaining a valid permit within one week. Permits specify the street where *ambulantes* are authorized to work, which are typically between a centrally located market and the second-class bus station at the western end of the city.<sup>7</sup>

## Getting Started

A novice *ambulante* may have trouble establishing herself on an assigned street, because women already working there jealously guard their spots against new competition. Maria, an *ambulante* in her 50s, recalled her first days working on the street (a decade earlier):

When I first [went on] the street, one of the women who thinks she's the leader [of an informal union]<sup>8</sup> wanted to see my permit. I told her that I only show my permit to the inspectors and clients if they ask, and I didn't show her anything...  
*La calle es libre* (The street is free). I have as much right to be here as they do.

Health Department personnel confirmed that fights between women working on the same street are not unusual, and during check-ups women report that they have been insulted, sworn at, or hit. In one case, a newcomer's clothes were torn off on Calle Iguana. During a time of tension between *ambulantes* working there, an informant advised, "There are always problems on the street. Go home and come back another day."

The age at which a woman begins prostituting often determines where she works and how she interacts with health officials, customers, and other prostitutes. The youngest age at which a woman claimed to have first prostituted was 12 and the latest age was 36. Although no woman described being sold or pushed into prostitution by her relatives, some indicated that relatives' lack of support contributed to them becoming a prostitute. In one example, Leti, a woman in her early 40s, claimed that she fled her parents' home in her mid-teens due to consistent sexual and physical abuse.<sup>9</sup> Without other employment options, she began to prostitute. Concha, a widow in her mid-30s, said that she began to prostitute following her husband's death in a traffic accident because her in-laws threw her and her three children out of their home. She says that these in-laws are aware that she prostitutes in order to support their grandchildren, but have offered her neither financial nor emotional support.

In an instance like Concha's, a woman may ask a friend with knowledge of the prostitution industry to help her get started.<sup>10</sup> Women who were underage when they first prostituted reported that they were duped into prostituting by older friends. Once she had received money from her first customer, Lisa, who first prostituted at age 12, spent the next six years hiding from health department inspectors, until she reached the age 18. Some women now over age 30 started working in clubs or brothels while in their teens or 20s, but they moved onto the streets as they became less appealing to clients in these higher paying locations. One woman had toured Mexico as a stripper; another lived for a time in the United States. The women now work in Oaxaca City for a variety of reasons, including to be nearer to aging or ailing relatives, so their children could have a permanent home, or because it's more tranquil than larger cities.

## Earnings

*Ambulantes* learn quickly to identify potential clients and negotiate a price with them. One of my first observations on Calle Iguana concerned *ambulantes*' ability to correctly identify men who are just passing down the street, those who come for sex, and members of a group of older men who watch the *ambulantes* and comment to and about them without ever soliciting their services. They also distinguish between potential clients and the policemen and Health Department inspectors who might pass by to make sure that there are no problems.

In 1996 and 1997, the women normally began negotiations with clients at between 20 and 50 pesos per trick, though they did ask more from men they perceived to have the money to pay more. The women on Calle Iguana quickly assess a potential client's worth (through cut and style of dress, and model and year of car, if driven). Though it was impossible to systematically report income of all the *ambulantes* contacted (because so few were willing to share this information), I did observe interactions between women and their clients on Calle Iguana, and the women who knew me well and learned that I did not repeat what they told me, would report what happened in transactions I witnessed or overheard (and often told me at the end of a week how much income they had generated). They stated that women willing to perform "extras" (such as having sex without a condom, or engaging in anal or oral sex) could earn more than those who engage only in vaginal sex using a condom.<sup>11</sup>

In 1998, the women who discussed their income with me indicated that on a "good day" they earned 80 to 100 pesos (four-five times the minimum wage), and on a "bad day," 20 pesos or less (in other words, less than the minimum wage). Mari beamed one day when we met casually in a local market while she bought meat for her family's dinner. She confided that she had earned 180 pesos, marking the first time in over 20 years of prostituting that she had earned more than 100 pesos in a day. When asked what precipitated this windfall, she mused that it could have been because some of the other women who serviced more clients were not working that day, joked that possibly she had been very attractive, and finally concluded with the observation, "Who knows?"

Earnings were commonly between 40 and 60 pesos (two-three times the minimum wage) for six hours spent working. Though six hours was the norm, six days per week, the length of the workday varied on different days of the week and among some women. For example, whereas most of the 10 women who routinely worked on Calle Iguana arrived between 9 and 10 a.m. and left between 3 and 4 p.m., women tended to arrive later on mornings they went to CACETS for their check-ups. Others arrived with an intention of going home once they had earned the amount they had determined to be sufficient for that day. Others remained on the street for a set number of hours (but never past when the next "shift" of women arrived on the street) regardless of how much they earned. In a few cases, women spoke about needing to leave Calle Iguana to coincide with childcare needs. Though this theme emerged among younger women contacted at CACETS, the children of *ambulantes* on Calle Iguana are now in most cases of an age where they do not need to be supervised. The women commented often about their low earnings and spoke of clients who "ripped them off" by underpaying for services, giving them ripped bills (which must be exchanged at a bank), or leaving nothing. Often times the women spoke with me and each other about the reality that most of their clients, who are typically from rural and urban lower income groups, cannot afford to pay the minimum daily wage for a service that lasts less than 10 minutes.

