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## Interrogating Sexual Identities and Sex Work: A Study on Constructed Identities Among Female Sex Workers in Kampala

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### Introduction

We have arrived in the sexual tower of Babel where a world of past silences has to be breached (Plummer 1996).

This quote from the work of Plummer very tellingly energises scholars to ask new questions about sexuality and its meaning in the current discourse on gender and work. Recognisably, the subject of sexuality has moved the domain of knowledge production away from psychologists and psychiatrists (Freud 1993) to the social sciences. Hitherto, knowledge of sexuality was anchored within the totalising discourse of the 'pure sciences' and based on the idea of a monolithic meaning of sexuality derived from a universal biological determinant. Consequently, sexuality was perceived as an inherent energy accounting for all human behaviour. The heterosexual married couple was the ideal. Any deviations from that required scientific explanations. Today the ideal of the heterosexual couple has been complicated by the emerging sexual behaviours driven, in part, by the triumph of capitalism and reconstitution of communities into providers of labour power. In this new context, sexuality has become increasingly contested, commercialised and commodified.

This study is concerned with mapping the complex terrain of commercialised sexuality – commonly known as sex work. The study forms part of an interrogation of identity politics focusing on issues of representation and its impacts on the configuration of sex work in a post-colonial city. These questions acquire increased importance since the symbols and icons that line the

world of sexuality are in themselves living cultural products and processes that shape our understanding of what sex work is, at least in Africa.

In most writings on prostitution, the opening statement invokes a canonical given with the famous cliché of prostitution as '*one of the oldest professions in our history*' (White 1980; Bakwesigha 1982). Such a cliché implies a common understanding of the nature of prostitution, the only debate being in the ascription a moral marker on it as 'good' or 'bad'. I want to emphasise here that this study is not anchored on the moral dichotomy of the good and bad things about prostitution. Instead, it intends to unravel and foreground questions about how identities are formed, negotiated and recreated within the realm of prostitution and new issues needing attention in our engagement of the larger intellectual project on gender and work.

The identity category, prostitute, is one of the most contestable areas in the discussion of labour issues globally. In nearly all countries of the world, prostitution exists in one form or the other. Authors have indicated that in some countries like the United States up to \$40 million is spent daily on prostitution. In Birmingham, a British city, up to 800 women are engaged in prostitution, with one million people working in prostitution-related businesses like massage parlours, saunas, escort agencies and on the streets (Pateman 1988). Paradoxically in a country like United States, cities spend up to 7.5 million dollars per year on prostitution control (<http://www.bayswan.org/stats.html>). These kinds of complex situations are important to unpack if only to understand why today's most liberal form of capitalism still considers prostitution a double tragedy.

In the intellectual world, there is increasing scholarly and activist work on the pros and cons of prostitution. Medieval scholars stand out prominently in the quest for knowledge about prostitution when it is named as the oldest kind of trade in human bodies. References in the Holy Book of Christianity, the Bible, are a case in point (St. John 8:3 and St. Matthew 21:31). These biblical utterances valorised and complicated the place of prostitution in ancient society and Christian morality, since the prostitute was both criminalised and condoned by the same society. Many laws of different countries continue to exhibit similar ambiguity towards prostitution. In British law, it is the acts associated with prostitution (like loitering, soliciting for sex publicly and earning from 'immoral means') that constitute a crime, not the act of exchanging sex for money (Davidson 1996). Versions of this law exist in different parts of former British colonies. In Uganda, the same vagueness exists in the law books against prostitution.

Critical concerns that still mar the understanding and legal response to prostitution could be traced to the conception of the trade itself. An everyday definition of a prostitute suggests that it is a person who engages in sex for money. This definition however, falls short in pointing to other critical parameters like - the duration of relationship, mode of exchange, nature of exchange and a host

of other issues that compound prostitution. This has made the curbing of prostitution difficult, with myopic sections of the law like being 'idle' and 'disorderly' are invoked to charge women who are viewed as prostitutes. This in itself shows the frustration of the law and the patriarchal domination and oppression that still define the morality of the world we live in. Nevertheless, the debate on prostitution still rages on and now needs to be taken into new horizons if we are to 'move out of the ghetto in a methodological way', to borrow Mbembe's (1999) phrase.

One other dimension that still informs our knowledge production in post-colonial Africa is the ways urbanisation and the organisation of labour impacted on the African continent. It is argued that the advent of urbanisation and the reconfiguration of labour processes in African societies made prostitution possible and a necessary evil accompanying the vulgar capitalism that came with colonisation (White 1980). The 'detrified' urban worker was catered for in all aspects but their sexual needs. In this case, the women who only existed in the informal urban setting served the sexual needs of the heterosexual male. It is also mentioned that for the colonial urban worker in very harsh conditions, the prostitute offered a place for solace on their day off and possibly the only opportunity to sleep in a *real bed* (Nelson 1987). This was the kind of knowledge that was produced on colonial discourses on prostitution in East Africa although little is known about how these new relational paradigms shaped the labour discourse – if they ever did.

Arguably, in present day Uganda, there are no more restrictions on the movement of male workers who only access *real beds* in the city through sleeping with prostitutes. This then means that the parameters around which prostitution was mobilised, along with its past dynamics, have changed. It also highlights the fact that the dominant discourse that shaped the relationship between male waged workers and female sex workers criminalised the female while viewing male behaviour as a necessary evil of the patriarchal colonial capitalist system. Today, the women and men who exchange sex for money can no longer be described accurately through some crude method of women serving men in a dark corner of the city or the illegitimate beer brewer offering 'a bed' to the legitimate but sexually starved colonial worker. The terrain of prostitution is now more complicated and interspersed with the complexities of urban living and urban survival. Economic problems seem to be the overriding factor, given the increase of women entering the body marketplace. However, it may be too reductionist to argue that material concerns are the only reason driving human action. Can we then read other contending discourses besides economics in the study of prostitution?

What this study has done therefore is interrogate the different identity questions on prostitution while reflecting on the dominant discourses and the resultant complications. For instance, feminist thinkers express bewilderment at how

prostitution can be treated within the framework of feminist politics. For radical feminists, prostitution is the ambiguous embodiment of male oppression that reduces women to merchandise with which men affirm their patriarchal rights of access to women bodies (Shrage 1990; Pateman 1988). Yet this argument is complicated by the fact that exchange of sex for money does not always occur within a coercive space. Additionally, distinctions between 'free choice' prostitutes and 'forced prostitute' need to be clearly articulated. The forced prostitute is usually a child prostitute or the vulnerable woman captured to become a sex slave and is an issue of great concern in the East Asian countries where the highest statistics of sex tourism in the world. 'Free choice' prostitution is still an area of great controversy. This is so because of the complexity that arises in the interpretation of the contours of power and how they operate within this arena.

Consequently, the nexus between sex work and identity questions in Uganda is an important area of inquiry in gender scholarship because of the limited attention it has received and its significance in everyday work experiences. In Uganda, two studies have been conducted in this area (Bakwesigha 1982; Southall and Gutkind 1957). Bakwesigha's study uses data from the 1970s and is anchored within a sociological perspective. It labours to assemble statistics but does not actually clarify to the reader the different power complexities at play. The Southall study is anchored within the colonial patronising mode of knowledge that does not see any agency in the African subjects. My study therefore borrows from discourse analysis popularised by Foucault (1977 and 1978) in understanding the nuances encountered within the world of prostitution.

### The Problematique

Prostitution has always taken place in the 'illegal realm'. It is sometimes regarded as the nameless trade where men and women buy sell and the services of the most contestable parts of the human being – the sexualised body. In order to understand the different facets of prostitution we also have to understand the social meaning of the body and the different ways in which power constructs the body as both a *labouring* body and a *sexual* body.

One influential writer in this area is Michel Foucault who has written various works on the subject of sexuality. His work has been very instrumental in making the body a favoured subject of analysis in Sociology, Anthropology and Philosophy (Gatens 1992). One of his major arguments is that the symbolic meanings we attach to the body are not inherent in the body but are invoked through the different activities that bodies engage in as social beings (Foucault 1978). Moore (1994) has also argued that the body is never finished and never perfectly socialised and adapts to different situations and challenges. It is used for work, a site of enjoyment and a medium for the perpetuation of other bodies.

Prostitution refuses to fit neatly in our understanding of what work is or is not. One reason for this is that the body is both the site of work in prostitution

and also a site of power struggles and identity politics. In prostitution, sex becomes the commodity and the body the marketplace. People pay and sell to step out of the complex web of rules and regulations that non-commercial sexuality accords them. Prostitutes are condemned by religion, laws are made against it and feminists' viewpoints are made to stand on their heads in debates about prostitution. At one point the prostitute is seen as the tragic frontline casualty and at the other point she is the self-serving collaborator betraying her sisters (Davidson 1996:180).

