

# Prostitution as a Social Issue - The Experiences of Russian Women Prostitutes in the Barents Region

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to shed light on women's subjective experiences in prostitution in the Barents Region. The article focuses on prostitution as a local activity in the Murmansk area in north-western Russia and as mobile prostitution in the northern parts of Finland, Sweden and Norway. We concentrate on examining the prostitutes' experiences as a phenomenon related to individual, cultural and living conditions that, in one way or another, push women towards prostitution. In this article we examine prostitution by studying the individual and societal factors that women attribute to their decision to engage in prostitution and the meanings they assign to their experiences within prostitution.

Prostitution is often studied as a human trafficking phenomenon (e.g., Sipaviciene 2002; Hughes 2005) wherein the women are considered as victims; our analysis differs from this viewpoint because we focus on women's experiences by connecting them to the women's everyday environment, the local and societal factors attached to the status of women and female prostitutes. Furthermore, prostitution is often studied from the point of view of the target country rather than the women's homeland. Localized research on prostitution is lacking, especially in Russia. More research is required on how specific contexts, conditions, features, routines and relationships are associated with various aspects of the everyday lives of specific groups of prostitutes (Vanwesenbeeck 2001, 279–280). Women's local everyday lives are unquestionably related to larger social structures (Smith 2005, 205–206). In order to reach a broader understanding of prostitution, much more information about marginal conditions and life situations is needed. To establish knowledge concerning the causes and effects of prostitution on

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a global scale, studies focusing on many different geographic locations and individual experiences are necessary. It is not only a question of generating information; this article is also a call to increase political discussion regarding prostitution (see Phoenix 2012, 229). We endeavour to raise the voices of women in marginal positions in order to recognize the validity of their experiences in a specific place (see Rowland & Klein 1996, 10; Puidokiene 2012, 75).

### *Eastern Prostitution as a Research Context*

Throughout the existence of the USSR, prostitution did not officially exist in Russia, although stories of “currency girls” are familiar to many. During the Perestroika movement, prostitution was associated with the moral degeneration of society and with the idea of selling out socialism and homeland to the west (Shlapentokh 1992). The societal changes caused by the fall of the Soviet Union included liberation of sexual behaviour. This liberation has been compared to the western sexual revolution of the 1960s (Kon 1993; Pankratova 1987). The Soviet system celebrated the socialistic nuclear family, motherhood, reproduction and marital fidelity. The only positive portrayal of women was as caring mothers and wives (Koukarenko & Kalinina 2007, 194). Open discussion of sexuality and contraceptives was unconventional and repressed. This is explained in an interview with an authority in Murmansk:

*For years sex didn't “exist” at all, but now sex has suddenly shown up, and, of course, due to the fact that an entire generation has grown up without sexual education. Everything was forbidden and now all of a sudden everything is permitted. It has had all kinds of negative consequences. (Interview with a health care authority, Murmansk)*

Over 20 years have passed since the fall of the Soviet Union, but the resulting changes to life in Russia continue to have repercussions in the everyday lives of Russian women; these repercussions include problems with living conditions, residency permits (*propiska*), social security and employment (see Eremicheva 1996, 163). Aleksandar Štulhofer and Theo Sandfort (2005, 4) have spoken of the feminization of poverty in Russia. Although average wages have increased at a rapid rate, the differences in wage levels between different areas and between the genders are vast. Working in the grey economy is often the only real choice for many women.

Many changes and discontinuities in the societal transition from the socialistic Soviet Union to present-day, post-socialist Russia have shaped the structures of women's lives

at the individual, communal and societal levels (Lewin 2005, 12; Hanhinen 2001). Societal changes have transferred societal caretaking tasks and responsibilities from the state to families and most of all to women (Ashwin & Lytkina 2004, 193). Today a middle-class Russian family requires two paid incomes to survive due to the continually-increasing cost of living in Russia. Yet ideals of domestic women who stay home to take care of their children continue to prevail; the Russian government has even encouraged women to return home and give birth to more children in order to increase birth rates (Ashwin & Lytkina 2004, 359; Gerashimenco 2008, interview with an authority).