### Dangers

Despite the women's consistent complaints about the low and unstable income they generate, by far the most common problems they identified were not financial, but rather involved interactions with other *ambulantes* and clients. Informants stressed that one of their primary concerns is to *cuidarse* (protect themselves), which meant both to use condoms during sexual intercourse and to beware of abusive men. They also report weekly to CACETS for a physical examination and follow a schedule of tests for HIV, venereal diseases, and uterine cancer. *Ambulantes* receive

small numbers of condoms at no charge from two AIDS education and support groups: the privately funded Frente Común Contra la SIDA (United Front Against AIDS) which provides AIDS education and free condoms, and COESIDA (a government health service) which provides confidential, free HIV testing and condoms. The women also mentioned pharmacies and agencies where low-priced condoms could be purchased.

Protecting themselves from violence as well as disease was a major concern for these women, as it is for prostitutes elsewhere (O'Connell Davidson 1998). Each woman had heard of prostitutes killed or menaced by men who had picked them up. For example, Toni, a mother of two in her mid-40s, insists that she is now more cautious following an incident that happened to her friend. The friend's client had tied her up and held a gun to her head as he threatened to do various types of violence, then – without carrying out any of his threats – left the room, leaving her tied up. Toni's friend eventually managed to free herself and draw attention to her situation. Toni noted that this situation frightened her for many reasons. Foremost, her friend could have been killed. Second, Toni thought this man was really sick. She said that although men have wanted to act out (sometimes kinky) sexual fantasies with her, she had never encountered a client who solicited her without intending to have sex. Third, to the best of Toni's knowledge, this man was never caught. Her friend gave the police a description, but it was so nondescript that Toni feels she would be unable to identify him if he approached her. Toni did note that she was impressed by the police's attempts to find this "pervert" because, she said, "When a man mistreats or abuses a prostitute, many people say that she deserved it."

To mitigate the possibility of physical violence, the *ambulantes* frequent hotels where the staff agrees to look out for them. This means that the client paid 10-20 pesos in 1998 (less than \$2 US) to the desk clerk for a room that contains a full-sized bed, has cold running water, and a door that does not lock. The desk clerk will provide assistance if the woman gives a pre-arranged signal for trouble (for example, banging on a wall). Although other hotels in the immediate vicinity provide hot water for approximately the same price, some of these rooms are on the upper floors and the *ambulantes* cannot be sure that anyone will protect them. The women let each other know if a client is *loco* (crazy) and these men are generally ignored. *Ambulantes* say "No!" very firmly to men whom they will not service. Yet there are times when assertiveness does not work and the women need help. In cases of a perceived threat, women who normally compete with each other for clients may help one another, either by standing beside another woman in a show of support, making rude remarks to the client, or by hitting him with a shoe or dousing him with water. *Ambulantes* explained that unpleasant confrontations with men are very much part of life on the street.

The potential for violence was mentioned as a reason for going into the designated hotels, and considered an important reason to establish a clientele of repeat customers. For example, Mari, a grandmother in her mid-50s, said that she goes only with known clients, and will turn down a stranger's money. As we sat on Calle Iguana, she often criticized other women who were "so desperate" for money that they went with "anybody who asked." Each woman contacted used a version of the phrase, "You have to put up with the men," when asked to identify the worst aspect of prostitution. Individually, *ambulantes* spoke of tolerating drunks, men who agree to pay one price but then renege and pay less after they are in the room, and men who are physically dirty or smell. Some also spoke about the tediousness of having sex with strangers. Other women singled out men who insulted them with remarks such as "So whore, why do you rent yourself?" as making their job more difficult than necessary. These women are likely to respond

to such comments by saying *a volar* or *largete* (both are vulgar ways of saying “get lost”). A few contrasted themselves with *ficheras* who do not work for themselves, and whose bosses at times mandate that they tolerate being groped by clients. Mari observed that she decided years ago to work as an *ambulante* rather than as a *fichera* because “No man touches me without paying first.”<sup>12</sup>

### **“I do this for my children...”**

*Ambulantes* are aware of the prevailing negative attitudes toward prostitution in Oaxaca, and said that in many instances this work has caused conflict with their relatives. For example, Nanci recalled that her mother “threw [me] out of the house” when she returned home during a family illness. She expressed her sentiments saying, “It doesn’t matter if they talk to me or not. I say, ‘I don’t live for you. I work [at this] so my children can get ahead. Not for you.’” Yet she admitted that this experience, reminiscent of many arguments she’s had with relatives through the years, was painful. In other cases, family members may be more concerned than angry about the women’s conduct. Ravi, a divorcee in her 20s, described a situation of this type. She said that her brother was furious when he learned that she worked as an *ambulante* and criticized her. She snapped in response, “Who’s going to feed my children? You? My ex-husband? I don’t have many options.” She said that her brother stopped criticizing her and instead suggested that she should protect herself by using condoms.

