

# WOMEN IN STREET PROSTITUTION: COMMUNICATION AND NEGOTIATION TECHNIQUES\*

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## Introduction

Interaction between men and women inevitably involves *asymmetrical relations of power* (emphasis supplied). If this is taken as a "social fact" ... then any face to face encounter between the sexes should serve as a good starting place for investigating power and gender.

(Alexandra Todd 1988, Ch 1:19)

Can someone embedded in an exploitative or in an asymmetrical relation possess power? Can an oppressed person negotiate?

This study probes into the life situation of women in street prostitution or streetwalkers, as they are sometimes called, and how they interact with customers, pimps, hotel managers, police officers, live-in partners, NGO staff, and fellow streetwalkers. The study also seeks to identify the streetwalkers' mode of negotiation towards better treatment and higher pay in the practice of their profession, thereby, minimizing the advantages of what is otherwise iniquitous relationship.

The study specifically inquires into how communication in street prostitution contributes to the exploitation of women on one hand, and, how within its system women are able to negotiate for

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their own end, on the other. What are the conditions under which communication becomes either oppressive or empowering?

### The Context of the Negotiation

The researcher interviewed and observed some streetwalkers in Cabao district in Quezon City known for sex trade. Most streetwalkers who were interviewed admitted they were surprised to find themselves into such profession. Majority of those studied went through hard labor and/or dehumanizing conditions at the workplace before resorting to street prostitution. Those earlier employed as household helpers experienced maltreatment; some, to the extent of being raped. Those who were employed as sales ladies had to withstand long hours of extreme hard work to earn an income. But despite all the sacrifices, the pay from their work never seemed enough to compensate for their needs and the needs of their respective families.

Streetwalking in Cubao begins at around seven in the evening and ends at about three to four in the following morning. The entire streetwalking time is spent by women in the following manner: 'tambay-tambay' while attracting customers, haggling with prospective clients or pimps, or just lazing around with fellow streetwalkers.

With P500 rate per customer, the women entertain an average of three customers a night. Those who want to earn more double their labor by accommodating as many as five to six customers in a single night.

The women are aware of the risks involved in their job. Unfortunately, they claim they have no other job opportunities

outside of streetwalking. Their poor background is perceived to militate against their employment competitiveness.

### **A. The Social Location of Women Streetwalkers**

A composite profile of the research participants indicates that the majority of the women studied are provincianas. They come from rural communities of the three major island formations—Luzon (2), Visayas (5), and Mindanao (6).

Almost all of these women belong to poor families. Only two out of thirteen women respondents are able to reach college. The rest are simply elementary and high school graduates. With a desire to improve their economic conditions, they were easily egged on by friends to leave the barrio and enter the flesh trade in the metropolis. They all left home without the knowledge of their parents.

The number of years spent by these women as streetwalkers range from three to seven years. Three of the respondents had earlier decided to quit streetlife even before this researcher could conduct an interview with them.

All of the women studied experienced consensual relationships (i.e. live-in arrangements) with their boyfriends. Alma and Leila<sup>1</sup> married years ago, but both are now separated from their partners. Aiza, another respondent, recently got married. The rest of the women, except for Leila, Star, and Juvy, were in cohabitation with their partners during the time of the research.

All of the women respondents bore at least one child in the course of their consensual relationships. Each of them later gave the child up for adoption, or left it with parents or relatives. Three of these children are now dead.

Most of these streetwalking mothers are Catholics. They believe in God to whom they seek material help. They also prac-

tice the act of praying. But they altogether shun churches, priests, and other sacerdotal and moral guardians who according to them are constant reminders of their guilt and sinfulness.

These women are all members of the SINAG Program (SINAG is an NGO which works with streetwalkers in Cubao).<sup>3</sup> They had been religiously attending meetings, seminars, and sharing sessions claiming that the program has helped them a lot, especially in coming to terms with their particular situation.

Furthermore, the program has made them aware of their rights as women and human beings. It gave them the courage and ability to negotiate with their customers and taught them to transact as regards fees, use of condom, time, as well as their preferences as to the nature of sexual encounters.

All of these women experienced being caught by the police for vagrancy. Four of them had been arrested twice or thrice, and had been brought to the Bicutan detention center. Two of those arrested underwent total hair shave—a punishment imposed upon three-time offenders.

## **B. The Physical Location of the Negotiation**

The place or location where streetwalkers operate is an important factor to understand how women can be empowered in their capability to negotiate. A designated area of locale usually present better business deals for this kind of profession.

The streetwalkers interviewed for this study ply their trade within the Cubao commercial complex in Quezon City. They are ubiquitous near crowded establishments such as restaurants and moviehouses. They are also visible in street corners.

They are regular fixtures in these areas except when they are earlier notified of impending police raids. What happens during actual raid is that they join the commuters riding buses along EDSA to escape police entrapment.

A typical streetwalker is usually found at the ground floor shopping malls. Upper floors have normally cooler air-conditioning systems unlike ground floors where shoppers are dime a dozen. But upper floors are more roomy and airy for the likes of Fatima, since potential customers also abound in these floors. Fatima is an example of a very aggressive streetwalker who works double time day and night. She starts her streetwalking life from nine in the evening up to about early morning. At night, she hangs around jeepney terminals and favorite eating places. She cat-naps at dawn and goes back to the malls at ten again in the morning.

Fatima and the rest of the women respondents, together with their clients frequent the motels and cheap hotels scattered around the Cubao area. In fact, some establishments have already considered them as *suki* (favored customers) because of their regularity in these places. Streetwalkers also enjoy certain benefits from motel managers such as free accommodations in the motels as a concession in exchange for bringing in more customers.

Some staff of motels at times, would even act as pimps and bodyguards for these women to ensure a steady flow of clients. There is also an “understanding” between the women and the pimps in case of emergencies. Once a streetwalker screams for help, the pimp/bodyguard comes to the rescue. The pimp then gets a tip from the streetwalker or a share of her earnings for that night.

These women prefer the motels in Cubao because of their proximity to places where customers abound. They can quickly return to the streets to pick-up more customers leaving behind a sleepy or sleeping client after every sexual encounter.