Possibilities for individual growth can either be increased or limited by marginal societal-cultural conditions (Sen 1999, 13). According to Dorothy E. Smith (2005, 205–206), everyday conventions should be attached to broader social structures. The way in which societies are structured can drive people into risk zones in terms of income: many women face problems in Russia's labour market and limits in terms of their possibilities for action, and are eventually driven to prostitution (Khodyreva 2005). These societally imposed restrictions can result in a lack of future prospects in everyday life. Thus societal structures limit women's possibilities to cope, but at the same time they create different possibilities for action.

The geographical location wherein women practice prostitution has an effect on their experiences in the sex trade. The majority of the women interviewed for this research worked in mobile prostitution in the northern regions of Finland, Sweden and Norway; a few of them worked locally in Murmansk. The women who migrated north to practice prostitution worked in environments where they often had few social ties; furthermore, their opportunities for action in foreign environments were limited by barriers of language and culture. Another important factor is that in the Nordic countries, the spirit of the law criminalizes the purchase of sex rather than prostitution, whereas in Russia earning a living by prostitution is illegal (Skaffari 2010, 50–58).

The local environment was the major factor influencing the way the interviewees practised prostitution. Hiding their prostitution activity from people who were close to them was a concern that was largely eliminated by mobile prostitution. Working locally as a prostitute restricted the women's autonomy, so the work presented different risks than in mobile prostitution. Mothers of small children and those with ties to informal networks were especially limited as to where and when they could practice prostitution.

## METHOD

Our theoretical engagement in this article is a feminist approach. Feminist methodology highlights women's experiences and knowledge about their everyday lives as a subject of research. Thus, feminist knowledge is based on recognizing the experiences of women (Alcoff & Potter 1993, 1; Harding 1990, 90–91). We have chosen to present some excerpts from the interview material that highlight the breadth of the experiences of Russian women involved in prostitution in the Barents Region. The reliance on interview data fits well with feminist methodological strategies aimed at 'giving voice' to otherwise muted groups (Ardener 1978). It also helps develop theoretical categories on the basis of women's experience, as described in feminist standpoint epistemologies (Harding 1993). 'Giving voice' and taking women's lived experiences as a starting point are an important strategy. We approach the prostitution of the women who were interviewed for this research through their personal experiences of prostitution and the meanings which they attach to these experiences.

Another important viewpoint is the demand for "situated knowledge" (Haraway 1988) when it comes to the study of prostitution. Since prostitution is a personal experience, a general study of the practice is not constructive; thus, personal information about the everyday reality of sex work is necessary to form a realistic study of the subject of prostitution. Our article focuses on the particular experiences of prostitutes living in Russia, allowing these women to share their particular cultural viewpoints.

### *Data gathering process*

The research material was collected in Murmansk, Russia between the years 2004 and 2008. The women who were interviewed had either moved from other former republics of the Soviet Union to Russia or were Russian. One challenge that the Western researcher faces on foreign ground is the realization that womanhood is not a universal ontological condition (Anttonen 1997, 45). The women we studied have been shaped by Russian culture and history; their agency is shaped by various societal boundaries, conventions and cultural conceptions (cf. Nussbaum 2000, 40). The effort to understand the experiences of women who are living in a culture which is different from one's own necessitates taking an open approach to the women's stories, without any presumptions. Such an approach provides a chance to examine Russian culture and its operational models relatively freely and as told by women.

Collecting research material from a different culture involves linguistic, cultural and trust-building challenges (see Ihamäki 2010, 113). The pursuit of an experiential point

of view and the sensitive, secret and taboo nature of the subject matter pose further challenges. Continued access to the women involved in this study was made possible by a local *key person* (see Bogdan & Taylor 1975, 30–32) who bridged the gap between the women and the researcher. This local psychologist was present throughout all the interviews that were conducted to support the women, who often had to revisit sensitive and even traumatic life events. The psychologist offered the interviewees therapeutic discussions, if necessary. These arrangements ensured that the participants had emotional support in the event that they experienced distress while recalling their sometimes painful experiences.

### *Data*

This article is based on material collected for Pia Skaffari's doctoral dissertation, in which 17 women discuss their experiences in prostitution, as well as observational material (Skaffari 2010). From this observational material we have drawn upon four interviews with Russian authorities for this article. The authorities who were interviewed worked at the employment office, and in social, health, and child care services in Murmansk. This observational material and the interviews with the women reflect the societal attitude towards prostitution and sexuality and provide a measure of women's agency in everyday life. The interviews with the women and the analysis of their experiences were directed by an interest in emancipatory knowledge and carried out with a feminist approach (cf. Smith 1987, 105–106).