Husbands and lovers react to the women’s activities in different ways. Mari’s husband has known that she prostitutes for over 25 years and accepts her activities. They often have heated arguments, but she insists that these are caused by family crises or their children’s problems, and are not related to her work as a prostitute. Most other women, as mentioned earlier, did not sustain long-term relationships with men, in part because they were unwilling to tolerate physical abuse or insults that resulted from a partner’s feelings about this job.

The women’s attitudes toward the criticism they face from family or neighbors are best summed up in Toni’s words regarding her siblings’ criticisms of her lifestyle:

It would be different if I lived in a two-story house and had a lot of money to buy nice clothes or jewelry. Then people would be right to question why I have sex with strange men. But in reality, I live in a shack [a one-room tin dwelling]. We don’t have a refrigerator. We don’t have a stove. So if I want my daughters to get ahead, I have to prostitute.

The notion that women choose to prostitute to help their children emerged consistently in these interviews. Each mother said she worked at prostitution “out of necessity” or “for my children,” and insisted that earnings from jobs other than prostitution were too low (i.e., at or below the minimum wage) to provide for basic needs such as food, shelter (most commonly in a rented room or house with tin walls slowly constructed one room at a time), clothing, health care, or babysitters. In our first interview, Carla (a single mother of four children in her early 40s) began crying when she mentioned needing to spend 200 pesos on eyeglasses for her daughter. She said, “I just don’t have it.” For women struggling to make ends meet, receiving milk and juice distributed free of charge by the State System for the Full Development of the Family (Desarrollo Integral de la Familia, or DIF) is a benefit of complying with CACETS’ regulations and attending parenting classes sponsored by the DIF at the CACETS clinic.

Although all the mothers told me emphatically that they prostituted for their children's welfare, not all are equally candid with their children about their activities. As Castillo (1998), among others describes, Mexican mothers may tell their children that they work as waitresses, maids, or cooks during the day; each spoke of her concerns that her children would find out before she was ready to tell them. Nanci, who told her family emphatically that it was "none of their business" if she prostitutes is unable to tell her young children what she does, and has lied for years that she is a waitress. She said she knows that they'll learn the truth one day because "people here love to gossip," but said she'll explain to them when they're old enough to understand that she did this to support them. But some mothers, like Mari (whose husband knew of her prostitution when they married), have never hidden their activities from their children because, as Mari says, "I don't want my daughters to make the same mistakes."

Without exception, the mothers expressed a desire to give their children better lives or greater chances than they had when younger. Consequently, they place a high priority on financing their children's education. Due to expectations that their children will support them later, many mothers consider investing in a child's future a way of investing for themselves. For example, Mari said that after financing most of her son's pre-university and university studies by working "down there" (her euphemism for Calle Iguana), she expects that he will care for her as she ages. However, as I discuss below, she has a contingency plan because she says, "Ultimately, he will do what he wants to. If he doesn't want to care of me, what can I do? He wants to go to the United States. Can I stop him?" Other women say that they financed their children's education for entirely altruistic reasons. For example, Nanci, the mother of a 14-year-old son, stated, "I believe that education is the best legacy we can give our children." Similarly, Ramona (a 43-year-old mother of two teenage daughters) encourages them to remain in school "so that they don't wind up like [me]." Mother of three, Teresa tells her children "to take advantage of the opportunity to study and make something of themselves."

### **Leaving this Lifestyle and Alternate Job Options**

As stressful as the life of a streetwalker can be at times, many women remained at this job for years, and even decades. Just as economic factors were the most common reasons given for entering into the lifestyle, they were also the most common reasons given for continuing to prostitute. These women consistently said that lack of formal education limited chances of finding jobs generating comparable earnings. For example, Toni (discussed above, p. 13) spoke of a time when she took a break from prostituting so that her body might rest. As she had not completed primary school, Toni found that the only jobs she could get were as a cleaner. For two years she worked as a janitor for the government, taking any additional private cleaning jobs she could get. Her earnings were minimal but sufficient to rent a small room for herself and her daughters while they were at primary school. However, when her eldest daughter entered junior high school, Toni returned to prostituting in order to pay the costs (which included tuition, registration, books, and a uniform, in addition to incidental costs of transportation, supplies, and foods).

Lack of marketable skills was a major concern when *ambulantes* spoke about what they would do when they stopped prostituting. Because of their skill levels, the three jobs that the women suggested as alternatives were all in the informal sector: janitor and cleaning, *lavandera* (laundress), and vending. Each woman dismissed the possibility of supporting herself as a janitor because the salaries were too low. Similarly, they also rejected the possibility of working as *sirvientas* (domestic servants) for what they considered "obvious reasons." Most middle income

and elite households that hire *sirvientas* do so on a full-time, live-in basis. Although there are exceptions where families hire a *sirvienta* with a dependent child, more frequently they are reluctant to provide room and board to the *sirvienta*'s child. Women who employ domestic servants say that they do not want to pay the higher salaries that older women with dependents ask for (Howell 2000). The *ambulantes* said not only do household jobs pay too little, but they would also never get jobs from anyone who knows that they prostitute because (I paraphrase a number of women here), "housewives don't hire prostitutes to take care of their kids or to be around their husbands." Toni's unsuccessful attempts to support herself and her two children by working two shifts as a janitor convinced her as well as other women who know her that this is not a viable alternative to prostituting.

