

Sœurs de Bon Pasteur : Prostitution : A violence against women

Violence against women is defined well in Senegal. It has been studied in a number of times by some Private Sector. In the article « Les Violences Faites aux Femmes Reprimées au Sénégal ¹ » published last 1998 it mentioned clearly the different types of violence suffered by women. One of these violence is the economic and financial violence. The purpose of this report is to stress that “Prostitution” should be categorised as kind of violence against women.

I would like to link this kind of violence as I share my personal experience while accompanying some women who are victims of prostitution. Economic and financial violence cannot be separated with the violence caused by prostitution.

While in Dakar, my first involvement with the concerns of this country was with the English speaking refugees. It was in this work that I became aware that prostitution is rampant and alarming here in Senegal. I accompanied three Liberian women who were forced into prostitution. They were economically deprived. They got themselves into prostitution as the fastest way to earn for a living.

Then I was transferred to Mbour, a two hour drive from Dakar. Mbour is a tourist place. It has many beach houses, hotels and night bars. It has been known that prostitution flourished for so many years in this city. We Good Shepherd Sisters tried to do some intervention with regards to this concern. Last 2000 one of our sister linked up with the local health centre where the sex worker asked and renewed their health cards. Our initial intervention was not really that strong. Then last November 2004 I continued our presence in that local health centre. I met the women who renewed their health cards through the supervision of the social worker and the midwife. By listening to their stories I realized that majority of these women are forced into this kind of work.

REASONS AND CAUSES : As defined by ENDA² and linking it to what I discovered :

One of the causes is the basic needs. Majority of these young women came from the rural areas that often leave their villages with hopes in their hearts to look for a greener pasture in the city. They need to satisfy their needs. In many cases, the parents pushed their daughters to engage in this work to help support their daily needs. Often the young prostitutes are also orphans. On the other hand, the widows and women who are separated from their husbands engaged in this work to support their children: for food, shelter and education. Senegal has a Family Code that indicates the husband as head of the family thus, he has the obligation of providing the basic needs of the family. Unfortunately, as the family broke up the husband ignored, abandoned the family and the woman took all the responsibilities. This is where I link prostitution and economic violence as one. With the 31 women I met and talked (from November 2004–February 2005), their cases are almost the same.

In Mbour, majority of the women who work in this domain are strangers. Meaning they came from other neighbouring places and countries. There is a popular practice here in Senegal « a sex worker finds clients not in ones own back yard ».

ENDA categorized the sex worker into two types. Those who are authorized by the law and those who are illegal or hidden³. Authorized by law : In cases that a certain sex

¹ CIJ :RADI, Violences Faites Aux Femmes :L’Etat Du Droit Au Sénégal, (July 1998), p.101.

² Diallo, Hawa, La Prostitution a Dakar Telle Qu’elle est Vecue et Telle Qu’elle est Réglementé, ENDA « Environnement et développement du tiers-monde, version provisoire (Novembre 1990), p. 2.

worker is caught by the authority. The sex worker must show her health card. If it is updated she only has to pay 3000 cfa (4.5 Euro) and she will be refrained from going to prison. If she has no card or if it is not updated, the authority will send her to prison. When I discussed this matter to a police officer, he explained that prostitution in Senegal is not legal but tolerated. What is the difference anyway? The hidden types are those who are not visiting the health centre and do not have a health card at all.

ENDA continues: In Senegal there are “occasional” or “circumstantial” sex worker⁴. As mentioned earlier those single mothers, the divorced, widows and students. There are also those called “seasonal”, in a way that during the drought period they will leave their villages and go to the big cities and work in this domain while waiting for the rainy season. There are also those really “professional”. They are those who exclusively sell their bodies as commodities and have permanent places in doing the act. So to say their lives revolve around it.

Laziness, difficulties in finding a job, lack of family education (parents and children) are other contributing factors.

STEPS THAT WERE MADE:

As mentioned above our community initiated some actions in responding to this kind of violence. As I continue the task these are the things that have been done:

1. I continue our presence in the local health centre (PIME). That is every Tuesday and Thursday, from 10 am to 1 pm. I met the sex workers referred to me by the social worker and midwife. Since there is no place given to us for the meeting, I met them under the tree. In general, the initial meeting is so informal. It is not also obligatory for the women, those who are only interested.
2. After establishing friendship I asked permission from those women if I could visit their places. I accompanied those women who are free and willing enough to be accompanied.
3. In Mbour we do not have funds allocated for the immediate needs of the sex worker such as: medicine if they are sick. I linked it up with PAEDAC⁵. PAEDAC, is a counselling centre founded by one of our sister in cooperation with St. Marthe Parish last 2002. It is a centre who tried responding urgent cases such as listening/counselling, medical assistance, etcetera.
4. As the work progressed, we initiated giving small-scale projects to at least 4 women. Before we handed them the money worth 25,000 cfa (38.10 euro) we gathered them and gave them conscientization session with regards to the health risk of prostitution and other consequences of such violence.
5. We established contact with the authorities and explained our plan in going to the night bars. The parish priest was also informed.
6. As these four women started their micro projects, we continued visiting them.

³ Ibid, p.24.

⁴ Ibid, p.25-26.

⁵ Point d'Accueil d'Ecoute et d'Accompagnement

DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED:

1. Language barriers: majority of these women speak wolof (local dialect). And I speak little wolof.
2. With regards to one on one accompaniment I tried stressing the “dignity of a human being”. Since most of them are Muslims, value formation is difficult. According to some retired sex worker prostitution is a kind of “from generation to generation” mentality.
3. In many cases, it is hard to have a thorough follow-up since majority of these women are strangers. They moved from one place to another.
4. A lot of older women (late thirties to mid forties) wanted to move out from this work but there is no enough alternative.
5. With regards to the 4 women who initially received the micro-project, the amount was not enough. Once they got sick or one of the family members got ill, their only choice is to go back to work.

As we reflect in the interventions that are being done and as the apostolic year is about to start the following are our action plan:

- >Conscientization: With the help of the 3 women (who received the micro-project), we will continue the awareness program. We will try to penetrate the villages, quarters, schools thus re-educating the family is necessary.
- >The alternative projects for those women who wished to leave will not be individual but in a group of 2 or more.
- >Collaboration with other NGO's such as ENDA. Continue collaborating with the local health centres.
- >Educate local church people about Prostitution as other type of violence against women. Encourage them to do their part in combating this phenomenon.
- >Go down to the night bars.
- >Search for funds in mobilising the action plans and for actualising the micro- projects.

Conclusion: As I compared notes with the NGO's, women's experiences and my actual experience, I realised that fighting against prostitution is very difficult. Talking about prostitution here in Senegal is still a taboo both in society and church. It is not considered yet as violence against women. The influence of the local mentality is so high that it covered up the realities of this phenomenon. Despite those difficulties mentioned we are hoping that prostitution will soon be categorised as violence against women. We need to unite our forces, individuals and groups alike.

We hope that this report will help in categorising clearly “prostitution” as violence against women. Prostitution needs to be eradicated as it has a devastating effect of woman's sense of self, self-regard, and all aspects of woman's life. Finally, prostitution must be addressed as its root.

Submitted by:

Sr. Maria Juanita Nenet Reños Daño, rbp
SOEURS DU BON PASTEUR
B.P. 940,
1500 MBOUR, SENEGAL, WEST AFRICA
Email: nenetrgs@yahoo.com