The age of the women who were interviewed varied between 20 and 55 at the time of the interview. Their life situations and life stages were diverse. Almost all of the women were mothers (13 individuals), and some of them already grandmothers. There were ten single parents, and at the time of the interview three of the women were married. In practice the married women lived in a similar manner as the single parents, bearing responsibility for the children and the home. Four of the women were single; they were young and did not have children. These women often lived with their mothers and had responsibility for them. All of the women who were interviewed for this research, whether they were living with their children or with their mothers, had to bear the responsibility for the economy of their family units because of the nature of their relationships with their parents and other close relatives.

The women who participated in Skaffari's research practiced various forms of prostitution, from occasional "jobs" to full-time work. The majority of the women worked simultaneously as official or unofficial labourers or small entrepreneurs and as pros-

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titutes. There were also unemployed women, and one of the women was retired. Five of the women were no longer working as prostitutes at the time of the interviews. The women are identified by their self-given codenames in our quotations; in the interviews with the authorities we used the names of the individuals who gave us permission to do so.

### *Analysis*

The data sets were gathered using qualitative thematic interviews. Our starting point in this article is that through their stories, the women made sense of their experiences, constructed and communicated meanings (see Chase 1995, 3). The interviewed women told which events or factors they considered to be meaningful in their decisions to engage in prostitution and the life within prostitution which emphasized their subjective experiences. Qualitative content analysis (cf. Krippendorf 2004) was applied in order to gain an understanding of the factors which are meaningful for the women and which are behind their choices, and what kind of meanings they attach to their involvement in prostitution.

During the analysis of the data we looked for phrases which the women used to talk about their life experiences in relation to prostitution. The phrases were then sorted into categories that referred to the societal and individual dimensions of the women's lives. In these categories we found factors and events which the women interpreted as meaningful for their lives and attached to their decision to engage in prostitution and meanings assigned to the consequences of prostitution. The underlying societal factors behind prostitution are connected with women's poverty, the weakness of the social security system, problems with *propiska* (residency permits), and unemployment. At the individual level the women's experiences were connected with divorce, motherhood and personal relationships.

Societal and individual dimensions as consequences of prostitution intertwine so that distinguishing between them is complicated. These factors acquire meaning in the everyday lives of the women who were interviewed for this study through stigmatization, the questioning of motherhood, violence, problematic relationships with officials and the people who are close to them, and changes in their self-image at the end. In addition, there are a variety of emotional elements at the individual level: concealment, shame and guilt connected with stigmatization. According to Krippendorff (2004, 110, 172–173), the purpose of content analysis is to use logical reasoning and interpretation by first breaking down the data and then building it up again to a logical entity.

Different factors construct women's prostitution, and analysis of these factors shows how the women in our study conceptualize themselves, their interactions and their possibilities in the local context and in society at large.

### THE SOCIETAL AND INDIVIDUAL DIMENSIONS BEHIND CHOICES

The stories of the women who were interviewed for this study contribute to an understanding of women's position in Russian culture and the gendered conditions in the margins of the labour market, which are reflected in the everyday lives of women and families' welfare (see Ashwin & Lytkina 2004, 193; Tutolmina 2008, interview with an authority). The life situations of the women who were interviewed are, without exception, haunted by a variety of economic problems; some of them live in downright poverty. There is not always enough money even for food supplies. Some of the women who moved from former republics of the Soviet Union to Murmansk have problems related to *propiska* (residency permits), which manifest themselves as difficulties finding an apartment and paid work. In the worst cases, the conditions for getting *propiska* also prevent the women from receiving social security benefits, as the following quotation shows:

*Pia: So do you get support now?*

*Aida: Yes, now I've begun to get it. Earlier I didn't get anything. But that [the child allowance] is the only support I get. I don't have the right to get any other benefits since I don't have the Murmansk propiska, because we moved. We didn't even have a temporary registration. We didn't have any rights. In order to get the child allowance, you have to be registered.*

Problems with registration are reflected in many ways in the women's livelihoods and position in the labour market. In the background of their decisions to engage in prostitution there are – nearly without exception – problems involving their livelihood, and their choices are limited by their relationship with the labour market. The employment opportunities for these women are mostly in low-income businesses or in the informal market. Some of the women have difficulties with employment due to their outdated Soviet-era vocational training. The discriminatory mechanisms of the labour market and selection often make women's involvement in paid work difficult and prevent them from earning a sufficient income. The opportunities for women who are over 40 years old in the local labour market narrow even further in the course of time due to their increasing age. Then the informal economy offers the only livelihood option, as the

following quotations show:

*Irina: I, for example, have two jobs. I'm not listed there officially [at the workplace]. I go there, I'm paid and then I leave. Officially I'm not working; officially I'm unemployed.*

*Margarita: No, I haven't been to work for a long time, because I can't get work... And age is definitely the reason. They hire under-40-year-olds. And after 40 years of age, it's practically impossible. Or they don't pay very much.*

Women's relationship with the labour market and their chances of getting paid work are problematic in every phase of life, a fact which appears in the stories of the women interviewed for this research. Just as being over 40 years old limits one's chances of finding work, so pregnancy and having little children are often seen, from the point of view of employers, as economic risk factors. Women also see pregnancy as essentially weakening their chances of staying in the labour market. Prenatal dismissals are frequent. The competition for work is fierce, and the opportunities for young mothers to return to the labour market after maternity leave and nursing leave have weakened (Khodyreva 2005; Tutolmina 2008, interview with an authority). In the data collected for this study, the two main age groups were women at the age of about 40 and mothers of small children.

An interview with an authority also revealed that employers do not want to hire new mothers because they fear non-attendance due to new pregnancies and the inability of mothers to be flexible in work-related matters (Tutolmina 2008, interview with an authority). The relationship of new mothers with the labour market is complicated: while these women need to make money, they are discouraged by specific workplaces as well as by public policy in general, which promotes regional family support programs (Gerasimenko 2007, interview with an authority) and the so-called "Putin child money." These programs encourage women to stay home and give birth in order to increase population growth. The official system does not, however, offer sufficient compensation for mothers to stay home, as can be seen in the following quotation from Aida:

*Pia: Is it possible to find work here with [your] degree?*

*Aida: No. Or well, yes, but the problem is the children. If you have children, you don't get work. Nobody will hire you anywhere when they find out you have*



*children. And it's not necessarily due to the fact that the children are small, if one has three children. Society starts to discriminate. We are like rubbish. Nobody helps us – not society, nobody...*

Fees for children's day care are often too high to justify full-time work, and with more children come higher day care payments. The social security system in Russia was primarily created during the USSR and is consequently inefficient today (see, e.g., Skvortsova 2007). The system has been revised since its creation; however, it still does not provide sufficient support to Russian citizens facing individual problems (Gerasimenko 2007, interview with an authority). The importance of close relationships and informal support networks is consequently enormous in Russia.

Official support networks for families with children are either under-developed or inaccessible to single parents in Russia. While day care programs are well organized, they are overpriced in relation to women's incomes. Social security benefits are low and partially discretionary (Gerasimenko 2007, interview with an authority). The legislation concerning liability for maintenance (which is contained in the Family Code of the Russian Federation 1995 N 223-F3, chapter 14) does not support the survival of women and children sufficiently.

Societal and individual factors intertwine in women's life situations. The lives of the women who were interviewed for this research have been negatively affected by strained relationships and divorces. The situation of women and children after divorce is unstable in Russia because men often try to avoid liability for maintenance (see Jäppinen 2006, 72). The legislation concerning alimony after divorce (again contained in chapter 14 of the Family Code) is wanting because it does not sufficiently recognize the position of children.

The fact that their ex-husbands avoided paying child support was a common complaint made by the interviewed women who had gotten divorced. Their ex-husbands refused to take economic responsibility for the women and children after divorce and escaped from responsibility and even parenthood in general (see Jäppinen 2006), as the following statement by Irina shows:

*Irina: He [her ex-husband] should, of course, according to law, pay child support. When I applied for support from him, he immediately resigned from work. He now works "privately" [in the informal economy], here and there. He has*

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*no permanent job, no permanent income, so the income can't be checked anywhere, because today he may work somewhere, tomorrow somewhere else. It's impossible to get any money from him.*

Matters involving residency permits (*propiska*) may also have an effect on women's living conditions in cases of divorce. In many cases, following a divorce, one of the spouses (generally the husband) remains in the apartment and does not move (see Attwood 1997, 99). In such cases, the husband is still officially registered as living in the apartment for purposes of *propiska*. In one case, the husband had moved out and it was the wife who remained in the apartment, even though the husband was still registered as living in the apartment, so the wife had to pay the local utility bills, which were quite high. When the women apply for social allowances, they are not considered as single parents by the authorities and their applications are refused. In the data, there was also the case of one woman whose husband had not registered her as living in their joint apartment after they got married; after the divorce she was kicked out, along with the children, by her ex-husband.