Similarly, all of the *ambulantes* rejected the possibility of working as a *lavandera*, a job that remains in demand because of the limited number of washing machines owned by Oaxacan families. Although a *lavandera* may earn up to 100 pesos per day, this job is arguably the most physically demanding in Oaxaca. The women described how *lavanderas* have to scrub clothing for hours in cold water, often suffering from colds, pneumonia, and arthritis because they must start in early morning (when it is usually chilly in Oaxaca City regardless of the season). A few of the prostitutes suggested that they would work at this if they stopped generating any income at all through prostitution, but all stressed that they would prefer not to. To justify her reasons for not working as a *lavandera*, Concha stated emphatically that she would need to work a double shift to support her children, a feat, she said, that "no one could possibly do and then do her own laundry as well!" Maria, who claimed to have become a prostitute years before when she was unable to support her family as a *lavandera* said, "Those women work very hard and don't earn very much."

Most women felt that they would continue to work until "more or less 50" (Marta, mother of four in her 30s), and most planned to work as food and durable items' vendors later in life. They spoke of being less attractive to clients after age 50 and anticipated a decline in their earnings. However, five of the 24 women continued working beyond the age of 50. The eldest of these women, 62-year-old Elena, is called *pobrecita* (the poor thing) by the women who see her at the clinic. This woman, who looked much older than her years, said that she now makes more money vending plastic goods as she waits for customers than she does from clients. In 1998, she asked between 5 and 10 pesos per trick, but said that generally she would accept 3 pesos for bus fare if she hadn't earned enough to get home by the late afternoon. All of the other *ambulantes* chided Elena's grown children (two sons who work as farmers) for not caring for her.

In the absence of a state sponsored public support system for the aging or unemployed, mothers hoped and expected their children would provide for them (especially when the mothers paid for the children to study). However, most stated realistically that it is a child's prerogative to help a parent and not something one can take for granted. Some of these women expressed a desire to open a small business such as a taco stand or *miscelania* (general-purpose store) after they stopped prostituting. Yet only Mari (in her mid-50s) has actually begun saving for her "retirement." She used her savings to add an addition to her home (in a *colonia popular* of Oaxaca City) with the hopes of opening a store. When she could not afford to purchase stock for the store, she began renting the space to a *tortilleria* (where tortillas are produced by machine). Although she was happy for this added income (500 pesos/month, less than twice the minimum monthly wage in 1998), she cannot afford to "retire" on this income. In words that echo those I

heard from nearly all women contacted, she said the day she can stop prostituting “will not come soon enough.”

## **Economic Development in Mexico and Oaxaca**

The struggles for survival discussed above came after implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in January 1994, and are representative in many ways of the types of survival strategies reported for both men, and especially women, heading households during the “rapid, intense, albeit uneven process of economic transformations” since 1940 (Chant 1991:31). The economic growth promised in this treaty brought hopes for the type of prosperity that occurred during Mexico’s economic “miracle” of the 1970s (spurred by oil production which contributed to growth of over 6%) (Hellman 1995:1). Rapid petroleum-driven growth subsequently gave way to the “lost decade” of the 1980s and an economic crisis triggered by a decline in global oil prices and characterized by inflation rates of over 100% in some years, unemployment and underemployment, and a staggering international debt that reached \$100 billion in 1986 (Hellman 1995:9). During the 1980s, the governing neoliberal Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI), under pressure from the International Monetary Fund, reduced subsidies on food staples – notably tortillas and beans – exacerbating the daily survival struggles of poor urban and rural households. Depressed economic conditions contributed to both increased migration to the United States (INEGI 2001) and the political unrest and changes of the 1990s. The Chiapas-based Zapatista rebellion coincided with the implementation of NAFTA in January 1994, and is one of many factors cited as contributing to the 2000 election of Partido Acción Nacional (National Action Party) candidate Vicente Fox after the PRI’s 70-plus year reign. Political experts agree that it is still too early to predict how the country will fare under Fox’s agenda, and all Oaxacans I have spoken with since 1992 have said simply that nothing has changed in their everyday lives as a consequence of political changes at the national level.