Through other kinds of logic, the prostitute, unlike the married woman, may be considered capable of exercising a great deal of power and control over her sexuality. She can refuse men sexual access and also exists on the fringes of patriarchal control. Indeed, it can be argued that in contracting sexual services, the prostitute is resisting patriarchy and refusing one-man ownership over her body, thus challenging the stereotypical notions of power. Similarly, men have many ambivalent attitudes about prostitution. In some instances, the very men who complain about commercialised sex are often the ones who may be going out to seek the prostitute's companionship.

In Uganda, prostitution was complicated by the arrival of a Victorian middle class and religious morality that accompanied the entire colonial project. Workers who were moved from rural areas were kept in the city without their families while single women existed on the fringes of the cities. These two conditions facilitated the development of different kinds of sexual liaisons (Obbo 1980; Nelson 1987; White 1980). Contemporary Uganda has witnessed rising costs of living, but the city continues to be seen to possess various opportunities for work, some of which subsumes the confluence between work and sex. In this paper, we explore the different facets that can help paint a picture – with a context – about the nature of prostitution in Kampala City. The following questions guide this research: How does one conceptualise the notion of identity and prostitution? What are the different ways in which identity articulates itself in sex work? In the emergent identities in sex work, what are the implications for patriarchal domination? What kinds of issues emerge for a better conceptualisation of gender and work?

### **Theoretical perspectives on sex work and the body**

While anchored within a theoretical framework popularised by Foucault (1978) on sexuality and identity formation, this work is linked to different theoretical formulations by feminists and sociologists about prostitution (Sunstein 1990; Pateman 1988; Weeks and Holland 1996). Foucault's original contribution follows the intellectual fallacy of 1960s Freudian psychoanalysis arguing that sexuality is an inner human quality generated by our childhood and producing particular forms of adult behaviours (Freud 1933). Sexuality was reconstructed around

the image of the dominant male phallus. Variations in sexuality were deviations from the masculine sexuality needing redemption and understanding within the masculine perspective. Foucault's contribution to this debate was to deconstruct this popular belief with the argument that sexualities are constantly produced, changed and modified and hence the nature of sexual discourse and experience also changes.

An explicit example of this perspective on sexuality comes from Theweleit. In his 1987 book, he writes that, '[I]f intercourse has always and everywhere felt, meant, and been the same, if a kiss is just a kiss, a sigh just a sigh, then it does not matter whether you are Roman or Barbarian, ancient or modern, 5 or 55, in love or just earning a living' (1987:73). Here, Theweleit illustrates the fallacy of universal assumptions, claiming that any Freudian biological pre-determinist approach to sexuality would not get to the real history of sexuality in any context. This point is well illustrated in the genealogy that Foucault maps out in his analysis of sexuality in ancient Greek narratives (Foucault 1985).

To locate this discourse within the discussion on sexuality and the female body, I briefly sketch out two ideological perspectives in feminist scholarship about the body and sexuality. Some feminists have argued that women need to affirm and celebrate the capacity of the female body, especially the capacity to recreate as well as nurture human beings. This school of thought presents the body more as a biological entity that is *ahistorical* in its characteristics and its capacities (Gatens 1992). Hence people are seen as essentially male or female without an assessment of the power that constructs these body dichotomies.

Another school of thought refuses body dichotomies of male/female and claims a history for the body. Within this perspective, understanding of the body and sexuality incorporates the different ways in which the environment and other typical activities of the body vary historically and create its capacities, desires and actual material form (Foucault 1978). For example, the body of a domestic worker or housewife and the body of a female athlete do not have the same capacities. Each has different capacities as well as different desires and demands in order to accomplish its work. Consequently, biological similarities cannot account for the specificity of these two bodies even though they are both female (Gatens 1992). When applied to the study of prostitution, sexual difference is not just reified. Rather, the ways in which typical spheres construct and recreate particular kinds of bodies to perform particular kinds of tasks is also explained. In this case then, the body is not only seen as sexual, but as *sexual within a context*.

A formulation that historicises the body exposes the different ways in which power constructs bodies and urges us to challenge *power* and not the *bodies* per se. It is also important to note that sexuality and the body are integrally connected to conceptions of femininity and masculinity and all these are constitutive of our

individuality and sense of identity (Pateman 1988). Consequently, when sex becomes a commodity, so will bodies and selves.

It is often easy to see prostitution as oppression of women by men – as if men and women are rigid categories that can be easily identified and their oppression easily mapped out. Further, this formulation gives us the chance to look at some of the ways in which bodies in prostitution also map out their own contours of power so that they cannot be analysed by focusing on monolithic entities like male or female. In the next section I link this debate to the issue of sexual identities.

### **Sexual Identities and Sex Work**

Identity becomes an issue when it is in crisis (Shotter 1993)

The crisis of identity occurs when things we assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable are displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty. Foucault introduces this angle when he points out, in a number of influential works on sexuality, discourse, power and subjectivity, that identity is bound up with the workings of power (Foucault 1978, 1985 & 1986). He suggests that identities are not ‘pre-givens’, neutral, unified and fixed, but products of a normalisation strategy regulated and ‘carefully fabricates’ the individual. This normalisation strategy – which he calls discipline – has the ultimate goal of eliminating all kinds of social and psychological irregularities and producing useful-docile bodies and minds.

Foucault extends this perspective to the understanding of sex, when he argues that the prevailing sexual discourse at anyone time shapes how different people influence or encounter sexuality. In our understanding of sex work and identities, we therefore need to explore the different notions of normalisation that go on in Kampala. These range from the social construction of the prostitute, the representation of the prostitute and the ways in which prostitutes subvert the different social icons that society and sex work inscribes on them.

Giddens (1991) writing on self-identity offers some useful tips in the argument that self-identity has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of an individual. Who to be? What to be? How to act? These are questions that must be asked in the formation of one's identity. In this way, identity incorporates choices we make based on questioning, answering and continually ordering the narratives that shape our lives. Giddens adds that, the more tradition (as a normalising strategy) loses its ability to provide a secure and a stable sense of identity, the more individuals negotiate lifestyle choices and attach importance to these choices. When thrown into doubt, concern with lifestyle makes the individual question those relevant routinised habits, especially those most closely integrated with self identity (Giddens, quoted in Heaphy 1996).

How then can these formulations be useful for understanding sex work? The fact that identities here are not seen as a given and static entity is a very important

element of our understanding of sex work today. Different lifestyle choices evoke instability of identity and make the case for a pluralistic view of the prostitute. One cannot just confer her with a monolithic identity of deviance. The findings of this study indicate that the sex worker is faced with different choices and narratives, some involving innovative strategies that subvert the normalisation processes of society. He/she travels and lives through different identities, invoking different logics in different contexts. Sometimes, the prostitute has to emphasise her femininity and 'availability' and at other times, she has to 'wear' the identity of the 'sophisticated woman'.

Another category that needs to be theoretically cleared before we employ it as an intellectual travelling companion in this study is the concept of sex work as used by different writers. Sex work is sometimes taken as the 'politically correct' term to use for prostitution. It has been used to make a distinction between paid and consensual relationships between sexual partners. It is a term that is employed to try and locate sex within the realm of work. Yet, despite the naming, the category still suffers ambiguity and fluidity. Some feminist scholars and labour activists have shunned this distinction by arguing that marital sex should also be seen as a type of sex work (Delpy and Leonard 1992). Other influential thinkers in this school of thought include Simone de Beauvoir (a pioneer feminist) and Friedrich Engels (a renowned Marxist writer). The following citations of both writers will be useful to illustrate their points of view:

Simone de Beauvoir writes that, 'for both, the sexual act is a service, one hired for life by one man, the other has several clients who pay her by the piece. The one protected by one male against all others, the other defended by all against the exclusive tyranny of each' (1974: 619).

Engels asserts that '[M]arriage of convenience turns often enough into crassest prostitution-sometimes of both partners, but far more commonly of the women, who only differs from the ordinary courtesan in that she does not let her body on piecework as a wage worker but still sells it once and for all into slavery' (1985:102).

In both cases, de Beauvoir and Engels consider sex as work for both the prostitute and wife in a home because in each case, the woman is *selling* herself to a man.

This debate has been taken up by contemporary feminists like Pateman in her influential work entitled *Sexual Contract*. In this book, Pateman argues that prostitution has to be understood within the whole rubric of the sexual contract, especially since, in some instances, prostitutes undertake sex work in order to earn money, as in any other job chosen by women. However, she is quick to add that we should not therefore just equate prostitution to other forms of labour where the contract is between the men and workers. Prostitution can be differentiated from other forms of labour because it is exclusively a contract between men and women. It is conducted in the context of the exercise of male-right to

sex and is therefore one of the ways in which 'men have always ensured that they have access to women bodies' (Pateman 1988:194). Connell (1987) has also contributed to this discussion by pointing out that sex work takes place in the context of interpersonal balance of power and unequal access to resources favouring one partner against the other. These resources, Connell says, may include money, physical strength and sexual attractiveness or even the capacity to deploy anger or love.