Another negotiation site for Cubao women streetwalkers is the detention center in Police Precinct 7. The researcher noted the deplorable jail environment where women arrested as va-

grants are detained. The cell is small measuring only about one-and-a-half by three square meters (1.5 x 3 sq.m.). In a rear corner of the cell is a doorless cubicle that openly displays a very unsanitary toilet and shower area for the inmates.

During the researcher's visit, around ten women were detained inside the cell. They were huddled around the cell's dry section near the cell bars. The mayora occupied the driest part of the cell.

There were neither chairs nor beds inside the cell – just the cold cement floor covered with some pieces of carton flaps. It was physically impossible for all the women inmates to lie down at the same time due to the limited space. They simply sat on the cold cement day in and day out. There were times when the women could not even squat and had to remain standing for hours on end. The more resourceful ones had constructed makeshift hammocks for their tired backs.

Adjacent to the women's cell is that of the men's. Only iron bars separated the two cells, allowing no privacy for the inmates of either cell. From each cell, the inmates could easily reach out to the other cell. They can even be privy to the conversations made by the fellow inmates with police officers and visitors.

The arrested women usually stay behind bars for about a week before somebody bails them out or until after the court would have decided on their vagrancy cases. The existence of a night court helps facilitate the resolution of the women's cases. The night judge would often slap a fine of P210 on the women for violation of the vagrancy law.

This, however, does not seem to deter the streetwalkers from their nightly activities. They would return to Cubao sooner or later after their arrests, a lot wiser thereafter and more conscious of the police.

Safer sex, better fees, the place for their tryst, and the type of sexual service are the usual subjects and objects of their negotiation with customers.

The streetwalker's fee for sexual services is usually based on the mode of sexual acts rather than on the length of time one services a client. As such, the streetwalker strives to complete the service quickly to be able to accommodate several customers, thereby, earning more in a single night.

A streetwalker's appearance such as youthful looks, beautiful face, and gorgeous frame enhances her ability to attract customers and negotiate for a higher fee. Included in the over-all physical attribute is her manner of dressing and how she handles herself before a customer. Accordingly, loud and fanciful clothes are unappealing to customers who prefer the "tempered and decent" look.

### Negotiation and its System of Communication

Streetwalkers' language involves verbal and non-verbal communication. As a sign, streetwalkers' use of vulgar and uncouth words betray their social origins and economic status in society. As symbolic speech, its vulgarity and lewdness (whether the verbal or non-verbal component) is a subversion of a male-dominated, elite-based, conservative Catholic community. Their system of communication invokes the desire of the oppressed and abused to be free and productive.

**1. Verbal.** This constitutes what linguists call parole or speech. Streetwalkers' everyday vocabulary is in itself an evolved language. Once transmitted, this becomes the worldview *of, by*

and *for* themselves as women street prostitutes. According to Dr. Kintanar, language articulates consciousness, reflects culture and affects socialization (Kintanar 1998). Semantics and/or language preferences shape one's perceptions and understanding of reality which directly make an impact on daily discourses and everyday life (Angeles 1996).

While women streetwalkers' *parole* or speech affirms their ability or power to effect communication, it is otherwise subsumed in the *la langue* (language as a system) of society which has been legitimized by patriarchal authority. Hence, all the demeaning labels that society assigns to women (those who use their body for financial gain), are disempowering. Wolfe says it further,

... so many terms for women have negative and sexual associations (and) reinforce the identification of women as sexual objects available to men (in Todd 1988: 202).

The *parole* or speech of Cubao streetwalkers in particular and Metro Manila streetwalkers in general, can be described as vulgar, crass, lewd, risqué. It is commonplace to hear such words as "pokpok" in their interface with fellow women, customers, or with anybody for that matter, including this researcher. They in fact refer to themselves in jest as *mga puta*. They have inventive ways to describe their scandalous activities through coded messages that ultimately give rise to a kind of jargon that women in this profession have been identified with. Gimmick means for instance, having sexual intercourse and getting paid for it. "Rumarampa" refers to going to the streets and showcasing their bodies as merchandise to customers.

But when these terms are used by "others" (those outside their circle) to refer to them, they react negatively. They feel slighted and degraded when their lingo is used against them. These terms acquire connotative meaning referring to them as



marginalized and second-class citizens of the community. In a study conducted by Abaya, streetwalkers have not yet been callous or immune to terms or references borne out of the streets. Abaya writes,

The *masahista* and GROs reject these degrading labels, arguing that “sex work” does not necessarily go with the work they do. The label *hostess* is acceptable to casa-based workers but not *puta* and *pokpok*.

Thus, the casa-based workers feel offended by the word, “puta,” especially when it is uttered in public. Yet, these women recognize that society call them by such appellations because of their own unruly (magaslaw) behavior, boisterousness, and appearance: i.e., displaying sexy clothes, blonde hair, and lots of cheap jewelry. (Abaya 1996: 3)

The act of coining words or inventing terms that make up streetwalkers’ jargon is a defensive mechanism, that in many ways, empower prostituted women who have already been defined and confined by society at the margins. A sex worker named Merly confirms this exercise of coining words such as “putatching,” “kepyas,” “pokpok,” “landi,” “puta,” to cushion the impact of the already indecent, despicable nature of their profession. Merly explains the reason behind creating new words to describe their kind, “Inuunahan na namin ang tao para naman di masyadong masakit.”<sup>4</sup>(We say it before people do so it work feel as bad if they say it.)

Worldwide, streetwalkers are generically referred to as prostitutes, whores and/or hookers. In the Philippines, American soldiers in the former US military bases described them as “little brown fucking machines.” These universal references to women of the flesh trade reinforce how language can generalize adjectival meanings of women. Susan Wolfe declares,

Feminists who have analyzed language have by and large subscribed to the Sapir-Whorf<sup>5</sup> hypothesis arguing that “it is

language which determines the limits of our world which constitutes our reality ...” (in Todd 1998: 201)

**2. Non-verbal.** Cubao streetwalkers seem not to typify the usual appearance of a “prostitute-in-the-waiting” who don skimpy or revealing clothes, with heavy make-up and attractive, colorful hairstyles. Respondents in this research were casually dressed, mostly in denim pants and t-shirts, with light make-up and without fancy hairstyle. They looked like ordinary young teenage girls who were just hanging around the streets. Some were even too comfortably dressed in loose shirts and “puruntung” or below-the-knee-shorts. This manner of dressing is intentional to camouflage their presence from the suspicious eyes of police officers who roam around searching for vagrants. But even without being too literal in their look as street prostitutes, they can easily be spotted because they are often seen in groups and their street behavior almost always betray who they really are.