Currently, at least one in four (officially 27%) of Mexicans lives in poverty, and the economic struggles of millions of Mexicans in both rural and urban Mexico are well documented, particularly in the growing body of literature about women in working class and lower income households of urban areas (Benería and Roldán 1987; Chant 1991; Gonzalez de la Rocha 1994; Levine and Correa Sunderland 1993; Selby et al. 1990).<sup>13</sup> In some regions, women workers are the fastest growing segment of the labor force, particularly in the *maquiladora* based (export-oriented factories) Border Industrial Program on the US-Mexico border. Job growth in this industry rose from fewer than 150,000 in 1982 to over 1,000,000 in 1998 (Cockcroft 1998:169), and women comprise the majority of workers. Almost 4,000,000 Mexican women work in vending, and another 1.5 million are paid domestic workers (INEGI 2002b). Not only is the percentage of women in informal sector jobs higher than that of men (INEGI 2002b), but the earnings of women in all 10 occupations surveyed by the National Institute for Statistics, Geography and Computing (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía e Informática, or INEGI) is 2-40% that of men in the same job (INEGI 2002b:333).

The comparatively low income generated by women is particularly alarming given the number of Mexican households headed by women. At the national level, approximately 15% of nuclear households (defined by INEGI as containing at least one parent and his or her children) are headed solely by women (INEGI 2002b). Women-headed households are defined as those in which a woman lives without an adult male partner. Monthly household income levels in female-

headed households are lower than those classified as male-headed in both rural and urban areas. Income differentials based upon sex alone are difficult to determine in available statistics, which do not indicate if male household heads are sole heads of household, or if they are married to women also in the workforce. Women's participation in the labor force is dependent upon both marital status (women are twice as likely to work outside the home if they are single than if they are living with a husband or partner [Chant 1991:132]) and local conditions in the local labor force (Chant 1991:135). Oaxaca has the fifth highest number (15.8%) of women-headed households in the nation, and ranks fifth in the percentage of households (56.2%) where women generate income (INEGI 2002b). What is most surprising about these figures is that Oaxacan households – whether headed by men or women – rank at the bottom of national earnings charts, at less than two-thirds the national average (INEGI 2002b:272).

Katie Willis' (2000) analysis of the different structure and resources of middle- and lower-income households in Oaxaca is one of few to discuss this population. Willis describes the women heading middle-income households (which she defines as those with a house of good quality and a car, and the ability to travel abroad, hire domestic servants, and send children to private schools) as having higher levels of education than women in lower-income households. She observes that, additionally, the middle-income households tend to be extended rather than nuclear, offering the potential for a larger number of workers to contribute to the household budget. Because children in these households have had opportunities to complete high levels of schooling, they tend to work in the formal labor sector. These households tend to be well connected in the local community, with a social network comprised of extended family members (aunts, uncles, grandparents) who provide moral and financial assistance in a crisis.

In contrast, Willis describes women heading lower-income households as more likely to have left primary school before finishing (if they studied at all), to be the sole support of their dependent children, and as having to perform household chores themselves rather than hiring a *sirvienta* to do so. Household structure is typically nuclear (i.e., just the mother and her dependent children) and the urban social network is not extensive for those women who are cityward migrants. She observes that the only characteristic these women share is the desire to educate all of their children to the highest level the child desires. This finding from Willis' work has bearing on the data collected among the *ambulantes* in terms of the expectations that women of different social classes have for their children. In middle-income and elite households, obtaining formal education is a way for children to replicate their parents' own educational and work achievements. In contrast, mothers in the lower-income group provide their children with higher levels of education than they themselves completed with the expectation that their children will experience some degree of social and occupational mobility (Sorokin 1954). These mothers do not want their children's employment options to be restricted to the service sector, the largest sector of Oaxaca's economy (INEGI 2002a). These women speak of lacking an urban social network upon which to rely. Relatives of cityward migrants typically remained in their villages of origin or were, in some cases, working in the United States. Lack of female relatives nearby was particularly difficult for mothers of small children, who could not rely on relatives to help them without charge.

Lacking the industrialization of northern and central Mexico, economic development has been focused on a tourism industry that promotes the city's colonial ambience, surrounding archaeological ruins, and the ethnic diversity of the state's communities. Among the 675,000 visitors to Oaxaca City in 2000, national tourists outnumbered international visitors by a ratio of more than 3:1 during the four peak tourist seasons: the Guelaguetza folkdance festival in late

July; Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) in early November; Christmas; and Semana Santa (Holy Week) in the spring. In Puerto Vallarta and other Mexican resorts, tourism has created a number of jobs for Oaxacan women (Chant 1992). There are desirable formal sector jobs in restaurants and hotels for both skilled and unskilled workers (Selby et al. 1990). The majority of these jobs pay less than twice the minimum wage, although a limited number of professional and managerial jobs (such as hotel or restaurant manager) may pay more than five times the minimum wage (INEGI 2002a). Hotels and restaurants are managed by individuals with university degrees or members of the owners' families.