While the debate on sex work continues a view from the practitioners may be useful at this point. In the Manifesto for Sex Workers of Calcutta, they note under the sub-heading *why do women come to prostitution?*

Women take up prostitution for the same reason as they may take up any other livelihood options available to them. Our stories are not fundamentally different from the labourer from Bihar who pulls a rickshaw in Calcutta, or the worker from Calcutta who works part time in a factory in Bombay. Some of us get sold into the industry. After being bonded to the madam who has bought us for some years we gain a degree of independence within the sex industry. A whole of us end up in the sex trade after going through many experiences in life – often unwillingly, without understanding all the implications of being a prostitute fully (<http://www.bayswan.org/manifest.html>).

One notes from this discussion that the history of prostitution and work is one that is marred with many contradictions and complexities. It also tied in with the history of sexuality, social control and capitalist exchange relations, which increasingly commodify everything. Consequently, I find that taking a stance on either to use the term sex worker or prostitute is a complex and futile position. I will therefore want to use the terms interchangeably in this study, in order to allow for a break in the terminology monotony but also to make the political statement that a discussion of prostitution cannot be separated from a discussion of work. Trying to only name the trade prostitution and not see it as any other thing is hiding away from the practical reality of prostitution, since prostitution is not so much the sexual service but the return, or rewards that the persons who engages in it gets.

In conclusion, therefore, a lot can be said about the disciplinary factions that make up the world of scholarship on sex work. However, I will put the debate to rest if only because I have borrowed a few intellectual signposts that will help to mould the rest of this paper into a useful contribution to the debate. In the presentation of findings I will keep returning to some authors to draw energy and intellectual morale for arguments presented. I will only make one point that binds most of the pieces in this section together; that an intellectual engagement

with prostitution cannot operate without subverting the normalising strategies of social sciences. In the quest to understand the notion 'sex work', we need to work on the basic assumptions that create the knowledge of sexuality that we hold and use throughout our processes of knowledge production. As it will become evident in the sections that follow, the generation of knowledge in this work depends on innovations rather than inscriptions of the paradigms of traditional social science research.

### **Methodological Issues**

I open this section with a caveat that this paper in some ways grapples with the question of research ethics, often presented as a personal and moral concern for the individual researchers. At the outset, let me submit that, focusing on ethics can also be a way of de-emphasising and downplaying the power relations that structure every aspect of research. 'Ethics talk' can be a way of separating and 'purifying' one area of thought from another. By showing that ethical debate cannot be separated from questions of power, this study recognises the paradox that research cannot be justified - in and of itself - as an ethical practice because all social research *is* an engagement with power. Let me also add that the way individuals operate in sex work raises difficult methodological, ethical and philosophical questions, not only in the research process, but also in the evaluation of what the individuals are prepared to reveal about this most intimate part of their lives.

### **The Sampling Process**

Thirty-one (31) women who are self-professed sex workers were interviewed for this study. Ten of these were contacted through one of the sex workers who agreed to work with the research team – this group was coded as Speke Hotel Group. The rest were contacted through a Local Council (LC) leader in one of the locations of the study coded as the Kisenyi group.

### **Sampling for the Speke Hotel Group**

We contacted the main sex worker who worked with us one evening before the fieldwork commenced in a Kampala pub known as Rock Garden Café. Through a confidant who is a bouncer at the Café and also works in one of the sports clubs I go to, it was possible to establish contact with this key informant. I brought up the topic of sex work with the bouncer during one of our conversations and he offered to show me one of the girls who was 'good-natured' and would be helpful. We arranged a meeting through the club bouncer to talk to the key informant. At that meeting I introduced myself and told her about the objectives of the study but realised that she was reluctant to continue that conversation on the first day. We therefore talked about social life generally in order to build enough rapport. I gave some more explanations about the kind of work I was

doing but without asking for any particular help. She was fascinated by the idea that a man was 'just interested in learning about sex workers'. We arranged a second meeting for the following day to allow both of us to think through this first encounter.

From the bouncer I learnt that she crosschecked my information and asked if I was a genuine person or she was being used or spied on. After the bouncer convinced her, she accepted to come on the second day. I found out that this key informant was studying in one of the business schools in Kampala. She accepted to be part of the study if she was going to be paid for the time she would spend doing the work. We agreed on the mode and amount of payment. Her task was to identify some of her friends who would be willing to talk to the study team. She mentioned that she could identify them but it may be better that we meet them during the day or on Sundays when they are relatively free. She suggested that her residence would be the meeting place. Through her we managed to talk to nine (9) girls who all confirmed that they were sex workers. In order to ensure that we talked to operating sex workers, I always insisted that our main contact identify her friends during the evenings when we are in the bar. I would then follow up the meeting during the days suggested by the respondent.

### Sampling for the Kisenyi Group

Sampling for the Kisenyi Group was through a secretary of the Women Local Council in the area whom we had worked with on a previous study in the area. During that study on poverty we did an analysis of the livelihood options of a prostitute and drew a livelihood analysis diagram using participatory methods. When we asked a few questions on the subject of sex work, the LC official promised to be helpful when we come to do a specific study on sex work. When we returned for this study, she identified about 25 women who were sex workers, but we could not interview all of them for various reasons. Some were not available during the interview times and 3 of them refused to be part of the study.

### Sampling of Locations

Kisenyi is part of the Central business district area of Kampala City long associated with sex work. In the early sixties, it was known for bringing together many immigrants from different parts of East Africa. The people in Kisenyi still talk of the Tanzanian women known as the Baziba who were very popular among men because they were considered very beautiful<sup>1</sup>. Most of those working in the biggest market in the area lived in Kisenyi. In addition, prostitution has been politicised in the public sphere discourse of the area. For example, during the Constituent Assembly Elections in Uganda, one of the contestants for the election who is a half-caste was referred to as *mwana wa malaya* (*child of a prostitute*). We were told that because of this metaphor being used on the candidate he was able to win overwhelming support in Kisenyi because all the women in Kisenyi said *we*

*are all malayas so we shall give our son.*<sup>2</sup> The councillor has since then been an ardent supporter for sex workers rights and, in one of the dissemination exercises in a study we had done earlier, he specifically asked us not to use the word prostitute in our work but sex work.<sup>3</sup> These informed our decision to choose Kisenyi for this study.

Speke Hotel Area/Rock Garden Café is located in an area that could be taken as the *Red Light District* of Kampala, next to one of the popular and oldest hotels in Kampala, Speke Hotel. Sex workers line the streets around this café and the hotels in the neighbourhood, including Sheraton Hotel (a five-star hotel), Grand Imperial Hotel, Speke Hotel, Nile Hotel and Mosa Courts Apartments (high-class apartments). These are the best hotels in Uganda used by nearly all the expatriates that first come to Kampala. Mostly middle class Ugandans can afford to drink in this area where a bottle of beer goes for 1500–2000 shillings compared to 1000–1200 shillings in other places. It therefore attracts a richer clientele than other parts of Kampala.

#### Data Collection methods

In order to get data on a complex topic like prostitution, it is necessary to engage with the respondents' lived experiences and perspectives as well as the feelings and perspectives of other persons. I therefore used ethnographic research methods for data collection, emphasising the longer interviews and unstructured questioning as well as observation of the spaces where the different key informants were. The first self-professed prostitute who connected us to her friends was one of the key informants in this study. Through long-term engagement with her in the research process, she was able to reveal a lot of inside information that could not be easily accessed by working with tools like questionnaires. We were able to even hold focus group discussions – not structured in any conventional way – on tables in different bars where we worked. Though the women gave us their names they said they did not want them used in the report.

Many of the women in Speke Hotel area offered to first write a script about their lives, as a basis for discussion. Although some of the scripts were not easily readable, we worked with them and acknowledged their efforts as very important. We also worked with a short interview guide for the women in Kisenyi because they could not have long interviews with us. This is because some of them worked during the day and our 'transport refund'<sup>4</sup> was not enough for the long interviews which we wanted to carry out with them'.

We did not have any structured interviews with any men but talked to some of the men who have interacted with the world of prostitution. We talked to male bar attendants and security guards at the different drinking locations. Policemen were reluctant to participate in the research due, in part, to a big Uganda Government inquiry into police conduct concurrently taking place at the time of

this research. As one of the policemen we approached put it: 'how do we know that you are not Ssebutinde staff trying to find out how we handle these sex workers'.<sup>5</sup>

### **Problems Encountered during the Research**

Studying sex work is a challenging and interesting topic. One has to start by grappling with one's personal biases. In the first place I found that some of the questions we started off asking were sometimes offensive to the women whom we interviewed. So, we had to learn to ask questions in a non-offensive way and we had to be patient with the respondents.