The women wear a two-piece clothing ensemble which is either a skirt or a pair of pants that matches the blouse. They simply take off their pants. The blouse is kept on to protect or shield them from other forms of sexual attacks. Moreover, this two-piece clothing allows them to leave the motel room in haste to be able to hunt for more customers in a night.

What distinguishes the streetwalkers from other girls aside from hanging around in groups is in how they communicate to prospective customers using their eyes. Their eyes are usually hooked on good and wealthy-looking men. There is always that wink, a piercing look coupled with a smile that altogether send signals to clients also in the look for street prostitutes.

According to these women interviewed, they vigorously use their eyes especially at times when they cannot rely on pimps to seek out customers for them. Otherwise, with pimps aiding them,

they would normally be just sitting around street corners or entrances of shops and restaurants preoccupied with their own public conversations with fellow streetwalkers.

Drinking beer and smoking cigarettes are also part of non-verbal communication that send signals to would-be clients that they are out there looking for fun and adventure. This drinking and smoking behavior seem to contrast with the way they dress up. But this is why precisely veteran customers and even “bagito” or new and young clients could always easily identify them from the rest of the crowd. From the pool of street women in this study, May and Nelly are the ones who most of the time drink and smoke in public, inviting men who are out there in search of pleasure.

### The Market Transaction Model

Power according to the *market transaction model*, is associated with the utilization of the objects of negotiation, i.e. fee, condom and venue. Power can also be defined, as the probability of key players within a social relationship to carry out their own will despite resistance ... (Krippendorff 1989). Thus, when customers force themselves upon unprotected women, they exhibit power. But when women succeed in making customers wear condoms, the women too demonstrate the power to negotiate.

However, O'Brien<sup>6</sup> says that power is not only the ability of women to convince customers to wear condoms. Power emanating from the woman must presuppose a totality of relationship between her and her customer. This means that there should be mutual satisfaction, fairness, and willingness to give and take. No element of coercion or force should be used in the transaction.

The NGOs Kabalikat and ALAGAD in Davao and other related organizations support the view that negotiation and mutual benefit could be achieved in a commercial setting, including prostitution which is regarded as similar to any ordinary work. Hence, like any other ordinary worker, street prostitutes should be accorded protection from unfair labor practices, health risks, and other hazards.

The assertion that prostitution is also “work” has resulted from the campaign of some feminists to legalize prostitution. However, the Cubao streetwalkers, SINAG staff, and others who oppose this legalization move, explain that they do not want their children to grow up and resort to prostitution when the going gets rough. They have big dreams and aspirations for their children. Streetwalking mothers want their children out of prostitution and live a normal and dignified life.

Another view declares that streetwalkers-customer transaction is inherently oppressive. After all, this is about men exploiting women and therefore presumes an iniquitous relationship between the customers on one hand, and the women with their pimps, on the other. This view has probably more adherents especially among women who suffer different forms of oppression apart from prostitution.

But this study focuses on how women inspite of their submerged realities are able to effect power to a certain extent, and achieve short term objectives. Their ability to develop negotiation styles to attract customers and to minimize threats in the business is an indication that women know how to respond positively to otherwise permanent oppressive structures and systems in a male-dominated power-seeking society. They manage to resurface and sustain their positions in instances such as in their campaign of condom-use, their verbal and non-verbal communication, their utilization of space, and even in their inven-

tive language. All these signify an instinctive power to compete and survive in a hyper capital intensive economy.

Thus, what appears to emerge in the negotiation or relationship between a streetwalker and her customer is similar to a market transaction. The objective of the model is to sell – in this case, the body or various forms of sexual service. As in any other commercial transaction, there is haggling, deception, mutual satisfaction and appeal to the emotions. The flesh trade is a business and these are always expected in any business. The woman's body becomes the commodity and the objects of the negotiation/trade are fees, condom, venue, and sexual services. Customers are buyers in a market setting.

Ultimately, the market transaction model reduces the woman into a commodity. Once commodified, the woman becomes powerless unless she is able to create techniques to negotiate herself aggressively in a highly male-oriented and dominated market.

### **Negotiating with Pimps and Motel Managers**

#### **The Paternalistic-Maternalistic and Incentive Models**

##### **A. Negotiating with Pimps: The Paternalistic-Maternalistic Model**

Pimps are known for their “brokering” role between women streetwalkers and their customers. But ‘brokering’ is not all that pimps do for the women. Hence, it may seem that a communication model involving streetwalkers and their pimps

is merely that of “brokering.” But a closer examination of field data would yield a dominant model that can be best described as paternalistic-maternalistic. Pimps also act as surrogate parents making sure that customers pay and do not shortchange the women. More importantly, they ascertain the safety of the women against abusive and sadistic clients.

In the “brokering” model, a pimp acts as a liaison or a match-maker identifying prospective customers and making arrangements for the woman’s sexual services in accordance with customers’ particular preferences. A pimp has to exaggerate streetwalkers’ physical attributes and abilities in assuring sexual pleasure to customers.

In some instances, pimps betray the trust of the women when it comes to the real amount agreed upon by the customer as payment for the women’s services. It is not uncommon for pimps to receive more than the women, making the act of “brokering” most beneficial to them. When the women discover the truth about the negotiations, the relationship between the women and their pimps weaken. Sobrevega states that pimps,

... exert greater control over services to be offered, rates for outing, dress standards, rest period, interaction with outsiders, working hours and implementation of fines for hour extension (1996: 39).

In Cubao, most of the active pimps are not the professional ones, in contrast to those who do pimping as a means of livelihood. More often than not, they are the women’s partners or lovers, motel managers, taxi drivers, roomboys, sidewalk vendors, street children, security guards, and even fellow streetwalkers.

Pimping by a fellow streetwalker happens when: (a) one was pregnant and could not “service” customers; (b) one had just given birth and might be nursing a caesarian operation or a

birth wound; (c) one had many customers and could not “service” others, thereby referring these to fellow streetwalkers; and (d) one was already old or no longer physically attractive to customers.

Cubao pimps are said to be very protective to streetwalkers who obey them without questions. They act as father, mother, older brother or sister making themselves available as shoulders to cry on. For all their efforts, pimps get a share of 20 percent of the women’s fee.