Without the formal training requisite for the higher paying, formal sector jobs, or the social contacts that would allow them to work in "good jobs" through nepotism, *ambulantes* have limited direct contact with the tourism industry, though it is possible that their children aspire to work in it. Male friends from a number of countries who know of my research interests have passed along to me the business cards announcing strip clubs, escort services, and brothels that they have received as they sat in restaurants or bars in the absence of women; none has reported being approached by an *ambulante* as he walked down Oaxaca's streets. No *ambulante* I have spoken with said that she had been solicited on the street by a foreign tourist (though hundreds walk through the area for which permits are issued during high tourist seasons), and I have never seen any foreign tourists stop to engage these women. Moreover, Oaxaca does not appear in the list of cities on Internet sites where foreign men write in graphic detail about their involvement with women prostitutes in Mexico's border cities and other tourist destinations in Mexico, suggesting that tourists who come to Oaxaca for a "cultural" experience do not include sex tourism as part of their activities.<sup>14</sup>

However, health department personnel stated that the number of women working as streetwalkers without permits swells during high tourist seasons. The women I spoke with and observed working throughout the year had actually complained that they lost business during local holidays that attract out-of-town and international tourists. On the one hand, their local customers are more likely to spend time at home with their families, or will travel to other parts of Mexico to visit relatives during their vacations. They do not benefit from an influx of international tourists because foreign tourists are drawn to Oaxaca for ethnic rather than sex tourism. Mari has consistently expressed little interest in the tourism industry, and her few comments about tourists have tended to be negative. She once commented as we watched tourists enter the "Artists' Market" located a few blocks from where she awaits clients, "I used to buy a *clayuda* (a large corn tortilla typically covered in beans, tomatoes and cheese) for less than a peso, but since we became the 'tourists' Oaxaca,' it costs me 5 pesos. How many of those can I buy?" Higgins and Coen (2000) report similar comments from Oaxaqueños who describe themselves as *gente humilde* (poor people), and feel they must work harder to support their families in light of what they consider to be artificially high, tourism driven costs.<sup>15</sup>

## Concluding Comments

The lives of the women whose stories are discussed here are fraught with concerns about getting by financially in a city where costs of living are higher than in many other parts of Mexico (Selby et al. 1990) and salaries are lower than the national average. On the one hand, Oaxacan women's involvement in prostitution can be understood, as Jaggar (1996) suggests, within the context of a sexually stratified marketplace, where prostitution provides a higher salary than other jobs available to women with little or no schooling. On the other hand, it is impossible to provide a

definite reason to explain why individual women decide to prostitute (Renaud 1997; O'Connell Davidson 1998). However, it is both possible and imperative to draw some conclusions about the women's own explanations for their participation in a lifestyle that most Oaxaqueños can neither begin to understand nor to condone.

Foremost, these women insist that their primary motivation for prostituting is economic rather than deviant. They patently reject suggestions that they enjoy prostituting, and emphatically state that they would work at different jobs if these generated the same income as prostitution. Lacking the opportunity for employment in industry, they point to the meager salaries earned by women working as maids and cooks, whose skill levels are comparable to their own and whose wages are at or below poverty levels. They attribute their circumstances to a lack of formal education and schooling, the same widespread precursor to prostitution that Farley and Kelly (2000:41) identify and that Lamas (1996) has identified in Mexico. Much as O'Connell Davidson (1998) observed in her cross-cultural analysis, the *ambulantes* have decided that, at least for the time being, prostituting is "the best of a bad bunch of options" for women faced with "a stark 'choice' between abject poverty or prostitution" (ibid:3). In this respect, the findings from this study indicate an *agency* that parallels Renaud's (1997) findings among Senegalese prostitutes, who are criticized by their neighbors for "choos[ing] prostitution out of 'vice,' they are corrupt and sinful and can never be 'converted.' They insist that women could find another source of income – other women in the same situation have – while the reality is that these women tried and could not."

At the same time, prostitution does afford some women a degree of *libertad* (freedom) as Lamas (1996) reports elsewhere in Mexico. They speak of ways they are able to maintain control over their work and private lives. They describe rejecting clients whom they consider to be risks to their safety, determining their working schedule, negotiating their earnings, and even turning down the opportunity to generate higher income by performing activities (such as anal or oral sex) if they find them to be immoral, unsafe, or unclean.<sup>16</sup> In their private lives, many report ending relationships with men whom they found abusive, establishing new relationships if these are to their benefit, and maintaining positive and supporting relationships with their children.

However, despite the independence they demonstrate in these areas, the women consistently indicate their displeasure with prostitution in a number of ways. They frequently describe their lives as fraught with the potential for violence and disease, and speak of the daily struggle for economic solvency. In this sense, prostituting is for these women a type of "obliging need" similar to that which Cook and Binford (1990:58) report among rural Oaxacan artisans whose "work is not so much a matter of free, individual choice as it is of material need and, ultimately, of survival." Perhaps most telling, the mothers are adamant that they want a better future for their children, and to that end place a high priority on their children's education, justifying their work at a job considered to be the moral and social antithesis of the idealized female role of chaste wife and mother, as a sacrifice they make so they may provide their children with a means to *defenderse* (in this sense, to support themselves) in the future.

The reality that women without children, or mothers with grown children, work as prostitutes is a factor that contributes to the prevailing attitude that women who prostitute are *mujeres malas*, who prostitute for pleasure. Oaxaqueños who are not involved in prostitution cite numerous examples of mothers – in some cases their own – who supported children by working multiple jobs if needed to make ends meet rather than prostituting themselves. This form of "victim

blaming,” that identifies prostitutes’ loose morals as the root of the “prostitution problem,” without challenging structural inequalities in the labor market, contributes to the ongoing stigma associated with prostitution.