Due to the fact that many men are unwilling to support their ex-wives in Russia, both economic and caretaking responsibilities often fall to single mothers. In divorce situations, women very rarely apply for legal help because they do not trust the legal system. To avoid divorce-related strains, women in Russia often remain for a long time in problematic intimate relationships. Thus the informal economy, including prostitution, is often the only recourse left to Russian women who wish to escape unwanted relationships (see Ihamäki 2004).

Women usually want to be good mothers, and prostitution is an attempt to solve income problems in a society that will not take responsibility for women and children. This line of thinking is a way for prostitutes to legitimize their work and give it a moral justification: it is done in the name of what is good for their children. Motherhood is a central justification for prostitution in the stories of the majority of the women interviewed for this study.

## WORKING IN PROSTITUTION

### *The context of prostitution*

Underlying societal factors set limits on the everyday lives of the women who were

interviewed for this study and construct prostitution as a way of solving problems at the individual level. In the stories of these women *choice* and *necessity* often appear simultaneously. The line between choice and necessity is a thin one. The women's living conditions and possibilities for action in relation to income and everyday life define which it is at any given moment. Freedom of choice is socially tied, because a woman's agency is conditioned and necessarily limited by the social, political and economic possibilities for action that are within her grasp (see Sen 1999, 13 on the agency of individuals).

Wendy Chapkis (1997, 67) classifies choices as either rational or free. The necessity of choosing is conveyed by the concept of rational choice, which is typical in hierarchically structured cultures. Anders Lisborg (2003, 170) notes that the expression "to become a prostitute of one's own will" is often considered to refer to voluntary action, but in reality the choice is not really a question of free will to the women who make it. It has more to do with the point where everyday life and societal structures collide: what choice and necessity mean for an individual and what kinds of meanings are attached to the same concepts in societies that are structured differently (Thorbeck & Battanaik 2003, 9; Nussbaum 2000). The lives of the women interviewed for this research are outlined by their relationship with the conditions in the margins of Russian society, which does not even thoroughly guarantee survival by providing for basic needs. Prostitution can hence be seen as a compulsive option which enables one to take care of oneself and those who are closest. The meaning of prostitution in negotiating everyday life thus brings positive dimensions to the lives of the women who were interviewed for this study. They were happy even about small, everyday things:

*Sonja: I have two children. I managed to pay my debts by going there [engaging in mobile prostitution]. I've bought things to bring home, I have clothes. All because I go there. Here I can't give myself something like that. What an income I have! 4500 [rubles]. It isn't good for anything. And you know how young people want to dress. And that's why I...*

In other instances, prostitution was a way to earn extra money. In some instances, full-time prostitution was the only way to earn a living. Some of the women who were interviewed had periods of respite from prostitution, but they returned to sex work due to individual life crises: for example, in cases of divorce. The majority of the women worked simultaneously as official or unofficial labourers or small entrepreneurs and as prostitutes.

The relationship between women and the operational environment of prostitution is meaningful. Women's value in the commercial sex market is partially defined by the place in which they work as prostitutes. In Murmansk, prostitution is generally well organized and structured. In some areas, however, the possibility of facing various risks increases: for example, on the streets or in low-grade prostitution firms (see Ihamäki 2010; Pettai et al 2006). Work in hotels, as an escort and for high-level prostitution firms is most valued because it pays better and is safer than working in low-level prostitution firms, clubs, saunas and streets, where drug users and even minors work. The police often raid these less-reputable areas and round up the prostitutes. Meanwhile, higher-level prostitution firms warn workers of raids and thus are safer bets for mothers:

*Vera: I try to hang out at the same club: the kind that inspires trust [...], the kind of club about which people say mostly good things. If something suddenly happens in that kind of club, there's always someone to help you. I have two children, so dealing with the police isn't a good thing.*