The pimps paternalistic-maternalistic functions include the following: (a) customers pay and do not shortchange the women; (b) customers do not insult or maltreat them; and (c) pimps negotiate the lowest rate of the streetwalker to haggling customers without jeopardizing both her interests and the pimp’s. An additional function is the pimp’s way of protecting the physical well-being and general welfare of the streetwalker especially against abusive customers and intermittent police raids.

Cubao pimps also conduct training on what constitutes a “typical” behavior for neophyte streetwalkers undergoing initiation. This includes dressing (e.g. “decent” clothes to avoid catching the attention of police officers), walking (e.g. seductive body language), and learning “techniques” for verbal and non-verbal communication (e.g. identifying customers).

In cases of unwanted or accidental pregnancies, pimps usually support and aid streetwalkers’ abortion. They are always there for the women until they fully recover and are able to work again. Expenses incurred during the abortion may or may not be demanded by the pimps, considering these as part of their “goodwill.”

Todd (1988: 50) explains that benevolent control or paternalism works to construct asymmetrical relations of power between the streetwalker and the pimp. This supports the claim

that “control and benevolence are mutually exclusive phenomena [which] can co-exist harmoniously.”

While pimps can be compassionate and kind to streetwalkers, reports of maltreatment and exploitation also exist. Opportunistic pimps are those who pocket some amount from customers' fees without the knowledge of the women.

There are also incidents when the women complain of sadistic and abusive customers whom pimps tolerate in exchange for handsome monetary considerations. Some women also complain of non-remittance of payments by pimps who indulge in vices such as gambling or the use of shabu.

### **Reflections on the Paternalistic-Maternalistic Model**

This model has redefined the notions of what a pimp is all about. With the 13 women respondents in this study, the image of a pimp goes beyond the idea of ‘brokering.’ A pimp is more a companion—a shoulder to cry on, fund-raiser, problem-solver, even a landlord and/or home provider.

These 13 women respondents have been able to develop friendly relations with different kinds of pimps, whether they are male, gay or female. With male pimps however, there is a greater responsibility of experiencing fraud and deception related to brokering and work-related cases. Often, these are the opportunistic type of pimps.

Lately, most of these Cubao women streetwalkers interviewed for this research have stopped using pimps to broker for them. They now can identify their customers and enjoy full payment for their services. With women and customers negotiating independently of the pimps, the latter have become minor players or actors in business transactions.



Nevertheless, pimps in general still wield great influence on the lives of the women. Their personalistic and domestic role have helped galvanize their relationship with the streetwalker. Taking care of their children, doing house chores, training them with new techniques, honing personality development, accompanying them in movie houses, malls, etc., —all these functions contribute to a relationship that is framed by the Filipino culture or practice of “utang na loob.”

#### **B. Negotiating with Motel Managers/Owners: The Incentive Model**

Streetwalkers such as Nelly and Fatima have long enjoyed the privilege of staying in a hotel with a room of their own for several years now. The *Incentive Model* relates to how streetwalkers are able to benefit from their line of work as a result of their relationship with hotel/motel managers. By simply assuring the motels with a regular number of customers a night, they receive certain privileges such as free boarding or board and lodging at the same time. This also facilitates their mobility making their line of work accessible to them. This give-and-take relationship is actually beneficial to both women and motel managers.

As in a business setting, incentives become effective strategies in transacting a business. The incentive takes the form of a “finder’s fee” where anybody who brings in customers gets a reward in return. This also constitutes a “buying strategy” whereby a buyer gets discounts or incentives for buying in bulk.

The incentives granted by motel managers result from successful negotiations that further enhance the negotiating power of the streetwalkers. The motel’s system that includes the staff (i.e. roomboys, security guards, and utility men that provide protection and security for the streetwalkers in the practice of

their profession), operates advantageously for the women. Working in a familiar setting such as in a motel that doubles as home and workplace for the streetwalkers, the incentive model, indeed works best for these women.

### Reflections on the Incentive Model

The *Incentive Model* exists because it presupposes a bilateral agreement between the women and hotel managers that is inherently commercial in nature. While the model works best for these women, it does also favor the business interests of motel managers. Hence, the model caters to both the streetwalker and motel manager's needs.

But once the steady supply of customers dwindles or ceases, it is the prerogative of motel managers to evict women lodgers from their premises. And this may happen arbitrarily. Such agreement collapses between streetwalkers and motel managers if the former fails to satisfy the needs of the latter.

### Negotiating with Police Officers

#### The "Cat and Mouse" Model

This model assumes the inherently illegal nature of the streetwalkers' profession. Thus, it also supposes a tense, roller-coaster relationship between the street women and agents of the law. The objective of the negotiation with police officers is for the women to exercise their trade or profession without any threat or interference. The strategy is always to avoid police officers whenever they become visible in Cubao or to escape from impending police raids. Other techniques involve bribery, posting bail in case of arrest, and even conniving with some police elements.

Meanwhile, the police officer's job is to enforce the law on vagrancy. The penalty for violation of this law is imprisonment for a minimum of five days to a maximum of six months. A night court conducts an inquest and requires the arrested women to post bail at P210.

Emerging from this type of interaction (or lack of it) between the police and streetwalkers is the Cat and Mouse Model, or hide-and-seek relationship. The women have employed certain techniques to circumvent the Anti-Vagrancy Law, the Anti-Prostitution Act and the Oplan Paglilinis of the Quezon City Government. They would play hide-and-seek with police officers during raids and arrests. Normally, they would use their knowledge of the familiar setting in eluding the police by moving from one of their "waiting" stations to another. This means transferring from one street to the next unless the police are conducting simultaneous raids. When this happens, the women would simply temporarily migrate to other areas in Quezon City such as those in the Quezon Avenue, Timog, and Morato areas.

The women have generated creative ways to elude police officers. With "tips" offered by vendor friends and contacts, the streetwalkers would suddenly camouflage as vendors or act like buyers or sales clerks. Being arrested is one of their worst nightmares because this means being subjected to indignities. They are pushed, shoved, and hoarded into a van like wild animals on the loose.