We also had to find ways of working through some of the research biases that the respondents had. Sometimes the respondents started off talking about their problems and they were wondering if we worked for Non Governmental Organisations that could provide 'credit' for them. These kinds of respondents preferred to portray themselves as a suffering lot. After learning that we were not only interested in their problems but also about their daily coping mechanisms, they changed the direction of their answers to reveal the different ways in which they worked.

Interview times for this research were awkward. We had to always work late into the night. Some of the respondents felt safer talking after 10:00 p.m. We also sometime had to cope with the wrath some of the women had against the state. For example some of the women wanted to know why men go out with prostitutes and yet they are married, or why the Government does not want to legalise sex work yet so many men in Government go out with prostitutes. To these questions we had no answers and therefore all we did was to sometimes stimulate a debate and that meant that we ended up using a lot of time. We also had to spend a lot of money because we usually met in bars and we had to buy some drinks.

The methodologies used for this study could not be standardised to our satisfaction because we found that there were different perspectives we could not get at easily using some of the tools we are trained to use in social research. We therefore had to be as innovative as possible. In addition, because we often had late interviews without immediate recording, we had resort to recollections and, where possible, crosschecking information, but this was not always possible.

### ***The Routes and Roots of the Trade***

The story of the trade in sex in Kampala City cannot be divorced from the story of the rise and development of Kampala City. One of the detailed studies in the colonial scholarly tradition on urban living comes from the work of Southall and Gutkind. In *Townsmen in the Making*, they give an account of Kampala's development, pointing out that the object of the study was 'not to discredit the unfortunate, but to reveal the unhealthy features of urban development at their growing

points before they become widespread (1957:19). This shows the patriarchal and patronising principle that informed the production of knowledge on urban places. Indeed, for Southall *et al*, urban development only involved and affected ‘townsmen’, not ‘townswomen’. This is despite references to women in some of the observation scenes and indications of the central part they played in the waragi trade and the immunity they enjoyed from the Buganda Police because some of them were related to the Kingdom. These dynamics, one may argue, could have brought in more interesting analysis of some of the notions of identity in the urban setting and how the context influences people’s mobilisation of identity.

However works like the Southall study were instrumental in informing the colonial policy on ‘free’ developing communities in the city. These places were seen as deviant spots and therefore in need to be sanitised because they were in themselves creations of the failed strong hand of the colonial law on urban centres. They also recorded some of the issues of prostitution in Kisenyi and Mulago. One of the opening statements made in this study reveals the long held perception of Kisenyi as a haven for sex work: ‘Every variety of sexual relationships is found in Kisenyi, from relatively durable concubinage to blatant prostitution for cash payment. Kisenyi is always full of good-time girls who hang around beer bars waiting to be bought drinks’ (79). The quotation is accompanied with some detailed accounts of the ways in which different women and men were involved in sex work in Kisenyi.

To date, Kisenyi remains mostly the same, with just a few cases of out-migration by men and women since the end of colonialism. One elderly woman in Kisenyi who accepted a short interview about the changes that she saw in the area had this to say:

Today the high-class men do not come here for sex. In our days all the African men who were big shots in Government would have a girl in Kisenyi. We had the Baziba who were very beautiful and very ‘clean’ women and the men liked them a lot. But when the bazungu went at independence then the high-class men stayed up so they could drink from those bars where the bazungu used to go.<sup>6</sup>

Obbo (1980) has analysed some of these changes and their effects on women who migrated to Kampala City in the post independence period in Uganda. From the work of Southall and Obbo one realises that sex work in Kampala City is historically related to the changes in the urbanisation process. In the next section we focus on how some of the demographic characteristics of the interviewees helped to restructure their identity positions. This focus on the demographic is not just a description of characteristics. It aims to show how self-identity is

created through a negotiation with different normalising strategies of the individual.

### Demographics as Sites of Identity Construction

#### *Age and Identity*

When does one become a man or a woman? This is a question that not only related to the age as a demographic factor, but also relates to age a defining factor in prostitution. In the short survey of the 21 respondents in Kisenyi we found most of them (80 per cent) were below 30 years of age. Of these, about 38 per cent were below 20 years. This is an important indication that mostly young women are involved in sex trade. The ten respondents who offered life histories had an average age of 18 years. When we discussed the issue of age and its importance in the construction of the self-identity of the sex workers, one of the respondents had the following to say:

As young girls if you have dropped out of school or your family does not have money to pay for your school fees, sometimes you find that you have no choice but to quickly find an occupation that you can do while you are young. I did start off as a house-girl but all the boys in the family I was working for - even their father wanted to sleep with me and they were only paying me 10,000/= per month. I met a young woman who was staying near our shop and I noticed that she was always very smart and yet she was always at home through out the morning. So one day I asked her if she could help me and find a better job but she just laughed and said I should just wash her clothes. I did this for sometime and I found she had very nice trousers and shoes and I asked her again and one night she told me we should go together. That first night I earned 25,000/= shillings and I was fascinated by the idea that I could actually double my salary in a night. I realised I had to use this body before I grow old!<sup>7</sup>

Age for the women was seen as part of the critical points for a person who intends to be a sex worker. Indeed the women said that in some instances one has to look younger than one is - because 'men like young women... we do not even mention that one has ever had a baby otherwise the man may think that wagwaamu da (you are already spent)'.<sup>8</sup>

I am reminded of Giddens's (1991) argument that self-identity in what he calls 'high modernity' is sculptured from a complex plurality of choices and reordering of narratives. The narrative of age in this scheme of the prostitute's identity seems to be one that is reordered with contradictions and divergent choices. For the customer looking for the 'experienced' woman then age becomes a lucrative identity and yet for those who are out to explore the young and innocent, age

loses its currency. It is important therefore to recognise the role of age on the level of self and representative identity. Age offers a discursive space for the articulation and reproduction of different identities for the sex worker in which dominant definitions of feminine presented are made explicit and sometimes contested.

### ***Educated Identities***

Western education is one of the invasions brought by colonialism. Education is supposed to be mode by which 'civilisation' and 'modernity' is delivered (Alan 1990; Ashcroft *et al* 1995:425). Education as a technology of colonialist subjectification works by universalising values embedded in the English while representing the colonised as the inferior and uncivilised. The educated person can talk authoritatively and therefore access different kinds of spaces and mobilise different identities. Higher education improves wages and social status of people. For the sex worker, knowledge of the English language was not only a marker of success but a reaffirmation a sophisticated sex worker identity and gateway to success in the trade.

Most of the women we interviewed in this study said they had limited education. This meant that they had gone to school for a few years and did not speak very good English. Majority of the women in Kisenyi (57 per cent) reported that they had attended only primary school. There were a few women who had never attended any school. Education was an important factor because many of them cited the 'end of being at school' as a very decisive factor in their becoming sex workers. Below are some quotations from different women on education and how it shaped their lives:

#### ***Respondent 1:***

Yes, I used to go to Bwala Primary School and stopped in Primary 6. Things became very expensive and my parents could not afford school fees. I stayed at home for four years and I got a boy friend who made me pregnant and then he refused to take responsibility of the baby... I suffered and struggled until I gave birth. My child is now seven years and she goes to school.

#### ***Respondent 2:***

I used to go to school up to primary five but I found school boring and I was ageing (she was getting to 13 years) so I dropped out.

#### ***Respondent 3:***

Yes I have attended school and I am still in school in one of the schools in Kampala. (*she refused to mention the school and the class*). But I had to drop out

because my parents could not pay. But because I know I cannot be on the streets all my life, I go to school and I pay for myself.

**Respondent 4:**

I stopped in senior one. My father passed away when I was still very young and my mother got married to another man who helped to pay the school fees. He also died when I was in senior one and my mother become sickly. So I had to stop school so that my sisters and brothers could continue.

The quotations above point to the different ways in which education was very instrumental in influencing these respondents' decisions to opt for sex work. In addition, there was the reality that their parents could not cater for their daily needs when they dropped out of school.

Women also talked about the importance of education in sex work. As one of the women put it:

If you are educated there are chances of getting a good man. Those girls who know a lot of English easily get men. That is why some of the girls come from Makerere to work with us here because they know that if they 'add' their English to sex work they can make a lot of money on the streets. That is why there is a lot of competition now.<sup>9</sup>

Fulfilling a client's needs did not just entail having a good body but also being able to communicate in a way that ensures the camouflaging of the identity of the illiterate street girl. The women mentioned that sometimes men are attracted to women because they can speak 'good' English. One of the women brought out the perspective that one can deny her identity as a prostitute and therefore is able to negotiate a higher fee if she can portray herself as *a good girl who 'does not do these things for money' but just has a small problem*. Again one notices the mobility and fluidity of identities in sex work intertwining the discursive strategy of being an educated person. The women involved have learnt to *live* these multiple identities as everyday strategies of their investment in sex work. Education was therefore related more to the representative identity that the prostitute mobilises.