Guarding one's reputation is part of maintaining one's dignity. When choosing local prostitution, the women attempt to minimize the risk of dealing with the police or child protection authorities. Prostitutes recognize the risks associated with getting caught in their line of work: their secret could be exposed, and they could be questioned as mothers and even lose their children. It would also mean stigmatization as a woman and as a societal agent. Mobile prostitution poses less risk to a woman's reputation and motherhood than local prostitution:

*Tatiana: All the women practice it only abroad, since they want to preserve the shell of a proper woman. That is, no one knows about it. They are calm due to the fact that no one finds out what happens there, you see.*

One good side that the women interviewed for this research see in working abroad is that they can guard their reputations. Working in a foreign culture is not risk-free, however. The women do not understand the language and do not necessarily know the culture, customs and legislation of the environment in which they work. Furthermore, the natural safety network is often lacking, so it is essential to form a supportive network with other prostitutes.

### ***Cultural attitudes toward prostitution***

Prostitution can be understood in Russia as a gendered phenomenon through which

women try to solve their income problems. A survey conducted by the Russian Academy of Science (2002) on the way Russian women view prostitutes demonstrates that attitudes vary in accordance with the age of the respondents; the oldest group of respondents was the most critical. However, overall, the attitude toward prostitutes was quite tolerant, but ambivalent. Less than a quarter of the respondents had negative feelings about prostitutes, confirming a generally indifferent or compassionate attitude towards the subject. Prostitution may be seen openly in the city of Murmansk. Unlike in the Nordic countries, condemnatory attitudes towards prostitution in Murmansk are rare. Nevertheless, prostitutes in the region struggle with conflicts between their inner values and common opinion. Women hide their involvement in prostitution in order to maintain social acceptance as mothers and citizens.

Society constructs prostitutes as Others who are willing to transgress against the cultural model of a good woman (Väyrynen 2007). Society's Madonna-Whore complex places prostitutes as debased Whores in a dichotomous relationship with saintly Madonnas. While the Madonna maintains a dominant position, the Whore is othered (Bell 1994, 40). The cultural attitude towards prostitution is often morally condemning and stigmatizing, as the following quotation from an authority shows:

*... If we don't achieve any positive results [working with prostitute mothers], and if the mother still wants to continue to practice prostitution, because she can't or doesn't want to live in another way, then we will take such children into custody. (Interview with Child Protection Inspector, Murmansk 2006)*

The stigma of prostitution is reflected in the lives of the women interviewed for this research. Deviation from the cultural norm raises a moral conflict between one's personal values and prostitution. The myth of an honourable woman is constructed, maintained and renewed in societal and moral institutions, values, norms, beliefs and the media (cf. Hubbard 1998). A woman's cultural acceptance is based on heterosexuality, marriage and reproduction; prostitution is posited as bad womanhood (Appell et al 1998; Sanders 2005, 324). But in the context of Russia, prostitution becomes a way for women to assume responsibility and guarantee a better life for their children. Prostitution thus allows for good motherhood rather than negating it, which is the opposite of the culturally defined negative stereotype of prostitution:

*Vera: I have goals; this is just a survival tactic for me. When I went there [to a local prostitution company], I was already ready for it. I was prepared for the*

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*fact that I needed money: money to feed the children. I did all I could for that. Do you see? And from the beginning, I prepared for it mentally.*

*Zhenja: Women earn money for their children, to maintain their families. The visitors there [who engage in mobile prostitution] are mostly disadvantaged women, women with low incomes. Women without husbands – most of them are like that – but who have children, and often little children, you see.*

In these women's tales, the decision to engage in prostitution is justified by a desire to support their families. This justification supports a personal sense of dignity. Economic need as a reason for selling sex is often said to be a performance of poverty; others consequently accept poverty as an excuse for immoral activity (Ratliff 2004). However, the descriptions of the women interviewed for this research reveal authentic experiences of poverty, not merely a performance of it.

Seeing prostitution as a personal choice allows the women interviewed for this research to preserve a sense of autonomy and dignity. This personal choice creates an internalization and acceptance of sex work as a part of life and a method of survival. The talk of necessity functions to distance the act from the self, placing prostitution in the context of the larger cultural environment and its gendered conventions. Thus the decision to engage in prostitution is given a moral and legitimate basis, which helps the women to accept their situation and live with their choice (see Appell et al 1998).