The same complaint was featured and aired in the now defunct *Brigada Siete* (28 November 1998) where one of the arrested puts it blatantly as, "Para kaming baboy na pinagtutulakan sa sasakyan." (We are headed off like pigs into the van.) While some police officers collect "tong"<sup>7</sup> when these women are caught, the worst practice is the demand for sexual services as a condition for their release.

Raids do not only affect the streetwalker out in the streets looking for customers but even more affect the actual negotiation process. When women learn of raids, they would quickly leave the scene with their customers and hide from arresting officers. Sobrevega reports,

... [the women] conscious of their vulnerability to the anti-vice squad, the negotiation process with the client on terms of price, condom use, and what services to offer were done quickly. Inevitably their safety remained compromised. (Ibid. 49)

Alma, who is a SINAG staff member, cited the lack of clear government policies on arrests. In one case, the arresting police officer had recommended to the judge that an arrested woman be detained because she was caught *en flagrante* (in the act). Furious, Alma probed what exactly the police officer meant by “huling-huli sa akto.” Apparently, the police officer had only seen the woman talk to a man and this already became the sole basis for the arrest.

Alma, whose involvement in negotiating for the release of women charged with vagrancy had experienced engaging policemen and judges in vigorous debates. She recalled that in her past as a bar girl which made her veteran of raids and arrests, she would always get into verbal fights against police officers who manhandled her as she was being pushed into arresting cars. These police officers usually held her tight by the waist and arms, which are acts unbecoming of a real agent of the law. She would then free herself, saying, “Huwag ninyo akong hawakan. Sasakay akong mag-isa sa jeep.” (Don't touch me; I will go up the jeep by myself.)

The verbal tussles with police officers continued even after Alma's stint as a bar girl. Now as an organizer of streetwalkers, she would often argue with policemen who try to detain these girls or who attempt to charge them in court for prostitution.

Alma also vehemently criticizes the contemptible look of arresting police officers in “sando” (undershirt), short pants, and slippers while conducting raids. Not only do they look undignified but are often rude in the performance of their duties.<sup>8</sup>

Now as a SINAG member, Alma realizes the necessity to learn how to argue with the police and with the night court’s judge as well. This might help avoid detention or reduce its period or duration. A longer period of detention naturally shall inhibit the streetwalking mothers to earn a living for their children and for their other dependents.

Ironically, the Oplan Paglilinis in Quezon City provided occasions for policemen to harass and maltreat the women. Cases of harassment had been on the rise since the implementation of this city ordinance authored by then Vice-Mayor Connie Angeles. As a result, the detention center in the Cubao area had become congested.

At the Police Precinct 7 in Cubao, this researcher observed how police officers remained callous and apathetic to arrested women streetwalkers. Witnessing a fight break out among the detainees, the police officers merely passed by the raging cell unaffected by the loud shouts, cuss words, and fist fights. These men in uniform remained oblivious to the melee within the cramped cell. They showed unconcern for the harm already inflicted by the “mayora”<sup>9</sup> upon one of the detainees. Neither pacifying nor stopping the quarreling parties, this attitude of indifference seemed to indicate that quarrel is a common occurrence in detention centers or that these women are not worth their time and trouble. “Walang kwentang mga tao iyan,” these police officers justified. One of the officers in Precinct 7 annoyed by the noise, shouted, “Hoy! Magsitulog na kayo!” (Hey, go to sleep!)

In rare but real instances we find police officers and streetwalkers in cahoots against unsuspecting customers. The

modus operandi is for the women to bring the customer inside a motel before calling on the police. The latter would then immediately conduct a raid and extort a large amount of money from the customer. After the predetermined scenario, the police officers and the women share in the booty.

### **Reflections on the Cat and Mouse Model**

Various laws and ordinances against prostitution in general, and streetwalking, in particular, are symbols of state power and control over women. As agents of the state to provide peace and order, police officers (mostly male) possess these symbols of power to effect the arrest in such an administrative, manipulative, arbitrary means that can be characterized as bossism in a society known for its patronage-client relationship.

The women respond to these masculinized symbols of power as real threats to their livelihood, thereby creating different ways to elude arrest. If there is a sector within the community of prostitutes that is hard hit by state laws and ordinances, it is the women streetwalkers. Compared to bar girls, entertainers, and GROs, streetwalkers seem to be the favorite arresting subjects of the state.

It is the perception of the streetwalkers of Cubao that GROs and bar girls in general are given preferential treatment by government laws which seems to condone their activities through the existence of the Social Hygienic Clinic. The women streetwalkers of Cubao believe that class and social hierarchy has still something to do with their being in the lowest rung of prostitutes. They assert the need to change the laws on vagrancy and prostitution that affect them most. These women respondents have already been oriented by several NGOs who likewise believe in the unsocialized way of looking at prostitution from the eyes of the state.

The Women's Legal Bureau contends that the anti-Vagrancy Law is unconstitutional and claims that the words "loitering," "tramping," or "wandering about" and "without any visible means of support" are ambiguous. The law is applied only to the women while exempting their male customers who are also caught with the women during raids. This view resonates in De Dios (1998) who opines that there is a need to reform the laws especially those that criminalize the women involved in prostitution.

## Negotiation with NGO Staff

### The Utilitarian Style

Earlier in their streetwalking life, the women respondents of Cubao were not even aware that NGOs existed. Later, with their frequent interaction with several NGOs in the area, these women have realized its indispensability in addressing their financial, social, and emotional needs. NGOs are support groups that provide assistance and deliver services to those who are in need of any form of help. NGOs related to women's issues have invariably sought to improve the lives of so many oppressed and exploited women in Metro Manila. Apart from the welfare services and resources that they hand over to streetwalkers, NGOs focused on women's plight aim to enhance the capability of individual women towards emancipation from social bondage and self-sufficiency. These take the form of livelihood projects and capability building techniques such as training. NGOs attempt to lead these marginalized women to a more dignified life if not a life without prostitution.

The NGOs in this study do not have an unequivocal stand as regards women completely leaving prostitution. These orga-

nizations are aware that they cannot offer good-paying jobs nor can they assume all the women's economic and social problems. Instead, they help the women reflect on their condition and let them decide whether or not they should get out of streetwalking. They link these women to other resource institutions that provide medical care, livelihood assistance, legal advice, and capability building seminars.