While age is a marker of self-identity as shown in the previous section, education was an icon, a defining factor that gets thrown into the body market place through the employment of language and speech. Indeed in the whole schemata of the use of English, one sees the ways in which language is a fundamental site for identity construction and therefore is a potent instrument for cultural control but in this case for entering the post colonial body market. The English language here displaces the native languages of the sex workers which are then constituted as impurities. English becomes the standard while other languages are variants (Ashcroft *et al*, 1995).

### Place and the Identity Question

The place subject is supposed to be able to throw light upon subjectivity itself (Ashcroft *et al.*, 1995). It is important to think of place conceptually because the relationship between the self and place where the self is located can increase our understanding of the notion of identity. The naming of a space as urban gives it a discursive productivity and a history and process of social construction is embedded on it. For the sex worker, the space where the trade can be carried out is a not only a visual construct. It is also a space that enables alternative lifestyles. The sex workers in this study came from different parts of the country. For example, 38 per cent of the respondents in Kisenyi were from the western parts of Uganda. Another 38 per cent came from southern Uganda; about 20 per cent from the central districts and 5 per cent from the eastern parts of the country. Some of the respondents from the south mentioned that they came from as far as Rwanda.

The wide regional representation of these sex workers was significant for other reasons. Some of them noted that some men even go on to ask them where they come from before they can buy their services. The women noted that these were usually men who looking for women from specific tribes because of the imaginations they held about the sexual prowess of certain ethnic groups. In a group discussion the women mentioned that the Banyarwanda and the Banyankole were seen as women with better bodies than most of the other girls.<sup>10</sup>

Respondents in Kisenyi noted that currently the ethnic mix is mostly Ugandan and as one respondent mentioned, there were many more people from different East African countries in Kisenyi in the sixties and early seventies. They noted that the eighties and beyond were marked with political upheavals and economic hardships and therefore it was mostly women from within the country who migrated to Kisenyi. The Speke Hotel Group also mentioned that in other locations like Kasanga there are many more women from different countries. One of them had this to say:

The Banyarwanda, Barundi and the women from Zaire usually opt to stay in places like Kasanga. This is because here the community does not care a lot about the girls and most of the people in the slums around work in bars where these girls go so they do not want to antagonise them. After all, they are the ones who make business boom. When some of the women from these neighbouring countries come to Kampala, they hire a room and they stay there for about one or two months and they live in group of four or five afterwards they go back to their countries. These girls speak many languages like – French, English, German and very good Kiswahili so the white men like them a lot.<sup>11</sup>

From the above quote it is evident that origin for the women in sex work was not limited to Uganda only. We had a chance to talk to one of the girls who said she comes from Rwanda and she said that, *Uganda today has got a lot of white men who come to do work for many Government projects in the country and we come to give them company*. In this kind of migration, the anticipation of the kind of clientele that is available in the certain place is a very crucial factor. We shall return to the point of clientele later. Many of the girls also mentioned that they came from rural areas. We did not have a question on the rural-urban divide but the metaphor 'coming from the village' was very prominent in the speech of the different women we interviewed.

It is important to point out that the use of these three kinds of demographic characteristics is not so much to stay true the traditional social sciences – of knowing the demographic structures - but to actually interrogate their contribution to the production of the identity of the sex worker. One notes that sex workers' representation and self-identities are negotiated within other demographic discourses. This section therefore attempts to elaborate that age, education and place provide different iconographic energies to the construction of the identity of the sex worker. In the next section I go on to present the different *sites* where multiple identities are played out. I discuss how these different factors shape and are reshaped by the existence of sex work.

### Space, Sex and Identities

In this section, I engage in an interrogation of the role of spaces in the constitution of the identities employed by the sex worker. It is important first to start with a theoretical exposé if only to rejuvenate the spirit that informs my analysis. Harvey (1990) argues that the capitalist mode of production is one where material practices and processes of social reproduction are always changing and with that comes the attendant changes in the meanings of spaces. In the progress of capitalist consumption and production our conceptual apparatuses and representations of space and time change, with material consequences for the ordering of daily life. The invasion of the capitalist mode of production on the space we call Africa today is a case in point for this study.

The case of the Ugandan urban experience is anchored within the paradigm fetishised by the colonialist that the African was a temporary waged worker at the risk of being 'detrified' (Cooper 1996). This was then turned into the vision of the African - turned industrial man after colonialism - living with his wife and children in the modern society. Around this conception came the problems that we see throughout the urban experience. When the above two fetishes failed, a patriarchal and gendered imagery of African labour followed. The colonialist became obsessed with prescribing a social reproduction of a space where the African wage labourer would be joined by his wife and the wife's role prescribed

as *reproducer of labour*. The African woman was relocated to the informal urban locale or customary structures to ensure masculine domination over her in the urban space reconstructed by colonial powers.

Obbo captures the attendant spatial and social reproduction of identities that occurred through time. She writes that once ‘the migrants have arrived in the towns, they make pragmatic attempts to relate to the urban conditions that they encounter, as individuals, as members of ethnic communities, and as representatives of social groupings and classes (including religious organisations), or just as women’ (1980:101). In the urban setting, new meanings can be found for older embodiments of space while ancient spaces are appropriated in very modern ways, sometimes subverting the original logic prescribed for the urban space (Harvey 1990).

In this regard, we recognise that the pace occupied by sex work is constructed around the western capitalist mode of production discourse. This discourse celebrates the male libido whose erotic explorations are fulfilled as part of the accumulation of resources and exploitation of the female body. In the next section I give some of the recorded descriptions of the different spaces and the attendant discourses that surround these spaces.

### The Homes of Sex Work

The slum has always been a sexualised and ‘free’ space where anything can be done. There are therefore a variety of activities and opportunities in slum areas. Southall *et al* describe Kisenyi as undergoing ‘free urban development’, explaining that: ‘free here means free from fully effective regulation of the building and settlement’ (1957:19). In Kisenyi, as in many other slums, *effective regulation* of the sex worker is also not possible. The women in this study mentioned that the reason they choose slums for places of abode is because ‘no one peeps into your life’. One is thus able mobilise identities in a way that is not possible in other locations where government regulatory apparatus is used to ‘poke’ into people’s businesses. The slums are therefore important spaces for the sex worker in urban areas because of the *laissez faire* identity. They also make economic sense for the struggling sex worker who needs cheap accommodation and minimal attention. Many of the women in this study would either live in the slum or work in the slum. Even for those who chose to work in the high-class parts of the city, the slum was always an important place of abode.

Sex workers in Kisenyi generally worked from their homes, although some had makeshift brothels, which they operated from. One of them described how the brothels functioned:

Usually, an official on the LC in this area owns the house. So he takes care of any law enforcers who may want to disturb us. We pay him some five thousand shillings per day and he gives you a room where you meet your customers. I come

here from around 10:00 am in the morning and sometimes I go on until the evening. The owner provides a bed; some water, and soap. Business is good here and one just has to decide how long you are ready to work each day.<sup>12</sup>

Another kind of brothel mentioned by the respondents is the 'lodge'. These have proliferated the Kampala urban space, and depend mostly on 'short time' customers ready to pay the rate equivalent to that charged for a full night's accommodation. They serve a more upper class clientele, generally middle class males who want a decent place away from the eyes of the public.<sup>13</sup> It was mentioned in the group discussions that some lodges are located in decent neighbourhoods, which do not have any inscriptions of sex work on them.

### Places of Operation

From the previous discussion, we notice that homes of sex work only involve those spaces where service provision is carried out. From the respondents, we found that the various locations preferred by different clients determine the sex workers' 'point of soliciting'.<sup>14</sup> When a question was asked about places of operation we had various responses, although three major categories could be discerned. Some women solicited sex on the streets, dance halls and bars even when they operated from different places. A respondent's narrative of her daily routine during the week is useful at this point:

After I put my house in order, I start off at around 5:00 p.m. and I go to one bar in the middle of town where I play some pool up to around 7:30 p.m. Sometimes I get lucky and get a customer during that period. But, if I do not get one I chat with the bar boys and any patrons in the bar. At 7:30 p.m. I walk along Nile Avenue to see if there is any customers passing by. If there are no customers coming my way I go to Rock Garden Café or Speke Hotel. I go to the toilets and make up my face in the Ladies and sometimes change my dress, because in the day I wear trousers and in the evening the men want to see your legs so you have to expose them. I then move on to the streets up to about 10:30 p.m. Usually I get a customer for a short time before 10:00 p.m. If I do not get one I then go to a bar in Kansanga where many white men drink till late. I stay there until I get someone for the night.<sup>15</sup>

This narrative was very telling for us because it made us understand how sex workers negotiate different identities to fit in different contexts. Most of the girls mentioned that operating in those different contexts required having friends who work in the bars or hotels that can allow the women use a table for drinking while waiting for customers. Some sex workers also pointed out that important as it is, moving around is easier for those who have worked long enough to make many friends in the city as well as escape bullying by other girls. Newcomers to the business mentioned that they needed to first operate from one place before going out to other places.