### **PROSTITUTION LEAVES ITS MARK**

Prostitution leaves its mark on women in both physical and emotional ways, affecting their personal agency and self-image. At the social level, the experiences of prostitutes include deprivation and violence, and at a personal level these women participate in self-abuse. According to Susan Brison (2003), traumatic experiences often destroy a prostitute's trust in men. In the stories of the women interviewed for this study, external deprivation and violence are often attached to practicing prostitution (see, e.g., Farley et al 2003; Farley 2004), but deprivation and violence are also often present in these women's interactions with authority figures and with those with whom they are in personal relationships. In their relationships with authority figures, these women face stigmatization, indifference or abolition. Some of the prostitutes discuss the fact that they often have difficulty being taken seriously by the authorities:

*Tatiana: My case [rape] wasn't dealt with at all. The only thing I managed to do was get angry, because I basically had no proof. Well, it isn't like I didn't have anything, but no one wanted to deal with the case and no one believed me.*

*Pia: How did they react to you?*

*Tatiana: Well, like a prostitute.*

*Pia: How many were there – three, four customers?*

*Victoria: Three, I think. Three.*

*Key person: She went [to a customer], and there were three customers and she was raped. Thereafter we filed a report with the police. Nothing has been done yet.*

*Victoria: Not only did they rape me, but they also took my phone and my money.*

Being known as a prostitute produces inequality and can hinder a woman's attempt to get help. Groups with questionable social values, such as prostitutes and drug addicts, are often targeted for strong social control and considered to be symbols of physical degeneration and dirtiness (Kristeva 1982). In the Russian women's stories, this reality becomes apparent in their descriptions of their relationships with authority figures. In Tatiana's case, the police did not take the woman's report of an offence seriously. In Victoria's case, the woman had to report the rape along with a support person in order to have the case acknowledged at all. Women who are known as prostitutes often have their needs and rights neglected; the authorities may even downplay or excuse rape when the victim is identified as a prostitute (see Attwood 1997).

The violence encountered by these women can be analysed from the perspective of society in terms of what kind of responsibility society takes for the violence and how, by shaping conventions, it shares responsibility for the victims and the agents of violence, as well as for the service system (Ronkainen 2008, 388). According to a study conducted by the Russian Academy of Science, 13.4% of respondents in a group of 1400 had encountered domestic violence in some form. Institutionalized help for female victims of violence in Russia is limited, and many informal support structures have unravelled due to migration and the break-up of communities (Russian Academy of Science 2002).

The interviewed women's experiences of being ignored by the criminal justice system even when reporting cases of rape can be understood as a form of institutionalized violence. These women are left helpless against violence and outside the justice system. Institutionalized violence represses the agency of women; the self is silenced by others

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(Jordan 2012, 261). Within the framework of prostitution, violence is often silenced and is considered a shameful matter, becoming a part of one's self-image if prostitution is seen only as a self-inflicted social problem.

Melissa Farley et al (2003, 34, 58; also see Farley 2004) posit that women who work as prostitutes lose their ability to enjoy their sexuality, at least temporarily. Some of the women who were interviewed for the present study described having this experience: because the prostitutes' relationships with men, their own bodies and sexuality in general are objectified, sex becomes a tool. The instrumental nature of personal relationships for prostitutes is demonstrated in the stories of the interviewed women, in which they forget their own needs, welfare and rights in relationships outside of prostitution (Sanders 2005). The weak economic position of these women causes them to feel a need, even an obligation, to please men in order to ensure their own survival. Economic issues push these women to define their relationships with men based on financial benefits rather than feelings:

*Margarita: If you think about returning from there [mobile prostitution] to Murmansk, you don't want to see anybody. I can't, I don't want to become close with anybody here who doesn't support me economically. I'm not interested anymore. In Murmansk men are often penniless. Personally I... I'm just not interested.*

Prostitutes often have to face their moral limits and redefine them. Once a moral line has been crossed, it becomes increasingly easy to cross the line again and again. The crossing of moral lines is a process wherein mental resistance slowly crumbles away. The break happens simultaneously through thought, emotions and actions. Zhenja, one of the women interviewed for this study, describes the crossing of moral lines as follows: "You have to step over yourself". Extreme moral compromise signifies a change in self-image and an experience of sexuality that is outside the norm (see Goffman 1990, 9, 13). This can result in feelings of inferiority and self-stigmatization, wherein the self is viewed as being within the category of prostitution. It creates back talking, which is used to maintain a sense of dignity. Talking back is always a dialogue with culturally dominant categorizations (Juhila 2004).