There were times when these women have become wary about NGO's true intentions. They suspect that NGOs merely utilize them as subjects in order to justify the organizations' solicitation of funds for its own operations. These women suspect that they are used as data-based entities for the NGO's project proposals to attract both international and local donors. Because they feel they are reduced to being merely objects of studies that sometimes fulfill philanthropic objectives of NGOs, the women would often sigh, "Binubulatlat lang nila ang buhay namin, pero hindi naman sila tumutulong." (They make our lives public, but they don't really help us.)

But when women face incarceration, they seek NGO's assistance to post bail or to provide them food, blankets, and other basic amenities. Streetwalking mothers of Cubao also negotiate with NGO staff for hospitalization fees, medicines, or infant's needs every time they give birth. There were also rare instances when NGO's would provide temporary shelter and nursing care for those who have given birth. But the NGO's stiff policies and/or criteria in delivering assistance has frustrated many needy women who now begin to question the sincerity of NGO staff. Understandably, the stringent policies are geared towards maximizing the limited resources of the organization. NGOs have to be very resourceful, creative, and austere to assure its own institutional survival.



Although the women appreciate the training and education NGOs provide them, they still feel the inadequacy of these organizations in responding to their personal needs. Yolly is a case in point. Except for Alma of SINAG who went all the way to help her, nobody else did. It is not surprising if Yolly became disillusioned with NGOs. It was only Alma who literally begged for money to get Yolly's baby out of the hospital. It was also Alma who provided shelter for the mother and child after the baby's discharge from the nursery.

There was also a case of 25 streetwalkers arrested and had no money to post bail. Not a single NGO extended help for these arrested women. Apparently, arrest cases of this kind are not well within the NGO's priority list for assistance. Other organizations believe that the women are at fault and hence must suffer the consequences. They perceive them to be stubborn and irresponsible when they insist on their activities in spite of threats or raids. Streetwalking mothers reply that the urgency to earn for their babies' milk and sustenance make them oblivious of the police.

According to these women, blaming them will not solve their problems. All they seek was to post bail to avoid the long period of detention at the Bicutan center. They dread the common practice in Bicutan where heads are totally shaven, as experienced by some of their associates.

Thus, these helpless women feel betrayed by indifferent NGOs. These women attest that they are always present when NGOs need them, as in during their conferences, evaluation and assessment, and their charting of proposals and programs. They are always there to respond to NGO's needs to help them get funds from abroad. According to these women, they regularly show up for the NGO's visitors who normally probe into their private lives. But NGOs fail to assist them during those times that they need institutional help.

There was a time when instead of extending help, one NGO gave them reading materials containing exhortations that they reform themselves. Angered and frustrated, they sat down on the pavement and used these materials as cover sheets.

Of all the NGO's, it is SINAG which has maintained its credibility and trust rating to the women streetwalkers of Cubao. They easily find solace in Alma of SINAG who used to be one of them. They trust, believe, and follow her advice without doubt upon consultation. They would even stay in her place whenever they feel like it. They also write to her their innermost thoughts, fears, and anxieties.

The effectiveness of Alma as a SINAG social worker stems from the practice of NGOs to utilize "survivors" (those who left prostitution to become community workers) to be able to gain the trust and confidence of prostituted women. Spearheading this practice, SINAG with Alma is likely to be the most successful women-related NGO that has been operating in Cubao.

### Negotiating with Families The Nurturing, Dependency and Reinforcement Style

#### A. Negotiating with Live-in Partners: The Nurturing Style

Living itinerant lives, women streetwalkers of Cubao relish the idea of a stable home. Their longing for stability and permanency is but a result of their dysfunctional families. No matter how abnormal the conditions were for these women, they are still normal individuals who can love and be loved in return. This is precisely why they still fall in love with their live-in partners inspite of a sex-oriented work that renders them callous

and unfeeling and that robs them of their human dignity. All of the women respondents still nurture hopes of a happy family, believing that their current partners will lead them to that cherished dream of establishing a home. This ardent belief that love will still prevail between them and their live-in partners creates that desire to marry and settle permanently.

This *Nurturing Style* is prevalent among women (whether as mothers or wives), especially to those who in their early years have been wanting in love and care. While nurturing may be considered as instinctive to women as in the 'mother-hen complex,' women streetwalkers' nurturing ways can be extreme and intense because of their psychological disposition towards being wanted and loved.

The women studied have exhibited dominant roles in the domestic front, providing both the material and emotional needs of their live-in partners. Based on observation, the burden of creating a home and making the 'love' work depends on the women. These seemingly unilateral relations as regards the outpouring of love only from the women's side reflect in their jobless partners' dependence on them as breadwinners. Hence, on top of sexual satisfaction provided for by the women, the male lovers rely on the women for their daily needs. In fact, some of these lovers even do the pimping for them. The already dubious relationship is made more exploitative with these partners functioning as pimps for their women.

Corroborating this observation, Talikala reports that relationships with live-in partners are usually founded on the concept of female commodification that inhibit the forging of human relations that may be founded on mutual love and respect (Talikala 1996). Talikala further reports,

... [a] woman's desire for belonging was often reciprocated on the basis of her ability to grant sexual favors and material benefits to the partners. (Ibid. 16)

While these women negotiated vigilantly with their customers for the use of condom, this requirement is waived when it comes to their live-in partners. The risk of getting infected is high but these women would rather please their partners lest the issue become a source of irritation on their relationship. This preferential treatment accorded to their partners may be indicative of “love” or a palpable longing to be loved. The waiver in the use of condom makes these women susceptible to STD. The possibility of getting pregnant is also high.

Once they are impregnated, their live-in partners may or may not own the pregnancy. In a number of cases, live-in partners disowned the pregnancy of their women. Most often than not, these male partners force their women to abort the pregnancy. Among the Cubao streetwalkers, Fatima, Nelly, Juvy and a few more streetwalkers have experienced this forced abortion. Talikala again reports,

... [it] indicate[s] the powerlessness of these women to enjoy their right to decide whether to have children or not which all the more reduced (sic) their sense of self worth, fertility being a value highly placed in Philippine society. (Ibid.)

The sexual act between the women and their live-in partners differ from that of the women and their customers. With their partners, the women were more submissive.

It is no longer unusual for male partners to suddenly abandon their women or refuse to marry them. Patricia's case demonstrates all of the above—ranging from pregnancy to abortion, to refusal of the boyfriend to marry her, and finally to abandonment.