Some respondents highlighted how the days of the week determined a sex worker's mode of operation. One girl had this to say:

On weekends there are many people around, so the clubs and the bars are very popular. Men get drunk as early as 7:00 p.m. and want sexual services after that. On weekdays it is a bit complicated and sometimes the most lucrative places are the streets because the men want to have some quick sex and then go home. So one has to keep thinking about where to go.<sup>16</sup>

Apparently, a number of strategic decisions have to be made for one to be able to get the most out of sex work.

Additionally, the importance of foreigners in boosting sex trade was highlighted. The women in this study mentioned that when there are many 'foreign guests' in town, especially white men, their business booms. Many women remembered when a contingent of American troops en route Rwanda during the aftermath of the 1995 genocide came to Uganda. Those who were sex workers at the time said that they made a lot of money. Other respondents also mentioned that at times when there are conferences with foreign delegates – these are very lucrative times. A newspaper article in the Sunday Monitor captures the essence of the moment when it describes the life of sex workers in Durban. The author writes:

From experience, major conferences, never mind what kind, offer a considerable upswing income. Last year's Commonwealth Heads of State conference, also held in Durban, saw her averaging R 500 (USD 5) a day. There was no way she was going to miss out on the 13th International AIDS Conference. AIDS or no AIDS, survival was the game. Better to die of AIDS than of starvation, she thinks. (Commeey 2000)

Though written with an air of chauvinism the article did point to some of the gains that international conferences offer to sex work. However, the author portrays prostitutes as if they never think of AIDS but only their survival, an issue that is inconsistent with the findings of this study.

Some respondents also pointed out that they go upcountry or outside Uganda for sex work. However, they were quick to add that they only do this if there they know they will make money from other towns. In fact, one of our respondents felt that most towns in Uganda are not 'good for business' because, in most places, there are local women who usually charge very little money compared to the Kampala based women. Some of the outside 'markets' for Ugandan sex workers was Kenya, although portrayed to have recently become less lucrative. Our key respondent for the Speke Hotel group had a story to tell us about her trip to Dubai:

I saved money for a ticket and pocket money to go to Dubai for about eight months. A woman who had been to Dubai before convinced me to think of going to Dubai. We got visas and I bought my ticket and we went. In Dubai we started off in a small hotel where we both stayed. But I did not like the life in Dubai at all. We were going out with mostly Pakistan and Indian men who were very low class workers. They gave us a few dinars, which were equivalent to about 6,000 Uganda shillings. It was so disappointing to me. In Kampala that is money paid by taxi conductors and I do not go out with such men! It was so difficult even to make enough money for one to survive in Dubai. The men preferred prostitutes from Russia because they were white women. The Arabs were also very queer men. They would buy you and only have anal sex. I am not used to that and it was very uncomfortable. After two weeks I became desperate and I wanted to move on. The other disappointing thing was that the women we found in Dubai had sold their passports to some black market people and they were very hostile and intimidated me to give them my passport. I refused and they wanted to beat me. I had to change my hotel after and when I realised it was getting more dangerous, I booked my flight and came back to Uganda. I think in Uganda I am better off.<sup>17</sup>

Sex workers do not imagine success only at home. They also migrate for work to other countries. In this narrative it was clear that it is not very simple for the sex worker to break into other worlds. These kinds of trips are fuelled by the imagination and success stories that the women have been fed with. Most of the women believed they would go to Dubai, have sex with some 'Oil Sheikh' and come back to Uganda driving a sleek car with a lot of money to invest in business. This was mentioned many times by some of the younger girls. Many of the girls were also trying to find ways of travelling to foreign countries like Britain and the Scandinavian countries. One of the women mentioned that her colleagues had become successful because she was working in a Strip-Tease bar in Copenhagen, Denmark - she was saving money to join her.

### **The Price Tag**

Early studies on Kampala suggest that sex for money has been around for some-time. Southall *et al* (1957) pointed out the different rates and modalities applied by Baziba women in charging for sex in Kisenyi. Gutkind (Southall *et al*, 1957) also reports that the phenomenon of charging men money for sex was prevalent in Mulago. Obbo (1980) introduces another angle when she analysed how women in Namuwongo, another low-income community, manipulated the men in their lives to get money from them. One of our respondents indicated an ambiguity around money and relationships. She mentioned that money was one thing that

needed careful negotiation. All the respondents mentioned a variable price for sexual services based on customers' presentation. A respondent had this to say:

Some of the men want straight sex so they ask you up-front how much you want and they 'go with you' and you pay. In that case you only have to ask if it is 'short time' and 'transnight'. If he looks smart and a presentable gentleman you then ask for 10,000/= -15,000/= for short time and about 30,000-50,000/= for transnight. If you have already worked and you can afford to 'miss him' you can play around with him, go and dance, drink beer and then disappear when he is drunk and you go home. If the man is an amateur you may decide to push the price higher. If it is a muzungu you charge in dollars usually between \$20-50 depending on how he looks. Very few bazungu want short time. Sometimes, you find that it is a guy who always comes back to you so you give him the price he is comfortable with. Sometimes you like the character of the man so you do not charge him a lot so he can keep coming back. Other times he can be a filthy guy but also with a lot of money so you give him a high price and go with him. There are many things that one has to consider in this business.<sup>18</sup>

Incomes earned from prostitution do not appear in the statistics on prostitution. However, for women involved in prostitution, these incomes offer a competitive and viable work option to some of the work in other professions. Respondents pointed out that they are able to invest their money in other businesses, pay for brothers and sisters in schools and carry out a variety of livelihood support activities spent 'responsibly'.

From a theoretical perspective, I am reminded of Appadurai's (1986) thesis regarding the artificiality of the divide between commodities and gifts. In one sense, it is 'Ugandan custom', in sex work, that the man who takes out a lady pays the bills while expecting 'something' [read sexual favour] in return for this generosity. Yet, girls do not always want to 'pay back' in the ways that men would want to be paid back. Clearly many of relationships in Uganda are understood and mediated through the medium of money, but how much coercive power does this social category – money – have? Does control of money define the shape of the relationships? How does sex work reshape understanding of commodities? Can we then talk about the materiality of relationships and sociality of things? In this case, is money only a material resource that shapes the social world of prostitution or is there a social element that is fulfilled in the exchange of money in relationships (Ssewakiryanga and Mills, 1995)? If the sex worker engages in sex work to fulfil material needs, could we argue that men buy sex to fulfil a socially anchored need – the expression of male domination and satisfaction of the male ego? Answering these kinds of questions will help us under-

stand the confusing tangle of things, emotions and power that make up everyday experiences of sexual relationships in the area of work.

### **The Commodity – The Body**

The body-as-used, the body I am, is a social body that has taken meanings rather than conferred them (Connell, 1987:83).

Connell's point above provides us with a very important tool to analyse how identities are deployed within the world of sex work. It shows how the different elements of our social practice act as significant markers of our bodies. Connell indicates the inadequacy of using the body as a biologically determined entity since social processes essentially mark bodies and therefore allows different uses of the body. Moore (1987) also makes another point when she borrows Bourdieu's phrase that 'bodies take metaphors seriously'. Consequently, living bodies give substance to the social distinctions and differences that underpin social relations. If one is to link this to the representation of bodies in sex work, one realises that the body of the sex worker is an important part in the construction of what sex work is. The body of the sex worker is adorned, pierced and oiled to live to the patriarchal ideology of the feminine.

Nearly all the girls we talked to mentioned that it was important to keep ones body 'in shape', 'clean' and try to wear 'something sexy'. All these were telling metaphors because they were anchored within a knowledge base that celebrated certain elements of femininity. One of the girls had this to say when interviewed about what they wear and how appearance counts in this trade:

Our bazungu [white men] customers like slender and dark girls. The fat girls do not get a lot of market among the whites. The black men have varied tastes but some of them look only for fat girls. One has to be careful about how you look if you are targeting the guys with good money then you have to work on yourself very well. We also have to dress well, you have to know what is the latest style and try and get it. The good thing is that Owino market<sup>19</sup> now has a good variety of clothes. Some of the shops in town also have good and cheap clothes - one has to always be on the look out. Of course the short skirts are very popular and so are the bikini-like dresses, so we have to look for those ones also. For the hair, braids are the best because they are cheap to maintain and one does not have to keep worrying about combing after every customer.<sup>20</sup>

It appears then that many ideologies and discourses are mobilised in determining how sex workers treat their bodies. Some of these markers can be traced back to how the black woman has been represented by colonial history. A case in point is the history of Sarah Bartman, the slave woman billed the 'Hottentot Venus',

whose naked body is still displayed after her death in the Musée d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris. Studied by many scientists, her nude body and large buttocks is admired by a large audience in Europe as the icon of colonial African women's sexuality. The quote below illustrates the paradox of images held within the colonial world and surviving today. 'African men were assumed to be virile, to have huge penises, and to be obsessed with despoiling the European women, while the African women were assumed to be insatiable mistresses of seduction, a disposition which rendered them well suited for the provision of sexual services (Mama 1997: 68).