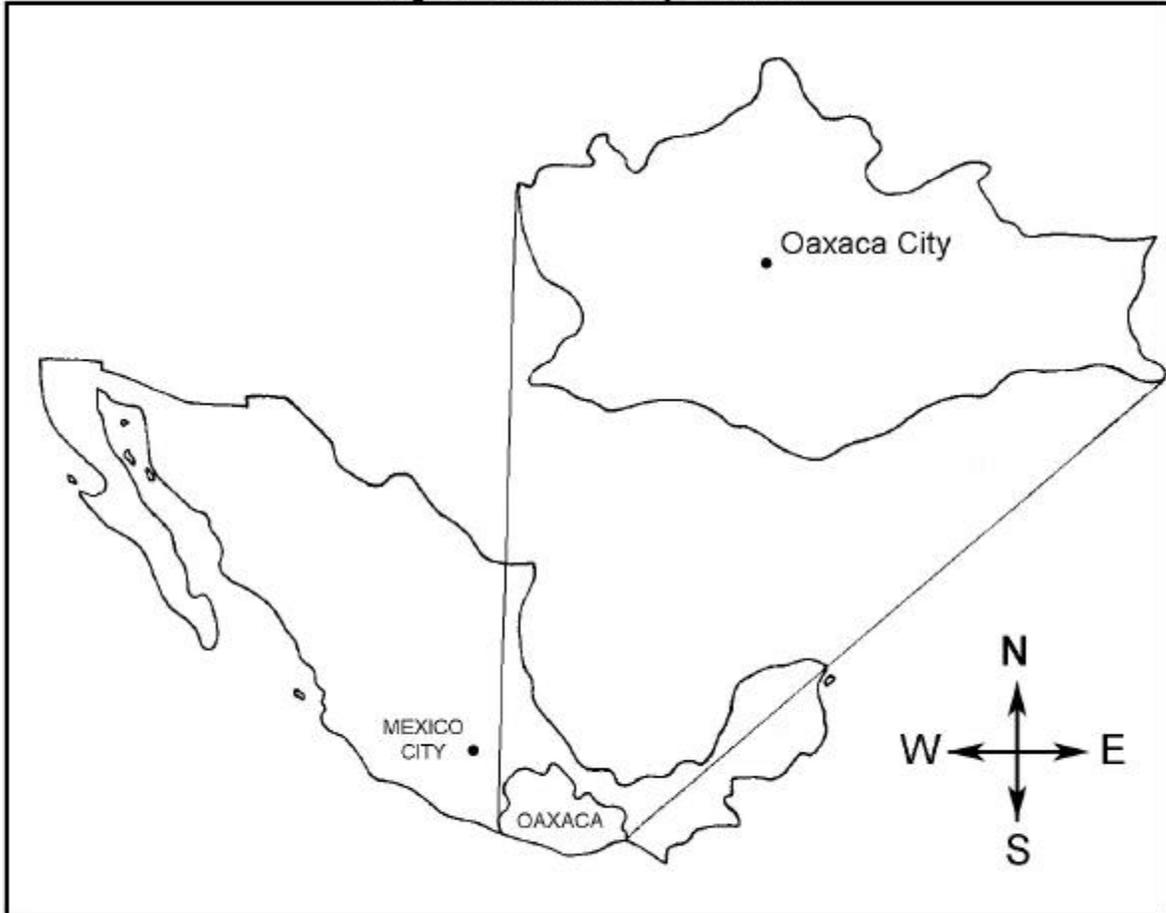
Oaxaca City’s municipal government is caught in a bind in their efforts to regulate and control prostitution. They expressly treat the women with dignity, and provide them with affordable health care and food subsidies for dependents, and have proposed programs to help these women and their children further their studies (Mayoral Figueroa 1996). By extension, these measures protect society as well by preventing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. By sanctioning and punishing women (and transvestites) who are “unclean” or “unhealthy,” they protect clients and clients’ sexual partners. Moreover, the government responded to community demands to make prostitution less visible by working on developing a *zona rosa* outside of downtown Oaxaca City. In this sense, in contrast to governments in other regions (Barry 1995), state and local governments in Oaxaca have never promoted sex tourism as a form of economic development. Rather, the tourism industry emphasizes cultural heritage and the arts, and the women discussed here have little, if any, contact with tourists. Instead, the government’s position toward prostitution appears to be a continuation of European attitudes introduced earlier, which views prostitution as a “necessary evil” that provides sexual outlets for adult men and youth, at the same time that it provides needed jobs for unskilled women who choose to enter this line of work. The fact that the commodification of women’s sexual labor provides higher paid alternatives for unskilled women than those stemming from the commodification of women’s household labor, reinforces the importance of increasing gender equity in the school system and ultimately the labor force.