The testimonies of these women affirm the reality that most live-in partners cohabit with them not out of love but out of their need for financial support. These jobless, male partners do not even know how to compensate the women's hard work with

care and respect but instead inflict upon them physical, verbal, and emotional harm. In one case, the battered Nelly lost her daughter in the hands of a live-in partner.

Going back to her lover who was responsible for the death of her baby characterizes Nelly as a woman too vulnerable and gullible to a fault. But this vulnerability and gullibility should be taken in the context of a powerless woman dying to love and be loved in return. She longs for a home that was absent in her childhood. This man seems to complete the formula of a family life, or a semblance of it. Nelly knows she will again be deceived by her prodigal lover, but she will continue to believe that this time it will last forever.

### **The Power of Drugs**

Almost all of the women streetwalkers studied have at one time or another tried using drugs. Some of them are still hopelessly hooked while others tried it only for curiosity's sake. Majority of these streetwalkers were taught by their live-in partners to use drugs; a few of them by street colleagues who claim it was "good." Fatima related how her boyfriend taught her to use it. According to her, she blindly obeyed him just to show how much she loved him.

Nelly's lover was more cruel. He would beat Nelly if she refused to join him in his pot sessions. At times, they would lock themselves in their motel room and indulge in drugs. During these sessions, they would create scenes in the hotel like fighting and throwing objects at each other. One time, when both were high on drugs, her partner slashed both their wrists after making promises of being together until death. Nelly almost lost her life if not for the timely intervention of the motel's employees who rushed them to the hospital.

Most often than not, using drugs was a way of escaping their problems. Confessing to this researcher, they look forward to the experience of being afloat on cloud 9 when they are on drugs. They also do things they don't normally do. Their inhibitions vanish as they become callous and impervious to their surroundings, forgetting for a moment their marginalization as women scorned by a moralistic society.

On account of prostitution being linked to the use of drugs, Hughes (1997) has this to say,

... the act of prostitution feels like rape. In order to endure the multiple invasions of the body, women use drugs and alcohol to numb the assaults to their dignity and bodily integrity. Eventually, the woman's physical and emotional health is destroyed.

While in most cases live-in partners push the women into drugs, there are very rare instances when male lovers push their women to leave prostitution. In these rare instances, the male partner ceases to be the typical dependent, opportunistic parasite. He rather becomes a positive influence in the women's struggle against streetwalking life. Among these few women is Aisa, who eventually left the trade and got married.

## **B. Negotiating with Family Members:**

### **The Dependency Style**

Generally speaking, most women prostitutes do not divulge to their parents and relatives the nature of their work. But they keep on sending money just the same without explaining what they do for a living. Some even leave their fatherless child or children in their custody.

A **Dependency Style** emerges out of the interaction of streetwalkers with their relatives. While it is standard practice among parents and relatives to depend on the women finan-

cially, a variation of this style exists in those cases where the women have severed ties with them. Painful experiences engender hatred and rejection but does not completely eliminate the longing of these women for home.

Reversely, certain parents and relatives are the ones who shoo the women away because of the disgrace they bring to the family honor. They are the ones who make the disconnection. These women who muster courage to inform their parents suffer the consequences of their act of honesty and transparency. Rejected by family members, these women live on their own.

But there are cases where women patch up eventually with their families. Alma was first given the silent treatment when she told the truth about her work. Later, she patiently explained to them why she had to join the ranks of the streetwalkers and begged for understanding. Her family finally learned to accept her.

Yolly lived with her aunt in Manila. When Yolly informed her about the nature of her work, she was severely reprimanded which resulted to outright eviction from their home. Yolly, however, did not regret leaving her aunt. She found peace away from her aunt's constant harangues.

When Yolly got pregnant, she went back to her aunt's house to pick up some clothes. Her aunt flatly advised her to give up the baby for adoption once it came out. From then on, Yolly never set foot on her aunt's place again. She feared her aunt might do something against her baby. She refused to go back even while experiencing birth pains.

The standard line among streetwalkers of Cubao when queried about their work by their relatives is either they work as salesladies in department stores or as domestic helpers in rich Chinese homes. Some even utilize fellow streetwalkers to vouch for their disguised work. Patricia, Aiza, and Nelly did bring some

street colleagues when they went home to visit their families in Butuan, Bicol, and Cebu, respectively. Already rehearsed, their friends would attest to their families that they work either as salesladies or housemaids.

In Leila's case, she requested the SINAG staff to bail her out from the hospital when her parents came to visit. The SINAG staff had to make up stories to sugarcoat the exact incidents leading to Leila's hospitalization.

The most stirring story among the Cubao streetwalkers is that of Lina's. Her relationship with her family is deep-rooted in sorrow, anger, resentment, and hatred. She loathes her father most of all. She wrote an autobiography in the form of letter-testimonial in a Journal notebook provided by SINAG.

### C. Negotiating with Fellow Streetwalkers:

#### The Reinforcement Style

Since streetwalkers are mostly *istokwa* (stowaways) away from home, there is a great desire among them to belong to any group or community in the metropolis. The streetwalkers of Cubao found company, acceptance, understanding, and even perhaps, love among their peers. Operating more like *barkadas* or sorority members, the women are supportive and protective of one another. They reinforce each other's strengths and fill in the vacuum where familial love has gone astray. The *Reinforcement Style* negotiates affection, attention, understanding, care among streetwalkers. Fisher writes,

Reinforcement ... [*sic*] a time of uninhibited joviality, members engage in loud laughter, verbal backslapping, and mutual congratulations on a job well done. (Ibid.: 260)

Unselfishly, they extend material help even during lean months. Their homogeneity helps forge friendship and solidarity that can even go beyond it. Fellow streetwalkers act as surro-



gate parents, substitute siblings and relatives when the occasion calls for it. Reinforcing each other also means interdependence as in sharing the tricks of the trade, learning new techniques, or being able to successfully negotiate.

Women-bonding is the key to their survival in the urban jungles of Cubao. This is illustrative of how they share customers when a fellow streetwalker is indisposed or someone needs more money. They would also act as pimps for fellow streetwalkers in dire need. They also act as recruiters for their fellow streetwalkers' friends who may be in search of work. "Devirginized" girls are likely candidates of streetwalking as a profession. In the case of Ana Marie for instance, her friend Carmi was invited by her fellow streetwalkers on account of her loss of virginity.