We still need to seriously ponder the extent to which these images have been deconstructed. However, what we see here is that sex workers live to some society images of femininity that also contribute to the perpetuation of sex trade. Another important element is how these women negotiate their body politics, which is essentially anchored with the 'politics of dress'. The women have got to look and imagine themselves as modern even if the second hand market is the only place of solace. They buy these clothes because the magazines, the TV, the videos all sanction certain images as modern, sophisticated and sexual. One of the women mentioned that they use JIK detergent to bleach themselves since the 'brown girl' is one of the identities in vogue.<sup>21</sup> Let me move into the area of representation and try to establish the connections.

### Representing Sex Work

One of the elements that this research investigated is how sex workers are represented both in speech and in writing. In order to give this section meaning I take recourse in some of the works that critic the very notion of what we use as an essential paradigm of gender studies today. Here I am inspired by the following words of MacKinnon:

Post-Lacan, actually post-Foucault, it has become customary to affirm that sexuality is socially constructed. Seldom specified is what, social, it is constructed of, far less who does the constructing or how, when, or where. When Capitalism is the favoured social construct, sexuality is shaped and controlled and exploited and repressed by capitalism; not, capitalism creates sexuality as we know it ... 'Constructed' seems to mean influenced by, directed, channelled, like a highway constructs traffic patterns. Not: Why cars? Who is driving? Where's everybody going? What makes mobility matter? Who can own a car? Are these accidents not very accidental (MacKinnon 1990: 212)?

The media, mostly print media, is very instrumental, in creating the identity of the prostitute. A very recent phenomenon in Uganda provides a case in point. In September 2000, Uganda witnessed massive arrests of sex workers off the streets

by the Police. They were sent to Luzira Maximum Security Prison on charges of being 'idle and disorderly'. It beats one to understand the logic of that phrase but it seems an uncontested notion of the post-colonial law in Uganda. What was interesting however was how the prostitutes were photographed or drawn in cartoons. The front pages of the daily paper the *New Vision* and the *Monitor* all chose the photos of the sex workers boarding a very high lorry to Luzira. The photos all gave a detailed rear view of the most skimpy dressed sex workers. The cartoons that followed were even more intriguing and mostly eroticised the image of the sex worker so as to speak the language of male domination.<sup>22</sup>

In his work on cartoons, Mbembe (1997) called this representation the 'image as a figure of speech'. He argues that the pictographic sign does not solely belong to the field of seeing but is in itself a figure of speech. This speech is expressed as a mode of describing, narrating and representing reality as well as a particular strategy of persuasion and even violence (Mbembe 1997: 152). This is a useful tool for engaging the different articles that came out after the arrest of prostitutes. Some people supported sex work. Others felt it was an immoral act. Some take it to be a part of the strategies towards eradication of poverty in people's livelihoods. However, each of these views would be accompanied by a picture that will allow the 'male gaze' to function as an act of male domination and even violence.<sup>23</sup>

This representation is a normalising strategy, which intends to demonise, eroticise and fantasise prostitution as an object of sexuality. This opaque violence (to borrow Mbembe's term) in figurative expression through cartoons for public consumption affirms and recreates an imagined identity of the sex worker. An analysis of these cartoons is material for another study. However, I need to point out that one needs to read a number of discourses at play in these cartoons. What is seen – the visible cartoon – and what is not seen are both important figures of speech. In these cartoons, patriarchal social reality is transformed into a sign, which the public uses to decipher the erotic world of sex work. The 'invisible' evoked by the cartoons or the 'imagined visible' are not just two sides of the same coin, but are both played out as part of the same sexual and erotic identity of the sex worker.

### Sex Work and the State

Here, I locate the discussion of sex work and the state in a framework that links identity politics to notions of the state. Identity politics in relation to sexuality is a problematic category. Different experiences and political desires of certain groups reconstruct what is known as identity politics. An analysis of identities can focus on the subject – that is the issues that a certain groups intend to put forward. It can also focus on the *form* that the identity politics tends to take (Wendy 1995). I

consider both to be equally critical to the analysis of sex work, and will therefore examine *issues* and *form* for a contextual understanding sex work and its

There is always the danger of turning identity politics into 'injury politics', with claims and counter claims about a phenomenon like sex work. However, it is important to note that the quest for moral claims usually get handed over to the state authorities like the police and the justice system. This implies that a new legitimisation is endowed on these state structures (Valverde 1999). The state structures therefore take it upon themselves to decide and to take action on any issues of conflict between the state and sex workers. This not only empowers the sexist police and prison apparatus but also robs identity politics of its revolutionary potential.

The state's violence against prostitution is one way of constructing different identities of the prostitute. In this regard, the sex workers' challenge of state hegemonies can be regarded as 'resistance identities'. These are identities that the prostitutes deploy in order to survive through situations where they get in contact with state agents. The police have always been the chief agents in the regulation and disciplining of prostitutes. Before we get into the insights provided by the different prostitutes on this issue I want to revisit the notion of the body and how bodies resistant and are controlled. In his analysis of Foucault's notion of power, Patton (1998) notes that adult pleasures are separated in two categories - the normal and the pathological. This he says is one of the pedagogic controls of the experience of modernity. In this schema, the female body is connected to the realm of reproduction and childbirth and these become the 'taken for granted' in orderings and classifications of the female body. Nevertheless, in this construction, sexuality is always fabricated upon an active body and therefore resistance always accompanies the deployment of sexuality.

The police are always a real and feared arm of government for prostitutes in Kampala. Many respondents in Kisenyi identified their worst days in relation to arrests by police. One of the women had this to say:

The police arrested me one day and the policeman gave me three options: give him all the money I had worked for, sleep with him or take me to the police. My money was hidden in two places in my bag and under my shoe. So I gave him – 10,000 shillings from my bag and then he said that I am a crook and he knew I am hiding some money in my shoe. I then had no choice but to give him the money in my shoe. It seems he had ever arrested somebody else who hid money in the shoe. So he took all my 30,000 shillings I had made that night. I was very frustrated. I just took a cab and went home crying.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, law enforcers use their power not only to discipline women, but also to extort money for their own personal gain and affirm patriarchal control. Some

women noted that sometimes when they stand near guarded places, the security agents are useful allies. For a fee, they help sex workers escape the wrath of the police. However, in other instances, the women did have a lot of problems with the police who sometimes become very violent and beat them up. One woman had this to say:

One day we were standing with my friend in our spot and then a small car with a muzungu and a policeman inside stopped and, as they jumped out, the policeman started by slapping me and said bring the dollars! Bring the dollars! I had no clue what he was talking about but it seems the muzungu had been robbed and he could not identify the girl who robbed him. They took us to a police station and we had to spend the night in jail. The next day I sent one of the policemen to a friend who came and I had to promise to give my friend my TV as mortgage so that I could find money for bail. Life on the streets can sometimes be very tough.<sup>25</sup>

In Kampala, the most spectacular swoop was the massive arrest of 60 sex workers from different streets and nightclubs in the city by the Police and Local Defence Units personnel in September 2000. The culprits were charged and taken to Luzira prison. There were mixed reactions to this from different places. Some people called it a hypocritical response to the issue of prostitution in the city. The Chairperson of an organisation known as Federation of Women Business Industry Organisation and Agriculture contributed money towards the prostitutes' bail.<sup>26</sup> The sex workers vowed to go back to their businesses and even offered 'half price' to their customers to make up for the 'times of scarcity' when they were in jail.<sup>27</sup>

This incident exposes the confusion in the state's attitude to prostitution in Uganda. Whereas the law seems to criminalise prostitution, the state's law organs were completely confused about how to handle the sex workers. Many newspaper articles challenged criminalising prostitution without any thought about the identity of the clients. They regarded this outlook as very problematic and a reinforcement of the sexual domination that favours men in heterosexual liaisons. It appeared, from this incident, that the state was reacting to what we have termed 'injury politics' – with some people feeling that sex work was injuring their self-esteem as people and therefore the sex workers had to stop. The state in this case reproduced the violence against the sex workers, through invoking the power of the legal discourse of being idle and disorderly.