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**Figure 1**

Figure 1 Oaxaca City Location



## Endnotes

1. Boserup's research has been criticized elsewhere for, among other things, presenting modernization in a positive light, and for discussing women as a monolithic category without consideration of ways that socioeconomic status, racial and ethnic origins, and religious affiliation contribute to individual women's participation in the development process. Tiano (2000) provides a succinct overview and discussion of these criticisms and of the growth of women (and later gender) and development studies.
2. The national illiteracy rate dropped from approximately 30% in 1970 to 10% in 2000. The number of Mexican teens and adults studying beyond secondary school rose from less than 8% in 1970 to more than 26% in 2000. Advances at the national level mask the variable gains for certain populations. As a rule, urban rates of literacy and schooling are higher than in rural areas, central and northern states have higher achievement rates than those in the south, and, in all cases, rates for adult men are higher than those for women in the same communities (INEGI 2002b).
3. As is true in Mexico, this policy was instituted during the Porfiriato (Overmyer Velázquez 2000). At that time, the city government stipulated the location of brothels and women who worked independently.
4. Rural residents support themselves predominantly through subsistence agriculture and handicraft production, and increasingly engage in international migration (Stephen 1991; Wood 2000) and migration to more industrialized regions of Mexico. The rural population consists of 16 distinct indigenous populations in addition to the majority *mestizo* (Spanish speaking) population. The standard of living in rural areas consistently ranks among the lowest in Mexico.
5. Although graduates of normal schools began earning a baccalaureate degree (*licenciatura*) in the early 1990s, this career is still considered by many to be a "carrera corta" because individuals who began teaching prior to the change in certification are not required to further their studies to this level. Additionally, a shortage of teachers in rural areas means that individuals begin teaching at reduced salaries, without provisional certification, and never complete their baccalaureate studies.
6. The exchange rate for the peso in US dollars has increased and was at 7.5 pesos=\$1 US in June 1996 and at 9.75 pesos=\$1 US in June 2002. The inflation has fluctuated dramatically during this period, between 20 and 40% during the late 1990s, and dropping less than 10% (summer 2002). Analysis of the effects of these fluctuations on buying power is beyond the scope of this discussion.
7. Though in the 1990s, the city government evaluated the possibility of establishing a "red" or "tolerance" zone outside the city limits in their *Zona de Tolerancia 2000* plan, in 2001 these plans are no longer a burning issue (Mayoral Figueroa 1996; Noticias 2001).
8. Prostitution in Oaxaca is not formally unionized. There are formal unions in other Mexican cities such Tijuana and Mexico City (Lamas 1996).
9. Although rape is widely reported as an antecedent to prostitution and a threat to sex workers (Farley and Kelly 2000), only Leti spoke of being assaulted.
10. A woman who knows employees or owners at a cantina can easily get a job as a *fichera*, who is paid to drink beer with a man and can choose to have sex for money if she so desires. Those without contacts find a job by checking windows for signs that say, "Waitress with permit wanted."
11. Castillo, Rangel Gómez, and Delgado (1999) report that the majority of the prostitutes they contacted in Tijuana would not have sex without a condom due to concerns about personal safety. They note that, due to consistent medical exams, a prostitute knows she is disease free, but she has no way of knowing if her client has a disease.
12. *Ficheras* I spoke with described situations where customers would grope them as they sat at a table drinking beer or dancing. Once a woman in her early 40s explained that she has learned to avoid these situations by wearing long skirts that make it difficult for a man to get his hands between her knees. She said that young girls

have not yet learned this trick, and used her hands to demonstrate ways that she will move a man's hands from her breasts or thighs in a manner that he might find "teasing" rather than threatening.

13. Historian Dan LaBotz (*The Southern Border* 2002) reports that real income has by some estimates dropped more than 80% in the past 15 years. He cites a report by the Center of Multidisciplinary Analysis of the Economic Faculty at the National Autonomous University of Mexico to argue that purchasing power has dropped over 10% in 2001, and the minimum wage purchases 20% of the items it purchased 15 years ago. Julio Botvinik of the Colegio de Mexico (College of Mexico) estimates that a worker needs to earn at least seven times the minimum wage to purchase basic necessities (cf. *The Southern Border* 2002).

14. Two sites with lists of female prostitution in Mexican cities are located at <http://www.smutland.com/guest/prostitution/mexico.html> and <http://worldsexguid.org/whatsnew.html>. There are often references to Oaxaca's gay nightlife on personal Web pages and in some chat rooms, but I have not seen a reference to purchasing a male prostitute in these communications.

15. Higgins and Coen (2000:64) quote a working class Oaxacan woman's thoughts on tourism:  
"The current economic situation is very bad – wages are low and prices are high. The rich of this town do not invest in industry because they make their money from tourism. They pay very low wages to their workers and prices are very high in Oaxaca, so it is hard on such workers. These rich people do not understand that they are screwing the hen that lays their golden eggs. The situation of low wages and high prices encourages people to rob the rich tourists, which in turn scares away the tourists, making things worse for everyone."

16. After rejecting a potential client's offer that she perform oral sex in exchange for a sum twice what she normally earned per trick, Mari said to me, "How could I go home and kiss my son after [that]? Dirty."

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