Fellow streetwalkers are aware that it takes a sexually experienced woman to become a streetwalker like them. While loss of virginity is frowned upon by a conservative Catholic Philippine society, it can become a ticket to a streetwalking life. Feeling impure and dirty, devirginized Filipina women lose their self-worth and are easily persuaded into the sex trade.

Negotiating with fellow streetwalkers leads to reinforcement not only of the kind of profession they are into, but more importantly, of themselves as hapless victims of a discriminating and hostile hypercapital-intensive society. But congenial negotiations stop with fellow streetwalkers who work in the same area. It is because there are also cases of animosity and tension between streetwalkers of different turfs.

Animosities or indifference usually exist when a streetwalker goes beyond her territorial assignment and usurps others' turf. While streetwalkers are known to be mobile in the streets, transferring from one location to another in search of customers, there appears to be an unwritten rule among them not to tres-

pass other territories. The clique factor exists and "turking" is but a by product of it.

Fighting over regular customers or *suki* can be a cause of trouble that may break out between groups. A hair-pulling incident along Aurora Boulevard involved two streetwalkers from different camps over a regular customer who happened to be seen in the company of a new group of streetwalkers. But no one dared to join in the scuffle for fear that a commotion might catch the attention of the police.

But in general, relationships among streetwalkers can be described as amicable. Everytime a neophyte streetwalker is introduced to the group, she is given proper welcome and orientation into the world of streetwalkers. They train her too in dealing with the new job.

Camaraderie is never lost. Problems are shared as well as coping mechanisms. Female bonding is usually forged during laundry time or when they go out for shopping (Malaya 1988). Communication is a vital element in their interaction. Discussions almost always come in the form of 'sharing' sessions.

## Conclusions

The quality of lives of women in street prostitution highly depend on their communication skills to negotiate. Negotiations with persons and institutions require technical ability and vigilance to sustain survival in the competitive marketplace of sex trade.

Communication models emerge from the empirical realities of these women whose inevitable negotiation with persons and institutions contributes to either their exploitation or empowerment. This implies that streetwalking as a profession does not operate in a vacuum, but rather in a field of forces which influence communication models and their outcomes. Thus, a vari-

ety of models correspond to different communication needs of streetwalkers.

Embedded in an asymmetrical relationship where male power dominates, these women struggle to negotiate for their own end within a system that presuppose a commodification of prostitutes. Neither rigid nor static, the communication models involving the negotiation processes of streetwalkers in Cubao deliver the women under study as winners or losers. But the outcomes always depend on how these women are able and capable to empower themselves before menacing patriarchal structures of interests.

Nevertheless, women remain brutalized by the irreversible fact of female prostitution as illegal and immoral, whether individual transactions are considered successful or not. Even in the mutual satisfaction method as a type of negotiation, the notion of mutual benefit loses its merit since all transactions are predicated upon the profit motive. Women's bodies as commodities is not only economic and political, but also social and moral in terms of social justice and human dignity.

The communication models that have been derived from the empirical realities of women streetwalkers of Cubao can best serve as guidelines in the process of identifying the subject and their mode of communication and/or negotiation. But it is not a presumptive standard that can be used by GOs or NGOs in the formulation of programs specifically for women in street prostitution. In a multi-level hierarchy of prostitutes operating in the metropolis, objective conditions vary from one sector to another. Streetwalkers are perceived to be in the lowest rung compared to GROs, bar girls, entertainers, casa-based masahista, or high class call girls. Investigations into the lives of other prostitutes would necessarily yield an entirely different set of communication models. At best, the communication and negotia-

tion techniques of women streetwalkers of Cubao can serve as documentary evidence to a larger study on women prostitutes in general.

### **Recommendations**

It is imperative for streetwalkers to gain more awareness about themselves as women and as human beings in a supposedly civilized society. Awareness is the first step towards the development of self-worth, esteem, and confidence. It can also positively affect negotiation styles that will ultimately lead to their enlightenment and empowerment.

Advocacy programs and research projects dealing with the subject should benefit these women. Proponents, scholars, and researchers should aim to formulate relevant, concrete programs that aim to alleviate their plight. However, the study of prostitution must transcend the epistemological arena towards a more pragmatic understanding of the subject matter that will redound to the women's interests. Planning sessions involving all concerned individuals or representatives of various sectors may be able to produce a focused plan of action. Complete with monitoring and evaluation schemes, this planning session will not only engage the particular streetwalkers, but also allow the thinking sector to function as active agents.

While the plethora of studies already deal with the subject matter, there is still a wide range of research agenda that necessitates future investigations. Researchers would have to consider other variables such as culture, language, history, training, etc., to fully cover the complex world of street prostitutes.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> All names used here are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the research participants.

<sup>2</sup> Vagrancy Law also known as Article 202, Section 2 of the Revised Penal Code provides that “any person loitering about public or semi-public buildings or places and tramping or wandering about ... and without any visible means of support” is to be arrested.

<sup>3</sup> SINAG means Sigaw ng Angking Lakas ng Kababaihan sa Lansangan, a program implemented by the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP).

<sup>4</sup> Interview notes, November 1998.

<sup>5</sup>The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity states that the structure of a culture’s language shapes what people think and do. “‘The real world’ is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group.” Their theory of linguistic relativity counters the assumptions that all languages are similar and that words merely act as neutral vehicles to carry meanings (Griffin 1994:46).

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth O’Brien is the Executive Director of the Alliance against AIDS in Davao. She is also the founding member of Talikala, Inc. She has seven years of experience working among the WIP of Davao.

<sup>7</sup>“Tong” is a colloquial term for commission received for services rendered. It represents a certain percentage of the entire payment for a particular service. “Tong” has become a form of bribe that is collected from either the arrested streetwalker or the pimp cum manager. Payment of the ‘tong’ to the police officer is either collected on a regular basis for protection from future arrest or collected after a raid for the release of the arrested streetwalker.

<sup>8</sup>Field observation and interview, 28 September 1998, Cubao area Quezon City.

<sup>9</sup>The *mayora* is the leader among the arrested streetwalker. She acts as the power in the detention and she sets the rules regarding visitors, *pasalubong*, and fights among the streetwalkers (refer to the discussion on “Negotiating with Fellow Streetwalker”).

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