In the lives of the women interviewed for this research, an inner dialogue begins which continuously ponders prostitution and its justifications. Aida expressed a sense of being marked and shamed: "After that, when you have kind of experienced it, there's the feeling



*that men won't look at you – I mean, they look at you as a prostitute, but not as a woman. As they say, a fallen woman.”* In the stories of the women who were interviewed, prostitution categorizes these women as being outside regular womanhood: they get a sense of being stuck within the Madonna-Whore dichotomy (Bell 1994). They feel that they are treated, touched and encountered differently than “ordinary women.” Lacey Sloan and Stephanie Wahab (2000) describe this type of stigma as ‘*a harlot mark*’ which identifies prostitutes as negatively related to their choices and environments. The women are marked in such a way that the choices they have made in relation to their environment are seen only from a negative viewpoint.

## THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF PROSTITUTION

Prostitution is understood as a social problem in the defining conventions and control mechanisms of which – as well as the intensity of these conventions and control mechanisms – vary in different eras and cultures. Prostitution creates an experience of marginalization and otherness that manifests itself in many dimensions of a prostitute’s life. What creates a paradox is the fact that in Russia, prostitution is integrally connected with structural factors. Prostitution is primarily an attempt at self-preservation in Russia: it is used to try to solve income problems and consequently to provide for families.

In the Nordic countries, there has, in recent years, been a shift away from criminalizing prostitution and an emphasis on making the buying of sex illegal; thus the focus is on the male customers, not on the women who sell sex. In Russia, on the other hand, prostitution itself is still illegal but there is no sanction on buying sex; thus, the aim is to try to control the women who work as prostitutes. Prostitution is, therefore, in a legal grey area to some extent, and attitudes towards it are ambivalent, which forces women involved in sex work to keep secrets and take risks. Prostitutes in these areas try to find work in places that pose minimal risk to their reputations. Mobile prostitution in the Nordic countries allows women to preserve their reputations; women who work in their homeland try to gain employment at reputable and protective prostitution firms that will take care of them. But prostitution is not without risk in any context: mobile prostitutes risk being caught in a foreign country and refused the possibility to return to their home country; they also have to deal with unfamiliar fields of activity, lack of language proficiency, and a lack of familiarity with the cultural conventions. But one positive aspect of mobile prostitution is that it allows those who practice it to separate it from their everyday lives.

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Local prostitutes who have children fear the child care authorities and the police, but benefit from working in a familiar environment and receiving help from informal networks. According to Elina Ihamäki (2004), prostitutes gain a feeling of autonomy by working in their own cultural surroundings. However, the fear of being marked as a prostitute is more prevalent in domestic sex work than in mobile prostitution (Spanger 2003, 180).

For the women who were interviewed for this study, prostitution simultaneously maintains a woman's social agency and challenges it. Like all Russian women, they are expected to be active citizens, and they are encouraged to have children. But the level of social support in Russia is not always sufficient to guarantee the welfare of mothers of small children. All of the women who were interviewed reported problems with custody or child support and violence in their intimate relationships. These women were forced to engage in prostitution in order to ensure their own and their children's wellbeing. The often-compulsive choice to engage in sex work means crossing a personal moral boundary and initiating a conflicting internal dialogue concerning the justification, consequences, benefits and disadvantages of this choice. Prostitution is often harmful to women and challenges them to reconstruct their identities. A prostitute's experience of stigmatization causes her to feel shame; this is reflected in her non-work relationships – especially those involving men.

Although Russian citizens recognize the prevalence of prostitution in their country, the activity is officially condemned. In the stories of the women who were interviewed for this research, the authorities often refused to help prostitutes. The condemnatory attitude of these authorities fractures the women's trust in the justice system and renders them sceptical of the social services that are offered.

Our article focuses on Russian women's stories of prostitution, but these stories contain a universal truth: prostitution is a product of social structures, a woman's position, the accessibility of support, and the personal, social and economic resources that are available. Prostitution is a way for women to survive. Women who practice prostitution are usually seen only as stereotypes, but the individual paths of their lives and the social contexts in which they live are integral to an understanding of the causes and effects of sex work. The stories of these women create understanding, offering an opportunity to see behind the dominant cultural story.

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