Other significant reactions to the incident included one from the Vice President (who is a woman) who was quoted as having argued that no one should talk about sex work without talking about how to find alternative survival strategies for the women.<sup>28</sup> She argued that women sex workers do not enjoy sex but do it

in order to survive and provide money for their children. The Vice President thus revealed the complexity of the demarcation between pleasure and work and the plight of prostitution. She was arguing from an alternative discourse that did not just view sex outside marriage as very evil and sexual services as deviant behaviour. It became apparent from the reactions to her utterance, that many members of the public wanted to stay true to the discourse that mutes the voice of the sex worker. However, what was also interesting to note that the radio stations also cashed in on this event and quickly moved into inviting self-professed prostitutes to the radio stations so that they can offer their views.

A recurring discourse here is the insistence that prostitutes were forced into sex work. Very few people considered it as a deliberate alternative choice by the sex worker. Interestingly, one respondent who 'feels comfortable with this work' attributed this to 'the kind of talk that many people wanted to hear'. Consequently, within the public culture discourse, sex work was still an ambivalent issue. The sexual act was still seen to function within a heterosexual conjugal union and the sex worker was a deviant. The public was thus concerned with thinking of 'alternative' ways of stopping sex workers. By implication, the solution lay in controlling the women, with nothing serious being said about the male clients. The men seemed to be invisible, even as customers. The only clue available to the public was that the men are 'powerful' and 'respectable' people. In the public debate the men's voice was muted; only heard when condemning the girls and seeking a redemptive strategy to close off the deviant behaviour. This in itself is a reductionist approach that offers a universalist solution without a critical analysis of the different aspects that interplay in sex work.

### Concluding Remarks

Based on current narratives of struggle and play of identities in sex work, it seems the polemics around prostitution will continue. There are debates about who gains from prostitution, whether prostitution is sex work, how much the men gain, whether there is a political economy of prostitution and whether sexuality should ever be liberated. While all these are still being played out, this study is a rejoinder to the continuing debate in the conceptualisation of sex and work. The conviction to take the bold step and investigate the question of sex work is in itself a political position that warns against reliance on hearsay and fabricated moral prescriptivism to answer complex questions that surround the area of sex work. Even with 'tongue in the cheek' caveats slapped on this narrative, I will try and point out some treads we can use to give some pattern and colour to this complex question.

### For or Against Sex Work?

In order to make myself clearer I need to emphasize what this study is NOT about. Many times authors who write either in the newspapers or in academic

publications want to get to the question of *why do women enter the world of sex work?* I do not think this is the most important question in trying to understand sex work. The reasons for entering a 'profession' is just one part of the story, and I think this perspective is located within the narrow focus that prostitution is a problem for women only. Asking the question why men buy sex is also important but may also polarise the debate and it becomes 'the knowing woman trying to find out what the pathological man is doing'. What I intend to do in this work therefore, is to move the debate into a realm that asks questions of the ways in which bodies are *disciplined* by different social systems and how new identities emerge in this process. The fact that there are emergences of new identities does not provide all the answers but helps us to look at the nuances that get covered up in the patriarchal sexual domination that women involved in sex work have to negotiate on an everyday basis.

The only moral I would like to associate with is contained in an analogy by Shrage (1990). The analogy is that: if a person decides to eat cat and dog meat, is the most important question whether eating dog or cat meat is 'really' healthy or unhealthy? Or whether it is 'really' like eating chicken or beef? What may be the most important point is that if one includes dogs' meat in ones diet, the person upsets others and therefore does damage to both themselves and to others. Hence the issue I am raising in this work is that 'objective reality' (if the dog meat is 'really' healthy) is not the most important but the 'social reality' (you and others are affected by your eating dog's meat) in which we live. Hence the argument here is not that unconventional behaviour is okay, but that, within the unconventional behaviour, we need to ask the harder questions of how it is played out in society. In there, lies the answer of the different ways in which capitalist domination articulates itself with the realm of sexuality. In that way we then get to the questions of the different elements of power that structure our identity and hence our relative position in society. Identity helps one to locate their position on the social compass, thereby getting one step further in deciding which direction one wants to take. This is the intellectual project that this paper tries to achieve.

Sexuality is one of the areas that have undergone a critical and yet frustrating engagement in feminist and gender work. Feminism gave us the energy to critic sexuality in the famous pronouncement of the 'personal is political'. Put another way, that the sexual is political'. What this meant was that we cannot keep engaging debates about sexuality as part of the private sphere which we know is marred with different shades of domination. This opening up has meant that even in the conceptualisation of other parts of the feminine experience one cannot run away from engaging with the most oppressive locale for many women in the world. As we question sex and work, there are unresolved questions about the nature of sexuality itself. Heterosexuality has already been earmarked as having undue oppression because of the ways in which it appropriates domestic work as no work

and also uses sex work as a mode of oppression. Yet for many and mostly the developing world feminists, the role of heterosexuality is seen as central to the continuation of society's affirmation of other experiences of emancipation.

This study is anchored within this very large and ongoing debate in which I decided to take the narrow focus of 'wondering about' identities and sex work. We have made snapshots at the different parts of what sex work is – the place, the bodies involved, the spaces they occupy, their representation and the ways in which other hegemonic sites interface with the sex worker. There are other parts that have been deliberately left out, for example - the role of men – because one needs a theorisation of masculinities in order to arrive at some systematic knowledge production process in this area. This study cannot therefore end with a moral tone but rather with an affirmation that sex work as an experience of the advent of capitalist economies is in itself a very complex trade, the emancipatory sites within it are only limited and confined within the dominant site of male domination. Hence, to think of deconstructing sex work further, we should go on to engage the nature of capitalism and how it has been managed in the post-colonies; how it has become both a vehicle of emancipation and also oppression through its different shades of perpetuating patriarchy. I dare say that prostitution is not an aberration but it is a consequence of well-established beliefs and values that form part of the foundation of our lives – we need to redirect our guns to those beliefs and values!

### Notes

- 1 Information given by the LC I councillor who worked with us as a guide on this study. For purposes of this study we shall refer to her as the Guide. Studies by Southall and Obbo attest to some of these facts. See for example, Southall A. W et al. (1957) *Townsmen in the Making: Kampala and its suburbs*; and Obbo Christine (1980): *African Women: Their Struggle for Economic Independence*.
- 2 Information from the Guide.
- 3 This was during the dissemination exercise for a on poverty assessment in Kampala. One of the activities we had to do was to take back the finding in a public meeting where the leaders from the area would be given a chance to comments
- 4 This refers to the small incentive fee of 5,000 shillings, which we had to give to each of the women.
- 5 Ssebutinde was the name of the Judge who headed the inquiry into the police. The particular policeman who said this was a friend because he came from the village neighbouring the secondary school I went to. But he was very sceptical about my involvement in this kind of study and was convinced that I had sinister motives. After sometime we also reanalysed our objectives

and were convinced that a police perspective would be another interesting study of it own.

- 6 Interview with elderly woman in Kisenyi May 2000
- 7 Interview with a woman staying in Kabalagala and working in the Rock Garden Café area.
- 8 This is a metaphor that suggests that some one had slept with so many men and therefore her body is spent. It is also interesting to note that in some other instances experience was said to be a very good investment because some men wanted 'experienced' women.
- 9 Interview with a woman from Kisenyi – May 2000
- 10 Group discussion in Rock Garden Café – June 2000
- 11 Interview with women in Rock Garden Café – June 2000.
- 12 Interview with a woman in Kisenyi May 2000
- 13 This issue was mentioned by a barman in Kabalagala
- 14 To use a working place language I have called this section Front Office to describe a space where the client first goes before being attended to.
- 15 Interview with a woman in Rock Garden Café – May 2000
- 16 Interview with a woman in Capital Pub – June 2000
- 17 Interview with women in Al's Bar Kansanga – April 2000
- 18 Interview with women in Gourmet Bar near Ange Noir Discotheque – June 2000
- 19 Owino market is one of the biggest markets in Kampala and is located in the central business area of the city near Kisenyi community.
- 20 Interview with a woman in Rock Garden Café – June 2000
- 21 Interview with woman in the Kisenyi – May 2000
- 22 See *Sunday Vision* of October 8th 2000, p. 14 and *Monitor* of September 11th 2000 in appendix I.
- 23 See for example cartoon in the *New Vision* of October 16, 2000 in appendix II.
- 24 Interview with women in Rock Garden Café – June 2000
- 25 Interview with women in Kisenyi – June 2000
- 26 See *The Monitor* September 30, 2000
- 27 See *The Monitor* October 1st 2000
- 28 See *Sunday Vision* article by John Eremu entitled: *VP Defends Prostitution*, October 15, 2000 and cartoon on October 16, 2000 in *New Vision*

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